ABSTRACT

Navigating the Multi-layered Identities of the Aufseherinnen:
Female Camp Guards During and After the Holocaust

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The profiles, training, and roles of *Aufseherinnen* portray women acting out a femininity which both contradicted and fulfilled Nazi ideals of womanhood. Additionally, they account for the two layers of reality—both *ought* and *is*—so common to the Nazi system. The individual narratives of former victims develop the picture of an *Aufseherin* more fully by depicting the overall "object-identity" of the female camp staff—that is, their identity as experienced by the inmates—and the overall role of femaleness in the *Lager*. Interestingly, narratives usually portray their guards as humans (is) instead of monsters (ought). This human status was, however, contradicted by the understanding of the female defendants throughout the war crimes trials. Trial transcripts and media coverage of the Belsen Trial reveal a lack of understanding of the role of women in the camp system, as well as a general influence of gender stereotyping on the incongruent verdicts and sentencing of female defendants. The identities of the *Aufseherinnen* were therefore experienced as strikingly different from those of male perpetrators.

Navigating the Multi-layered Identities of the *Aufseherinnen*:
Female Camp Guards During and After the Holocaust

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

Historical Overview

In January of 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor and expanded his authority and the Nazi party's power and influence throughout that year. Almost immediately, Heinrich Himmler announced the future construction of Dachau concentration camp, which was to be a model for any future camps within the Nazi system. Dachau opened on March 22, 1933, but other minor camps and detention facilities were also in operation by 1933, such as Moringen camp for women. Such early camps were part of a supposed Nazi rehabilitation policy of German asocial elements and political deviants. However, as Hitler and his party gained power and influence, the Nazi plans for these camps would change as the Nazis began sending other populations to these facilities.

By 1935, the primacy of the Nazi race policy was becoming clear with the passage of the first Nuremberg Laws. The Citizenship Law differentiated between German citizens—ethnic Germans—from "subjects"—those individuals and groups which could not boast an Aryan pedigree. The government guaranteed citizens' rights, but could treat "subjects" like aliens. The Law for the Defense of German Blood and Honor prohibited all marriages and any sexual relations between Jews and people of German heritage. The law made no exception for those marriages which took place in

other countries, but rather considered them null and void. [1] Other laws followed these initial, institutionalized attacks on Jews and other non-Germans.

On March 12, 1938, Germany invaded and annexed Austria. Later that same year, Hitler bartered with the allied nations at the Munich Conference for control of the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland, claiming that the German population there wished to be a part of its motherland again. The racial policy which dictated the necessity of *Lebensraum* for ethnic Germans, thus, began spreading. Domestically, the racial policy of hatred was encouraged through the series of pogroms on November 9 and 10, 1938. However, the policies, specific plans, and machinery for full scale war on the Jewish population were not yet in place. After invading the rest of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939, Germany invaded Poland on September 1 of that same year, thus touching off World War II. Interestingly, it is after the foreign war started that the Nazis began to seriously implement a policy of deportation and death of the Jewish population throughout the Reich. Having acquired Poland's large Jewish population, and with the prospect of acquiring still more territories with Jewish population, the Reich needed a plan for disposing of the lesser types. For example, construction on Auschwitz began in May of 1940, and construction of Auschwitz II began in October 1941. The Reich also employed mobile killing units to "liquidate" whole towns usually by firing squad. Within the overall camp system, there were several types of camps which each had varied purposes. While certain facilities fall outside of these main categories (such as Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt), the majority can be classified as "killing centers" or

[1] Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins,, 1997), 141–43.

concentration camps. There were four, official killing centers: Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Approximately eleven major concentration camps existed, each with numerous sub camps and satellite camps. There were also two complexes with the dual function of providing slave labor and extermination facilities: Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau. [2] Millions died at those camps which fell into the "concentration camp" category, owing to malnutrition, starvation, disease, execution, and overwork. However, these camps were distinct from the killing centers and dual function camps due to their lack of extermination facilities.

On January 20, 1942, top Nazi officials and attorneys, including Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann, met in Wannsee, Germany, to plan and activate the so-called "Final Solution," that is the campaign for mass extermination of the Jewish population. After the Wannsee Conference, the extermination facilities at various camps began operating at full capacity, receiving regular transports from other camps or from civilian locations throughout the expanding Reich. After this point, for example, Auschwitz began using Zyklon B in its gas chambers, achieving the ability to murder thousands of people a day. Saul Friedländer insightfully divides his book *The Years of Extermination* into three sections: "*Terror (Fall 1939-Summer 1941)*," "*Mass Murder (Summer 1941-Summer 1942)*," and "*Shoah (Summer 1942-Spring 1945)*."[3] After the Wannsee Conference, the Nazis unleashed the Holocaust—with all of its machinery, organization, and SS personnel—in earnest.[4]

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[2] Konnilyn G. Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1981), 26–7.

[3] Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*.

[4] The above chronology is based upon building blocks (facts, dates, etc.) found in most major Holocaust histories. The same can be said for other, basic information provided in the thesis. For example,

Historical Overview of Women's History of the Nazi Era

Women's history of the Nazi period is a relatively new field, but already boasts a rich historiographical heritage. In his contribution to the edited volume *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers*, Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann succinctly and helpfully summarizes the major tension which has characterized women's history of this period:

> The 'feminist' *Historikerstreit* (struggle among historians) over whether women were victims of an extreme male-dominated and sexist-racist Nazi Dictatorship that reduced women to the status of mere 'objects'. . . or whether women played an active role in the regime and shared some responsibilities for the crimes. . . constructed an over-simplistic perpetrator-versus-victim dichotomy. [5]

While his summary of the debate is, ironically, somewhat simplistic, his overall summary of such tension does provide a basis for inquiry.

In her contribution to the same volume, Christina Herkommer provides a more in depth look at the state of women's history in this era, by breaking down the main theses of the various historiographical camps. [6] In doing so, she delineates three main theses: the "victim thesis," the "perpetrator thesis," and the thesis of a "multiplicity of roles."[7] In this first thesis, "National Socialism was interpreted as an extreme manifestation of

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see: Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*; Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*; Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, (New York: H. Holt, 1997); Marilyn J. Harran, *The Holocaust Chronicle* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: Publications International, 2000).

[5] Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, "Perpetrators of the Holocaust: a Historiography," in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 41.

[6] Gisela Bock provides a different delineation of theses in her earlier work. Her categories apply most directly to the second thesis in Herkommer's scheme, and generally represent some of the main issues in the "dispute among women historians." See Gisela Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 85–100.

[7] Christina Herkommer, "Women Under National Socialism: Women's Scope for Action and the Issue of Gender," in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers,* trans. Richard Littlejohns, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 99–119.

patriarchy and all women in National Socialist Germany were accordingly declared to be victims of the repressive conditions."[8] The thesis delineating women as perpetrators within the Nazi regime includes three stances: women were joint perpetrators, alongside men and within male constructs; women were perpetrators within their own sphere (the home); German women were not involved in the Nazi state, or the crimes of the Holocaust "merely as an act of conforming to male strategies," but actually harbored "independent motives."[9] This second major thesis (women as perpetrators) brought about the bulk of the *Historikerinnenstreit*. [10] However, Herkommer contends that this dispute was largely resolved by the third thesis espousing that women occupied many, varied roles, with varying amounts of involvement within the Nazi systems. This thesis broke down the concept that German women under National Socialism could be studied as a homogeneous block. Many contemporary historians fall into this camp which has dismantled the foundation of gender difference within the discipline. [11] Herkommer summarizes the current state of German women's history (especially, but not only) as it relates to perpetrator studies as follows: "It is clear then that recent researchers no longer focus primarily on the question of whether women as a whole were perpetrators or more victims. It has taken as a given that unpersecuted German women took part in the National Socialist system of government in the most diverse areas."[12] In other words, the

[8] Herkommer, 101–02.

[9] Ibid., 103–04.

[10] Ibid., 107. The previously mentioned term, *Historikerstreit*, was altered by Gisela Bock to "*Historikerinnenstreit*" (dispute among women historians).

[11] Ibid., 109.

[12] Ibid., 115.

field has begun to focus on the varied ways that women took part in National Socialism, more generally, and in the Holocaust, more specifically; these foci are based on the shared foundation that those women who were not persecuted were a part of the state machinery of oppression, in one way or another.

With this basic structure in mind, one can look at some more concrete examples of scholarly contributions within the field in order to gain a foundational understanding of German women during this period. Claudia Koonz focuses on the separateness of women within Nazism, saying that most women, as wives and mothers, concentrated their efforts within their homes to provide a sort of safe zone of emotional stability for their husbands and sons who did work in the public sphere. They kept the home, feminine sphere separate from the public, male sphere, keeping "their family world apart from the masculine sphere of brutality, coercion, corruption and power."[13] Koonz asserts, "These [ordinary] wives did not directly participate in evil, but on the contrary, fulfilled 'nature's' by normalizing a masculine world gone amok."[14] Women contributed to the Nazi state by following the advice of the leaders of various women's organizations: they stayed in their proper place—their home. [15] In this way, Koonz argues that most women were not directly involved in Nazi atrocities, although they did enable the machinery of atrocity to remain well-oiled.

In terms of Nazi domestic policy, especially regarding women's roles within that policy, Jill Stephenson provides perhaps the best explanation. Rather than looking at

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[13] Claudia Koonz, "Consequences: Women, Nazis, and Moral Choice," in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, ed. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1993), 303.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 290, 300.

women themselves, Stephenson looks at the dissonance between Nazi policy and Nazi practicality, regarding women. She sees a gap between the prescribed role for women and the roles which women filled out of necessity. Like any other party, the Nazis could proclaim whatever ideology they liked while campaigning. However, once they were given the responsibility of running the country, they had to modify their ideology to suit the circumstances. Changing economics and the start of World War II were seen by the Nazis as a temporary and necessary break with their domestic policy concerning women. This break would provide the stability for the nation to get through the war, and then in peace time, ideology could reign, and women could return home. [16] While this break in policy, allowed—even necessitated—women's work in the public sphere, it did not indicate a change in policy concerning political life. In this area, women remained shut out. Nazi policy continued to separate the sexes within the party, and therefore the political sphere as a whole. Men, as primarily "productive," were given power and authority, while women, as "fundamentally reproductive," remained outside of this sphere. [17] Stephenson also paints the image of the "ideal woman" according to Nazi theory. The ideal German woman was strong, healthy, and wholesome. She was not silly or vain. She created a peaceful environment by raising her family, and working the land. In fact, a woman's athletic abilities played a central role in demonstrating her wholesomeness as well as her overall health, which was indicative of her ability to bear children. Nazi speeches frequently utilized this motif by saying things like, "the javelin

[16] Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), 1, 6, 8, 197.

[17] Ibid., 8.

or the pole-vault are of more value than the lipstick."[18] While practicalities barred the full implementation of Nazi ideology, the image of the ideal woman was still raised up as an example, creating a contradictory role for women within Nazi, German society. [19]

Gisela Bock also provides an insightful look at the prescribed role of women as well as a portrait of the ideal woman within Nazi ideology and policy. In her essay "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State," Bock highlights the prescribed norms of Nazi society by pointing to their opposite—deviancy—which became the key criterion for sterilization policies. These norms were different for men and women, and they were different by class, but Bock summarizes the common features by saying, "For women, this ideal was represented by the worker who performed ungrudging housework and efficient labor in outside employment; her antithesis was the slut, the prostitute."[20] Indeed, many women who were singled out for sterilization "tended to be those who did not accept, could not accept, or were not supposed to accept the Nazi view of female housework."[21] Those women of lower status who were not supposed to be homemakers, as they were supposed to serve the Reich via hard labor or in other menial occupations, were then punished for not conforming to a norm to which their status prohibited their conforming. Essentially, there was intense pressure built into the Nazi system for women to conform to impossible

[18] Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*, 191.

[19] Ibid., 197.

[20] Gisela Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsoryy Sterilization, and the State," in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, ed. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1993), 172–73.

[21] Ibid., 177.

ideals. Another contradictory standard was that of motherhood. In another essay "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany" Bock quotes Nazi literature to point out that women, who were associated with reproduction and with nurturing, were not supposed to be too nurturing or too soft: "'Women's maternalism,' and 'the female instinct to care for all those in need of help' were ' acts against the race. ' Of 'women's particular inclination toward all living beings,' it was said that there was 'scarcely any worse sin against nature.'"[22] Young women and girls in the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM, Nazi girls' association) participated in many of the same activities as the boys in the Hitler Youth. Additionally, female university students "were warned to avoid the Victorian 'soft, over-feminine ideal of woman.'"[23] This complex, contradictory, multilayered mold into which women were supposed to fit themselves, certainly led to confusion and vexation for women, specifically, and society at large.

Women in Nazi Germany would mostly likely, under normal circumstances not have thought of themselves, much less spoken of themselves, within the framework that scholars have since placed them. However, such a reality does not nullify the accompanying reality of societal expectations, which were concocted from traditional expectations as well as government propaganda. The roles held by women within the Nazi state were certainly varied, as can be seen by taking the former accounts into consideration. Their authority and their power were, nevertheless, limited by their outsider status, regarding the party, itself. In an essay written for the Holocaust series

[22] Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," 88.

[23] Ibid., 89–90.

Lessons and Legacies, Volume VI: *New Currents in Holocaust Research*, Susannah Heschel discusses the various trends in feminist thought which have been employed, with limited success, in the study of the Holocaust. In dealing with some of the historiographical issues presented by the study of female involvement in the Holocaust, Heschel also cites certain general agreements among scholars. She states that the community has come to a general consensus, "that while women did not hold positions of power within the dictatorial hierarchy, they exerted great political influence as wives and *Handelnde* in the middle and lower levels of all the institutions of the Nazi state, and that their indirect participation is genocide may not be undervalued."[24] With all of the variations in scholarly interpretation, one can safely say that the gender expectations for women were confusing and that whether these expectations looked traditionally "feminine" or not, they were certainly distinct from the expectations for men in the Reich. Moreover, the roles that these expectations allowed were subservient to the state, in that women were expected, before and throughout the war, to contribute to the Reich in whatever way society most needed. These needs were pointed out to them by the state, and while most women had a limited amount of choice in which roles they would fill, their participation in the Nazi structure was, at least on paper, dictated to them by men. While the positions and expectations of men remained traditionally masculine, women were, with varying degrees of autonomy, utilized practically within a tenuous concept of femininity.

[24] Susannah Heschel, "Does Atrocity Have a Gender? Feminist Interpretations of Women in the SS," in *Lessons and Legacies Volume VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research*, ed. Jeffry M. Diefendorf, (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 301–02.

The Current Project

This study will attempt to take up where the historiography has paused and it will seek to approach "old" subjects from different vantage points. The study of German women and the debate over their involvement in the Third Reich has reached a convenient point of consensus which allows current scholarship to rest on a fairly stable foundation of certain assumptions. The foundational building blocks essential to this study have largely been laid out in the "Background" section of this introduction, but a concise summary will aid the reader in categorizing which ideas are central for this project. The first assumption concerns the official gendered expectations for women in the Third Reich, and the second concerns the level of power and/or authority which women could achieve within the Nazi system. There is a general consensus among scholars that women were expected (by the state, and generally by society) to fulfill different roles depending on their social status, and the conditions within the German state, and that these roles were in some way dependent upon their female nature. This ideal, prescriptive nature can generally be described as one which is hearty in temperament and general health, devoted to family and the Reich, hardworking and sacrificial. This nature suited women to work, primarily and ideally, in several areas: farming and animal husbandry, clerical positions (if males did not need these jobs), factory work (especially once the war got underway), and homemaker.[25]

As discussed in the historiographical section of this chapter, most of the German women's history of the Nazi period has focused on how and to what extent women

[25] For a more detailed explanation of this evolution, please see Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*.

facilitated the expansion of Nazism within the everyday capacities listed above. However, these "normal" female roles were not the only ways in which women were involved in the Nazi state, and they were certainly not the only ways in which women were involved as perpetrator of Nazi crimes against humanity. Such mundane roles imply women's indirect connection to the Holocaust, and they fail to discuss in any detail the ways in which women were directly involved in the extermination of millions of "sub-humans." Women served in euthanasia centers as doctors and nurses and in concentration camps as administrators and guards. The history of female involvement in such instances does not fit within the general narrative of women's indirect involvement in the Nazi apparatus. Since such cases stand outside of more common categories—usually consisting of more supportive roles—their exclusion from the scholarship might seem understandable. However, it is a gross oversight for several reasons. The number of serious studies done on male doctors, *Kommandanten*, and guards in and of themselves necessitate work being done concerning their female counterparts. Within the field of women's history, more specifically, these more direct categories of involvement necessitate serious study *because* they stand outside the framework so far established. Scholars have excluded these direct actors because they assume that they are aberrational due to their small numbers, relative to the entire female population. However, such logic is fallacious if for no other reason than that numbers alone constitute rarity, but they do not necessarily indicate a profile outside the norm. These studies on women in Nazi Germany, and female perpetrators, specifically, fail to account for a level of involvement which stands outside of most theses concerning female involvement.

This project will explore the role of female guards within the Nazi camp system, as well as the results and the meanings of that role. It will seek to delineate the difference between male and female occupations, status, authority, and experience in the camps. The female guard's experience seemingly stands in contrast to the historical narrative of the German female experience as well as the ideals of Nazi womanhood. Women were largely to be excluded from the Nazi bureaucratic and authoritative framework, so the inclusion of women in authority roles within the camp framework is remarkable. The first section will provide a profile of the female guard based on her duties and her place within the camp system, as well as her place within society before arriving in the camp. The second portion will sketch the identity of the female guards by attempting to understand the ways in which they were perceived by the prisoners under their control. In addition to their roles and identities within the camp, this thesis will seek to describe how the world saw these women by analyzing their treatment and fates during the various war crimes tribunals after the war. I believe that analysis of these topics will not only provide insight into the Nazi system, but that it will also nuance our understanding of the views and expectations of women at this time.

Literature Review

Susannah Heschel was correct in pointing out, "Scholarship on Nazism and the Holocaust has paid almost no attention to female perpetrators."[26] However, the work which has been done deserves to be mentioned for its merits and needs to be discussed for its deficiencies. In her essay "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and

[26] Heschel, "Does Atrocity Have a Gender?", 300.

German Jewish Women," Sybil Milton concurs with Heschel in pointing out, "there has been no systematic study of the uniformed SS women guards."[27] While her essay does not attempt to remedy that omission, she does provide a basic, history of the early women's camps. Beginning with the prisons and detention centers and ending with Ravensbrück, the largest and most well-known women's camp, Milton demonstrates that not all camps were patterned after Dachau from the very beginning. Rather, at least in the case of women's camps, detention facilities morphed into what historians would recognize as concentration camps, as time passed and populations and necessities changed.

Those scholars who deal more directly with female perpetrators can be divided, at least generally, based on their understandings of power and how it functioned in the Nazi state and its systems. The first of these groups discusses power as compartmentalized. Claudia Koonz, while she does not focus on female guards, does point out the ways in which women participated in Nazism through their own spheres by providing emotional support for their husbands who were involved more directly with the state-sponsored mass murder. Men and women exercised power in their own spheres, thus effectively contributing to the state's systems. Wendy Adele-Marie Sarti also falls into the camp of those who see power as operating within separate compartments in society. In her book *Women and Nazis*, Sarti explores the case studies of various female guards, head guards, and prisoner functionaries in order to examine the role that women played in the Holocaust. Positing a sort of patriarchal bargain, Sarti theorizes that while women were

[27] Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, ed. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1993), 224.

marginalized, they could sometimes exert agency and influence within their own sphere. Women could marry Nazi officials or members of the SS as a means of furthering their bargaining powers. However, outside of marriage, home, and hearth, the only opportunities for serious commitment to the state and exertion of influence were as female camp guards. [28] While this might seem like a step outside of Sarti's compartmentalized schema, she sees women's involvement in the camps as in sync with gendered compartments of power in so much as these roles were aberrational—the exception that proved the rule, so to speak: "Countless women who worked for the SS blurred the gender roles in the camp structures by imitating male SS and taking part in the abuse and murder of millions."[29] Essentially, women exerting power outside of their designated sphere were forced to behave like men.

The other basic stance on female perpetrators and power is one where power is a web: shared, without the limits of a zero-sum game. In this camp, historians point out that female perpetrators, especially guards operated out of their own motives and within their own framework, instead of merely working within the limits of a completely male-defined system. Gisela Bock even argues that historians need to reassess the notion of "Nazism as a regime that attributed to, imposed on, or left to women only the sphere of family and dutiful motherhood."[30] Gender's relationship to power is nuanced, in her theory, by the way in which she approaches gender. Gender, Bock argues, should be

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[28] Wendy Adele-Marie Sarti, *Women and Nazis: Perpetrators of Genocide and Other Crimes During Hitler's Regime, 1933-1945* (Palo Alto, CA: Academica Press, 2011), 2–4.

[29] Ibid., 4.

[30] Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," 91–2.

seen in terms of similarities as well as differences; it refers to the similarities and differences between and within the sexes and "sexual hierarchy and power."[31] Bock would like historians to assess historical figures in terms of their actions and not in terms of their "identity."[32] In doing so, their behavior and motivations would be examined on their own terms, and patterns which formed would then be discussed, rather than assuming a "feminine" identity which might lead to equally assumed patterns of behavior. Irmataud Heike also provides a nuanced, historical account of female perpetrators—in this case, strictly female guards—which explains their position on their own terms instead of likening their actions and motivations to those of males. Heike does not list "desire for power" when discussing motivations for female guards. Financial gain, proximity of camp to a woman's home town, and a continuation of work within "social welfare" (i. e. the prison system) motivated the majority of female guards. [33] In other words, there was nothing particularly female about their motivations. Heike goes on to provide three case studies to illuminate previous point and to provide new ones. One of her last sections deals with the ways in which female guards were (or were not) prosecuted, and the ways in which ideas about femininity played a role in those trials. [34] Between the lines of her argument, Heike seems to suggest that history has been heavily

[31] Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," 96.

[32] Ibid., 94.

[33] Irmatraud Heike, "Female Concentration Camp Guards as Perpetrators: Three Case Studies," in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers,* trans. Richard Littlejohns, 125–26.

[34] Chapter Three will refer back to this point in greater detail.

influenced by the ways in which courts and the media perceived and portrayed these female guards.

While Heike and others have provided scholarly biographies of various camp guards, others have provided more salacious tales. Daniel Patrick Brown, for example, wrote a biography of Irma Grese: *The Beautiful Beast: the Life and Crimes of SS-Aufseherin Irma Grese*. While serving as a springboard for other research, this biography latches on to the sensational characteristics of Grese's story, causing its value as a serious, scholarly contribution to come up short. Sarti's case studies also fall prey to the same sensationalizing tendencies, accounting for the less than scholarly nature of her biographical analysis. Indeed, the sensational nature of many of the biographies of female guards has set scholarship back, instead of propelling it.

Aside from other practical works such as Jack Morrison's *Ravensbrück*, Daniel Patrick Brown's *Camp Women*, and Aleksander Lasik's contributions to the *Auschwitz* volumes, these represent the major contributions to the study of female guards within the Nazi concentration camp system.

Method, Methodology, Vantage Point

Primary Sources

The first body chapter will build upon the work of scholars who have outlined the power structures and duties of the camp staff by relying mainly on the trial records of the Belsen Trial and the memoirs of former victims. These accounts will provide the specific examples and human accounts of the responsibilities and activities of the female camp staff. Additionally, they will provide a working profile of these women. The use of the

Belsen Trial records is for the sake of continuity throughout the thesis, as this trial provides the case study for Chapter Three. The second body chapter will rely almost exclusively on the testimony and memoirs of former concentration camp inmates in order to fill in the female guards' object identities—that is, who they were to and how they were experienced by the inmates.[35] The last body chapter will provide a glimpse not only at how women fared in the post-war military tribunals, but also at how the media and the public responded to the female defendants. Court transcripts and various media publications will provide the backbone of this chapter.[36]

A note on the use of testimony of former victims. Despite these fairly practical reasons for utilizing former victims' narratives to research and write about the Holocaust, until recently scholars have expressed strong resistance to their utilization as evidence per se. Jürgen Matthäus sees the 1980s as the turning point for this trend, pointing out that until this decade, "mainstream historians" had generally ignored testimonies. This resistance is based on numerous scholastic issues, several of which are rooted especially deeply within history as a discipline. Generally speaking, historians feel comfortable using "facts" as evidence, especially in modern history where facts are so abundant. It is not surprising then, that historians have largely relied on official records and other "hard" sources when writing about the Holocaust, and have, conversely, hesitated to employ the

[35] While some of these memoirs have been translated from various languages into English, they remain valuable resources for understanding women in the *Lager*. As will be discussed below, English often offers a more "neutral" language for the relaying of Holocaust narratives. Moreover, the meaning of the narratives remains intact, even through the translation process.

[36] Raymond Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others: The Belsen Trial* (London: Hodge, 1949) will provide the main material for analysis for this chapter. While this volume is an edited edition of court transcripts, Phillips is clear and up front about what he has left out of the proceedings. He clearly lays out these deficiencies in the introductory materials to the book, and none of these omissions impact the areas presented in this project. .

accounts of former prisoners. Mark Roseman puts forth two basic, plausible reasons for such hesitation. Historians' discomfort with former victim narratives reflect a more general reservation about the use of oral history. Additionally, this discomfort and hesitation reflect "a belief that the victims were too disempowered and crushed to see what was happening to them."[37] Scholars, and historians in particular, want to know that their eye-witnesses were aware enough to take note of the details of routines and people around them so as to make them worth-while sources. An assumption about victimhood undergirds the application of this fear to Holocaust testimony. When creating a historical account, the scholar seeks out consistency in order to make an argument or a coherent narrative about their subject. When inconsistencies arise, not only do they pose a threat to such cohesion, but they also can prove unwieldy in their description and integration within the overall narrative. During his interviews and discussions with Holocaust inmate Helen "Zippi" Tichauer, Konrad Kweit noted that certain aspects of her testimony did not seem to perfectly match official records or other Holocaust narratives. [38] Upon expressing this concern, Tichauer responded, "Forget what others have written and said."[39] As Kweit pointed out, "For a historian, this statement is hard to accept." To put aside other knowledge and comparisons, seems downright irresponsible to the scholar devoted to writing an integrated history. Kweit went on to note, "for Holocaust survivors, it must be equally disturbing to read accounts by historians in which they do

[37] Mark Roseman, "Foreword," in *Approaching and Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), vi.

[38] During the war years, Tichauer went by "Zippi."

[39] Qtd in Konrad Kweit, "Desiging Survival: A Graphic Artist in Birkenau," in *Approaching and Auschwitz Survivor*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

not recognize their own experiences."[40] Inconsistencies regarding facts and descriptions do pose serious problems to the historian writing about the Holocaust, as well as the reader of such writing.

Language presents another barrier for the scholar both in the realms of translation/interpretation and availability of vocabulary. Jürgen Matthäus points out that English has become the "lingua franca of Holocaust discourse," not only because much of Holocaust scholarship has taken place in the English speaking world (especially the United States), but also because the language is known by so many individuals from different nations and cultures, and has, therefore, created common ground. However, numerous scholars see this phenomenon as detrimental to the field and to the preservation of narrative and "historical reality." Others, such as James Young, have observed that former victims experience English "'as a neutral, uncorrupted and ironically amnesiac language' well suited to telling their story."[41] Any translator well knows the difficulties in interpreting one language for the audience of another.

However, if this language frustration were not enough, words themselves also threaten to trip up the student of the Holocaust. In the introductory material to his volume *Art From the Ashes*, Lawrence L. Langer speaks to the seemingly universal desire that words should have some sort of objective, and actual meaning, that "language should play an active role in the affairs of men, that a link should exist between what we say and what we do, or what is done to us." Yet, such an expectation is challenged and

[40] Kweit, 25.

[41] Jürgen Matthäus, "Displacing Memory: The Transformations of an Early Interview," in *Approaching and Auschwitz Survivor*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56–7.

often disappointed by experience. Langer discusses the various diary and memoir writers during and after the Holocaust, and the frustration that they faced when, the more they wrote, "the less effect they seem to have had on the incidents consuming them." The frustration faced by these writers when their words and experiences did not seem to match, was enormous. [42] Such frustrations are further compounded when the scholar tries to flesh out the meaning beneath these already frustrated, and sometimes insufficient words. This confusion, Langer says, understandably "explains the impulse to abandon words, to nullify their power to rule over or portray human events."[43] What is the historian to do with the world of language when the issues of translation pale in comparison to the problems raised by the inadequacy of language to convey meaning in certain situations?

The nature of memory is the last, and perhaps most difficult category of resistance to Holocaust testimony as evidence. Two major concerns arise from the category of memory: recall and reliability. In the foreword to *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor*, Mark Roseman attests to the concern regarding the ability of the former prisoner to accurately recall their Holocaust experience in two ways. First, he points out that Tichauer's excellent recall counters "an all too glib assumption about the effect of time and cultural change on survivor memory." He acknowledges that such a fear exists, even though he wishes to dispel it. However, his very assertion that Tichauer's recall is excellent and accurate acts to assuage this anxiety among scholars, therefore reaffirming

[42] Lawrence L. Langer, *Art from the Ashes: a Holocaust Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

[43] Ibid.

its existence, and perhaps even giving it validity. In the preface to *Playing for Time*, Marcelle Routier describes Fania Fénelon's "merciless recall."[44] This description is presented over and against Fénelon's two companions who (thankfully) claim to have forgotten so much of their Holocaust experience. [45] Had Tichauer's or Fénelon's ability to accurately recall not been quite so excellent, how would this have affected the validity of her testimony? In other words, is their ability *exceptional*? Are they the exception that proves the rule, or the proof that a new rule is needed? Recall is only one facet in the larger concern of reliability. Reliability also deals with the ability of the mind to repress painful memories, fill in holes and gaps in recall, and alter the original memory as a person gains distance from the actual event. In the Preface to *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, Langer also asks about the reliability of memory: "How credible can a reawakened memory be that tries to revive events so many decades after they occurred?"[46] Many recorded interviews and written testimonies and memoirs are complete years, even decades after the events occurred. What if the distance of time and space have taken away some of the primary nature of these sources?

Even with all of those concerns, Historians have, increasingly, begun to use the narratives of former victims as primary sources in their research and as evidence in their writing. Often, they still feel the need to explain such a decision, as these pages have proven. For every argument against the incorporation of inmate accounts, there is an

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[44] Fellow inmates called Fénelon "Fania."

[45] Marcelle Routier and Fania Fénelon, "Preface," in *Playing for Time* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977), vii–viii.

[46] Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), xv.

equally strong, perhaps stronger argument in favor of their inclusion. Matthäus points out that even though certain aspects might be missing from the various testimonies, "they are the sole basis for reconstructing with any prospect of success not only what actually happened but also how what happened is remembered and communicated by survivors and subsequently by historians."[47] Essentially, even with all the concerns and difficulties that testimonies bring to the historian, they are the only option that she really has in conveying a realistic narrative.

In addition, the historian might benefit from shifting his paradigm concerning facts and reality. The need to convey reality to the best of one's ability need not overshadow the idea that accuracy is not the only road to reality. Fidelity is also such a path. Langer references Lina Wertmüller's Holocaust film *Seven Beauties* when discussing just such a dilemma. The film portrays the story of a concentration camp without a real life parallel, and with a female *Kommandant* (which is, of course, not factual). Numerous historians objected to the film's inaccuracies (which were actually conscious decisions), saying that they caused the film to fail "to capture the reality of the Third Reich." Meanwhile, "supporters insisted that the accuracy of detail was less urgent than fidelity to the inner tensions of victims…."[48] It is possible for a narrative, a story, or a testimony to be true in meaning without being true in fact—in that it can be true in meaning and faithful to lived experience without being completely accurate and precise in all the facts surrounding that experience. The scholar researching and writing on the

[47] Matthäus, "Displacing Memory: The Transformations of an Early Interview," 70.

[48] Langer, *Art from the Ashes*, 11.

Holocaust must bear the responsibility of determining how to navigate the "truth" of a testimony in order to include it in their work.

The task of reconciling inconsistencies is closely related to such navigation. Perhaps phenomenology can play a helpful part in the historian's ability to understand and collate the narratives of former victims. Langer describes the first time he experienced rather glaring inconsistency in testimony, in this case between former victims (Mr. and Mrs. B.) and their children. Towards the end of the taped narrative the interviewer asked the couple, both of whom had survived several camps, what it all meant to them, "what they are left with." Mrs. B. responds, "We are left with loneliness. As long as we live, we are lonely." Mr. B responds similarly: "Nothing to say. Sad." The interviewer then asks the couple's daughter what she has taken away from her parents' experience. Her response is quite different. She discusses the strength that she has derived from *their* strength, gained from managing to build a life after such heinous experiences. She feels connected to her European-Jewish heritage in a way that many Jews in the United States do not. Langer's initial reaction to this inconsistency was to think that either someone was lying, or someone just had not understood what the others were saying. "It took me some time to realize that *all* of them were telling a version of the truth as they grasped it, that several currents flow at differing depths in Holocaust testimonies, and that our understanding of the event depends very much on the source and the destination of the current we pursue."[49] At the surface level, this simply means that inconsistencies do not always mark misunderstanding or error, and that in fact they can actually authenticate stories which inherently must have looked different from

[49] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, xi.

different perspectives. Every person would not have had the same experience with the camp commandant, Kapos, or even with the camp latrines. These differences provide layers of understanding as opposed to indicating errors. At a deeper level, these differences do represent different "versions of the truth." Mr. and Mrs. B can be, simultaneously, bereft and lonely, and have a life with children whom they adore. They made a new life, and yet they are also "hostages to a humiliating and painful past that their happier future does little to curtail." Differences in fact need not be seen as factual errors, but neither should they be ignored. Rather, they should be incorporated and reconciled in order to come to a deeper understanding of the reality of the past. Similarly, layers of experience and truth do not necessarily represent inaccuracies, but ambivalence which leads to a more faithful account. Perhaps Charlotte Delbo, a former victim of Auschwitz, best summarizes the point by saying of her memoirs, "Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true./ I am certain that it is truthful."[50]

Just as the researcher must be willing to see themselves as the one missing the truth in the accounts they read, they must also be willing to admit that they do not always understand not because translation or vocabulary have failed, but because they are not listening. In the case of Zippi Tichaur, "instead of survivor memory or language failing in the face of Auschwitz . . . the failure seems to be on the part of the recipients, especially those who communicate testimonies in a selective or decontextualized manner."[51] David Boder conducted the first interview with Zippi in 1946 as a part of a larger project which sought to document the experiences of displaced persons after World

[50] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 2.

[51] Matthäus, "Displacing Memory: The Transformations of an Early Interview," 70.

War II. Boder conducted and recorded the interview, but he did not translate it until 1956. Unfortunately, Boder made several mistakes in translation, and was also unable to properly ascertain the context of what Zippi was describing at the time of the interview. Subsequent scholars who have used the Zippi Tichaur interview have often not gone back to the original interview, but have instead read the transcribed version, thus carrying some of Boder's mistakes into their own work. [52] Clearly, language as an idea is not at fault in this case. Translation and lack of context bear the brunt of the blame for this language related issue.

But, what of the instances in which language, itself, is the problem—when the signified does not have a signifier? Lawrence Langer completes his discussion on the desire, faced by numerous diary writers (such as Abraham Lewin, Lodz Ghetto diarist) to abandon language by asserting, "But even as he conceded the vanity of his efforts, Lewin went on writing, leaving behind a record of scenes that nothing *but* language could have captured for the future. In such moments of crisis, the pen must have seemed a brittle instrument indeed; half a century later, we realize that little else could so keenly conjure up that vanished time."[53] In addition to this existential relationship to language, Langer also invites the reader to try to realize "the difference between language as 'ought' and language as 'is.'"[54] Our expectations of Holocaust memoirs and their writers bear witness to this gap. Langer points out that the idea that former victims need time—years

[52] *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a more detailed account please see the Matthäus essay "Displacing Memory" in this volume. Also see the volume's appendix and notes which explain errors and make necessary alterations.

[53] Langer, *Art from the Ashes*, 4.

[54] Ibid., 3.

or decades—to write about their Holocaust experiences stems from a belief that no one *ought* to be able to be able to verbalize such experiences that soon after the trauma, or even at all. This idea does not, however, root itself in the reality of how or when a writer *is* capable of remembering and recording. Often, when speaking of the Holocaust, statements of "is" are, under the surface, statements of "ought." Another example is the idea of the indomitable human spirit. The idea that suffering *is* meaningful, must be suspended in order to hear the meaning, or lack thereof, that the former victims ascribe to their experiences. The statement "Suffering is meaningful," really betrays the reader's hope that suffering and tragedy have a meaning, but what she really means is that suffering *ought* to have a meaning. [55] (Think back to the example of Mr. and Mrs. B. and their daughter.) Essentially, the reader's and researcher's assumptions about the way things are and how they work, must be put aside as they enter the world of an individual's Holocaust testimony.

Certainly, the available language for a different world has the ability to limit our understanding of the former victim's experience, but applying systems and structures from our world to that of the camp only furthers confusion. Rather, as readers, we must shift our paradigm and battle disorientation not by utilizing familiar points of orientation, but "using landmarks native to this uncertain terrain."[56] Langer carefully summarizes the difficulties of language and understanding with the following explanatory analogy: "Reading and writing about the Holocaust is an experience in *un*learning; both parties are forced into the Dantean gesture of abandoning all safe props as they enter and, without

[55] Langer, *Art from the Ashes*, 3–6.

[56] Ibid., 6.

benefit of Virgil, make their uneasy way through its vague domain."[57] The two way street of communication is, perhaps, never more important for the historian than it is in such a situation. Instead of relying on the former victim to completely explain themselves in the vocabulary and paradigms of this world, the historian must enter the world from which s/he communicates. [58]

Having begun the process of unlearning, the historian's approach to memory must also undergo a metamorphosis. The scholar should consider abandoning the primary focus on gleaning accurate details and facts from the desired perfect recall, and instead devote attention too gleaning the meaning within the human testimony. Sometimes, what sounds like contradiction or even error, is simply a sign that the layers of memory must be explored more fully. Lawrence Langer is helpful here too. In order to engage with the testimonies he viewed for his research and the individuals he interviewed, Langer named the "complex layers of memory that give birth to the versions of self" which he discovered. [59] Langer borrows the concept of "deep memory" from Charlotte Delbo who

[57] Langer, *Art from the Ashes*, 6–7.

[58] In an effort to maintain at least some level of fidelity to these narratives, I have kept some of the original vocabulary from these narratives. Such a decision is also practical, as some words simply do not translate completely from the German into English. Moreover, there are certain words which carry such a connotation because of their use in the context of the Holocaust, that this usage has very nearly become an alternate definition. Often, even when narratives are translated into English, many of these "Holocaust terms" remain unaltered. Prisoners, especially those who spent many months or years in the *Lager*, learned a dialect of sorts, in which euphemisms and even ordinary words took on new levels of meaning. For this reason, translating these terms from German to English seems an example of infidelity. Narratives in many different languages employ these terms in an effort to describe their experiences and daily existence within the *Lager*. In this way, one could even argue that a translation from German or Polish into English or any other language would not even be accurate. German words such as "Lager," (camp) "kommando" (work detail) belong, at least in these narratives, to another language entirely. The same principle can apply to Polish words like "blockowa" (block leader). In this project, many of these terms have remained in their original dialect.

[59] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, xv. This is not to say that former victims are explicitly aware of these different layers of memory and different versions of self. Rather, it is the listener or reader who becomes aware of them as she strives to reconcile seemingly contradictory or nonsensical aspects of the

came to believe, "that the 'self' who was in the camps isn't me, isn't the person who is here, opposite you. No, it's too unbelievable. And everything that happened to this other 'self,' the one from Auschwitz, doesn't touch me now, *me*, doesn't concern me, so distinct are deep memory [*mémoire profonde*] and common memory [*mémoire ordinaire*]."[60] "Deep memory," represents the part of the mind which tries to remember and communicate the self that experienced the Holocaust, while "common memory" aids in the reconstruction, not only of the pre and post Holocaust self, but also of objective details which the self of deep memory experienced. [61] "Anguished memory" expresses the troubled nature of the rememberer, as s/he tries to reconcile the camp self's various identities (ex. actor and acted upon) with the world of the camp, including environment and time. This period of time spent in the camps represents a gap in life experience, an absence of the normal of this life in the presence of a world without normal moral codes or meanings. [62] Langer continues, "If anguished memory may be seen as discontent in search of a form, humiliated memory recalls an utter distress that shatters all molds designed to contain a unified and irreproachable image of the self. Its voice represents

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testimony. Individuals such as Charlotte Delbo and Primo Levi exhibit awareness of these facets of memory and self, but that is not to say that every former prisoner will or should do the same.

[60] Qtd in Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 5.

[61] In keeping with this idea of "multiple selves," I will refer to the authors of the memoirs included in this project by two names: I will utilize their last name in a discussion of the post-Holocaust self, and I will use the name that they went by before and during their time in the camps. This is especially important for the majority of these female narrators who married after they were liberated. Upon marriage, their last name changed, and so to call them by their last name (at the time of their testimony) when referring to their experiences in the *Lager*, seems strange, especially in light of the ways in which many memoirs describe their lives before, during, and after internment. For example, Judith Magyar Isaacson went by "Jutka" during the time about which her memoir is written, which is what I will call her. When discussing her as the author of a memoir, or her life after the *Lager*, I will follow the usual convention of calling her by her last name. In the footnote of the first reference to an author, I will make the specific correlation known.

[62] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* See chapter two, "Anguished Memory: the Divided Self" for a more thorough explanation.

pure misery, even decades after the events that it narrates."[63] "Tainted memory" attempts to redeem and justify the self of the camps, devoid of moral systems or guaranteed causal relationships, to the norms and morals of this world. [64] "Unheroic memory" is Langer's last category. Holocaust clichés and jargon concerning heroism and the strength of the human spirit fall limp in the face of this layer of memory. The sense of irretrievable loss and constant pain speak to what Langer calls a "communal wound that cannot heal."[65] Many "survivors" do not feel triumphant at having "survived" the Holocaust. This is partially due to the grief that they still must endure, the loneliness described by Mrs. B, the still present anguish. Additionally, the world that they survived was not one in which a person survived on merit, intelligence, or goodness. It was a world turned upside down, where normal morals fell short, choice was often an illusion, and where fate was determined by caprice and luck. In a way, Holocaust prisoners often do not experience triumph because others did not survive, and to attach words such as "victory," "triumph," and "nobility" to the experiences or the camp selves of former victims seems disingenuous. [66]

Langer's need to express the common concern about the ability of the former victim to awaken memories of events long past was merely a satisfaction of formality. One *ought* not be able to stir memories long gone; once again, *ought* does not capture the reality of what *is*. Langer responds to the question of credibility or reliability of

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[63] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 77.

[64] Ibid., 122.

[65] Ibid., 204.

[66] For these reasons, I have attempted to refrain from using the term "survivor" when referring to former camp inmates.

resurrected memories, by pointing out the insufficiency of the terminology in the question: "There is no need to revive what has never died. Moreover, though slumbering memories may crave reawakening, nothing is clearer in these narratives that that Holocaust memory is an insomniac faculty, whose mental eyes have never slept."[67] Fania Fénelon used similar words to explain how she could write a Holocaust memoir nearly three decades after the fact:

> It's not that I want to. But particularly at night, I can't help it, I find myself back in the block at Birkenau, and *it* all happens, without any help from me. It never starts the same way: a woman shouts—Florette or Irene; someone is crying—Anny perhaps; there's a shower of insults, blows . . . . I spend every night there—every night! . . . . I've never left the camp; I'm still there, I've spent every night of my life there, for thirty years. [68]

Perhaps Fénelon's "merciless recall" is actually at the mercy of something else—of a layer of memory ("humiliated memory," perhaps) which she cannot reconcile with her present life. Such a painful acknowledgement deserves the attention and the thought of thought of the historian who seeks to incorporate testimony into a narrative of the Holocaust. The entire debate over the validity and pitfalls of former victim testimony within historical research and writing is summed up by Lawrence Langer who, again, challenges the normal categories that scholars often attempt to create: ". . . since testimonies are human documents rather than merely historical ones, the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern of accuracy."[69] The issue is not that the narratives are unreliable as sources, but it is rather

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[67] Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, xv.

[68] Qtd in Routier and Fénelon, "Preface," in *Playing for Time*, ix.

[69] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, xv. Historians of other eras who face a dearth of sources, and especially primary accounts, no doubt envy the vast repository of modern historians, and especially those who study World War II and the Holocaust. Massive amounts of care and energy have been invested in the

that the historian must recategorize them as human sources/documents, instead of lumping them in with every other kind of record. The historian must also recognize the particular benefits of listening to testimonies as avenues to understanding a deeper level of identity of the former victim, and in this case of the former victim's captors.

Arendt: A Framework

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt explains the strange nature of simultaneous power structures which shield the actual center of power within a totalitarian state. Within Nazi Germany, there was a complex system in which both party and state existed simultaneously, creating the effect of a dual authority. The state was, according to Arendt, the ostensible authority, while the party was the real authority. Moreover, the continuous duplication of offices and shifting of power from one seat to the next made it nearly impossible to actually know where the actual power existed. The members within the power structure itself did not fully comprehend their place within the network. Generally speaking, the more apparent power an office or position held, the less real power it had. Each layer of obvious power served some official capacity, but perhaps more importantly, it served to shield from view the actual centers of real power. [70] In this way Nazi women's organizations created another layer in the shifting soils of power, and while they was official in nature, their authority was only ostensible, instead of real. Outside of the official femaleness prescribed by the state and the party existed other expressions of femaleness, which seemed to contradict that prescription.

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collection and preservation of firsthand accounts. To avoid including them, or to do so only grudgingly or with minimal effort would be foolish.

[70] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 507–31.

Himmler's decision to incorporate women in the camp system as guards, contracted to the SS, not only fell outside the official stance of denying women positions of authority within Nazi systems, but it made official certain modes of feminine expression which stood outside the party prescription. In this system, only, were women afforded real, if somewhat limited, authority. Interestingly, the camp system, as Arendt describes it, was a world of "total domination," and therefore the zenith of authority and power expression within the totalitarian world. [71] In this way, women were ironically awarded some of the most real power within the entire Nazi system, not only relevant to other Nazi positions, but certainly in relation to the prisoners within the world of "total domination."

Thesis

By building on and modifying the foundations of German women's history, looking through the lens of Arendt's layers of power, and employing Langer's methods for understanding former victim testimony and his framework of "ought" versus "is" a picture of the female guard of the Nazi camp system begins to emerge. The typical *Aufseherin* (female guard/overseer) was, in many respects, average, and her roles within the *Lager* (camp) varied in importance and scope. In keeping with the overall Nazi tendency to create worlds with two realities—both *ought* and *is*—female guard training presented what an *Aufseherin* "ought," ideally, to do. However, her internship process and subsequent job assignments reveal the reality of a very different "is" within the *Lager*. Additionally, the profiles, training, and roles of *Aufseherinnen* portray women acting out a femininity which both contradicted and fulfilled Nazi ideals of womanhood.

[71] Arendt, 565–592.

The individual narratives of former victims display the overall "object-identity" of the female camp staff—that is, their identity as experienced by the inmates—and the overall role of femaleness in the *Lager*. Interestingly, this portrayal indicates a certain level of ambivalence within the narrators and the researcher as they each discover that what perhaps *ought* to have been the case concerning the identities of these women *is* not always confirmed by experience. Amazingly, narratives usually portray their guards as humans (is) instead of monsters (ought). This human status is, however, contradicted by the understanding of the female defendants throughout the war crimes trials. Trial transcripts and media coverage of the Belsen Trial reveal a lack of understanding of the role of women in the camp system, as well as a general influence of gender stereotyping on the incongruent verdicts and sentencing of female defendants. The female accused often became monsters in the eyes of the media, public, and even their judges to some degree, thus marking a significant change in their object-identity. The identities of the *Aufseherinnen* were therefore created not only by themselves, through their actions and self-portrayal, but also by the ways in which others experienced them, ways in which prisoners and members of the courts did not experience male perpetrators.

CHAPTER TWO

Lager Women

Introduction

To delve more deeply into the lives of the women who became facilitators of the Nazi camp system, certain foundations must be laid. This chapter will provide a generalized profile of the average *Aufseherin*. It will give a general overview of camp structure, with specific interest in how women fit into that order. The training process and its application will take center stage in this chapter, as they represent two ends of historical language concerning the Holocaust: *ought* versus *is*. The ideological training of these women provided them with the rules and regulations of the camp system, but their internships and their assignments revealed the world of the *Lager* for what it was—a place where normal rules and categories were violated alongside human life. We can gain a murky picture of the women employed in this system through their actions which so often flouted the ideals of their training. This image is one which contradicts that of caring wife and mother, but which nevertheless fulfills certain ideals of Nazi womanhood, as it fits within the larger trend within the Third Reich of teaching *ought*, but encouraging *is*.

A Note Concerning Sources

This chapter will focus on two main perspectives: the guards and the guarded. It will, however, also occasionally include the perspective of male members of the Nazi hierarchy. I will rely heavily on trial transcripts and interviews in order to gain the

perspective of the *Lager* women themselves. Former victims also appear as witnesses in trial records, further demonstrating those sources' value. However, for the perspective of former victims, I mainly rely on memoirs and interviews. While the perspective of the inmates might seem irrelevant for a study devoted to their captors, their insights not only provide us with details and explanations of camp routines, but also context and the deeper meaning of the female guards. In her article "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany *Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders*" Gisela Bock concludes her discussion of the merits of a gendered approach to the Holocaust and its power relationships within such a historical narrative by stating:

> In the Holocaust, the crucial power relations were those between German Gentiles and Jews; searching for power relations between men and women among the perpetrators without considering their relationship to the victims (for example, in the argument that female camp guards were not admitted to the higher ranks of the SS because they were disempowered as women) may easily border on cynicism. Among the victims, gender hierarchy was clearly subordinated to, even abolished by, more central power relationships. This is where we may find the limits of a gender-based analysis of the Holocaust: male-female power relations cannot be conceptualized as a primary, independent historical agency; yet this limit, too, may be grasped only by studying the Holocaust through the perspective of Gender.[1]

The former victim's perspective in any gendered study of the Holocaust is, clearly, crucial. As expressed by Bock, this necessity does not arise from any sentimental desire, but from a genuine, scholarly goal to understand and transmit that understanding in writing. Historians must, she says, have the proper optic for studying the Holocaust. In order to understand the way in which the Third Reich and its many systems worked, a

[1] Gisela Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 96–7.

discussion of power relations is absolutely essential. A gendered study can certainly help to achieve those aims, but in doing so, it will demonstrate that gender was not the primary nexus of power. Rather, in the web of power that was the Third Reich, the primary links were between those of German Gentiles and Jews. That primary relation must be accounted for, in order to understand the role or relative position of any member of this web.

The conclusion of *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor*, a collection of articles written about the life and testimony of Helen "Zippi" Tichauer and edited by Jürgen Matthäus, provides another reason for including testimony of former victims in a study such as this. In order to battle against the prepackaged, popular image and symbol of Auschwitz, the historian must return to the history of what occurred there. Attention to detail, particularities, individuals, and instances, can only broaden our understanding. However, "we need as broad a mosaic of sources as we can get to paint a purposeful, that is to say nuanced, clear, and comprehensive, picture of the past."[2] Testimonies of former victims can contribute valuable aspects to this mosaic.

Profile

The profile offers an excellent starting point for study, as it demonstrates who these women were before they even arrived in the *Lager*, that is, who they were before they became *Lager* women. As with their male counterparts, many might assume abnormality as an explanation for how they could have done what they did. This is even more of a temptation with women, who have so often throughout history been

[2] Jurgen Matthäus, ed., "Conclusion: What Have We Learned?," in *Approaching and Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 120.

characterized as nurturing and caring. Men have been associated with violence and destruction, while women have been associated with peace and birth. These generalizations do not assist in our attempt to understand humanity, more generally, or *Lager* women, more specifically. What if violence is more of a human characteristic than a male characteristic, and therefore more common than we might want to think? Could it be that in reality violence is not relegated to the asocial and the deviant only, but also exists in the category of "normal," functioning members of society to which the majority of humans belong? The fact is that the vast majority of the women about which this study is written were, for lack of a better term, normal. Gisela Bock has rightfully pointed out that *Lager* women closely resemble Christopher Browning's "ordinary men."[3] Women from all walks of life and with varying life histories were represented among the *Aufseherinnen*. No one could assume exemption from the crimes of Holocaust, as "[t]he quota of potential candidates for genocide included all the generations of Nazi Germany and representatives of nearly all social circles."[4]

In order to provide a detailed profile of the *Lager* woman, I will largely depend on the data collected by Daniel Patrick Brown in his book cataloging camp women. I will supplement and corroborate his findings with the smaller case study found in Aleksander Lasik's article "The Auschwitz SS Garrison" which includes a summary of the available information on the female guards who served at Auschwitz. Utilizing these sources will

[3] Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," 89.

[4] Rudolf Höss, "Autobiography of Rudolf Höss" in *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon, Classic Holocaust Accounts, Memoirs and Reports series (New York: Howard Fertig, 2007), 10.

provide key information regarding birthplace, age, marital status, civilian occupation, and religion. The larger picture provided by Brown is generally corroborated by Lasik.

Of the over thirty-five hundred female SS personnel, Brown found twenty-four who were verifiably not born in either Germany or Austria.[5] Of the thirty-eight female personnel at Auschwitz about whom nationality could be ascertained, thirty-one were German (or Austrian). Two Czechs and five Poles constituted the remaining seven.[6] Moreover, an *Aufseherin* was much more likely to come from a rural setting than an urban one, and it was not unusual for her to have had roots in a farming community.[7] Twenty six was the average age at employment for these women, and the average birth year was 1917. Anna Kühn was the oldest upon employment at fifty seven, while Gertrud Sieber was only fifteen when she became an *Aufseherin*.[8] At Auschwitz, in the year 1944, the average female employed by the SS was approximately twenty-eight, which was a little over six and one half years less than the average for men. Moreover, 45.7 percent of its female employees were under the age of twenty four.[9] Females employed by the SS were also overwhelmingly single; only fourteen percent were married.[10] We do not have

[5] Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pub., 2002), 242.

[6] Aleksander Lasik, "The Auschwitz SS Garrison," in *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: The Establishment and Organization of the Camp*, trans. William Brand, vol. 1, Central Issues in the History of the Camp (Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000), 334. Thirty-eight people represents twenty-six percent of the population studied. (Sample sizes change throughout the study based on available information. These sample sizes can be found in the footnotes, if they are not explicitly stated in the text.)

[7] Brown, *The Camp Women*, 237.

[8] Ibid., 238.

[9] Lasik, "The Auschwitz SS Garrison," 333. Sample size: 47. 1 percent of the population.

[10] Brown, *The Camp Women*, 241.

comparable data from the Auschwitz case study, but there were at least five housewives employed there.[11] Brown does not note civilian occupations in his study, but at Auschwitz, of the twenty-two women whose civilian occupation is known five were housewives, four were clerks, two were shop assistants, and two were factory workers. The rest fell into the categories of domestic servants, agricultural laborers, hairdressers, and restaurant staff.[12] Brown also does not include religion as a point of reference in his profile, but the Auschwitz case study does provide some clues in this category. Of the sixteen women on whom data was available, ten professed Roman Catholicism, three Lutheranism, and three agnosticism.[13] Using these indicators, an *Aufseherin* was likely to be an unmarried German/Austrian under the age of twenty-eight. The varied data collected for the categories of civilian occupation and religion lends itself to the conclusion that outside of the aforementioned norms, *Aufseherinnen* tended to be anyone.

Holocaust narratives rarely spend time communicating about what scholars would call a "profile" of the typical female SS. However, a few examples of such commentary are worth noting. In her memoir, Gemma La Guardia Gluck notes the types of women who served as guards during her time in Ravensbrück.[14] Mrs. Gluck explains that as the daughter of a soldier, she had no qualms about standing at attention, "but to have done so

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[11] Lasik, "The Auschwitz SS Garrison," 333. Interestingly, of the *Aufseherin* defendants at the Belsen Trial, five of the sixteen testified that they were married. This percentage is above average.

[12] Lasik, "The Auschwitz SS Garrison." Sample size represented fifteen percent of the population. Marta, one of the orchestra girls in Fania Fénelon's memoir, encounters a warden who was a maid employed by her father before the war. And Fenelon finds herself gazing at Mandel and wondering why such perfect specimen of Aryan womanhood is working in a camp instead of producing children for the Reich. Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977), 139, 19.

[13] Lasik, "The Auschwitz SS Garrison," 334. Sixteen individuals represented 10. 9 percent of the population.

[14] Fellow inmates generally called her "Mrs. Gluck." (See next footnote for reference)

before these S.S. women, most of whom had been criminals or perhaps prostitutes in civilian life, was terrible punishment."[15] At least in the beginning, in order to become an *Aufseherin*, one could not have a criminal record.[16] Nevertheless, Mrs. Gluck most likely described these women as they seemed to her.[17] In her memoir, *Ravensbrück*, Germaine Tillion provides a different and quite detailed profile. As a trained ethnologist, Tillion found nothing odd about collecting data in her new surroundings. She made it a point to take note (mentally, and physically when the opportunity arose) of the various inmate and guard populations. Her book—half memoir, half scholarly study—provides unique insights into camp experience. Of the camp guards, Tillion provides the following detailed assessment:

> Unlike SS men, a sizeable percentage of whom fell into that universal category of true physical misfits—bowlegged, slope-shouldered, etc.—the Aufseherinnen were, in general, stout, strong, and healthy women. . . . I had reasonably complete personal data on about 200 of them, and a special interest in the social classes they had come from—and they came from all classes of German society. I encountered, among others, streetcar ticket takers, factory workers, opera singers, registered nurses, hairdressers, peasants, young middle-class women who had never worked before, retired teachers, circus riders, former prison guards, officers' widows, etc.[18]

These descriptions merely corroborate Brown and Lasik in their essential revelation: an *Aufseherin* could have been a former homemaker, maid, factory worker, or hairdresser. She could have been an inmates' neighbor.

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[15] Gemma La Guardia Gluck, *Fiorello's Sister: Gemma La Guardia Gluck's Story*, ed. Rochelle G. Saidel, Religion, Theology, and the Holocaust (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 46.

[16] Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp, 1939-45* (Princeton, NJ: Wiener, 2000), 25.

[17] The ways in which prisoners experienced and understood their guards will be the topic of chapter two.

[18] Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück* (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1975), 69.

Organization and Hierarchy

These various women came to work in an already established structure and chain of command, and many times the shifting which occurred in order to include them into this streamlined system resulted in its fragmentation. Scholars have fairly well documented the basic structures, hierarchies, and functions of the Nazi camp system, describing its different types and the branches within each camp. Certainly, these basic structures remained constant throughout the camps, but there were fundamental differences between camp types.[19] Extermination sites, for example, did not function in the same manner as labor camps, even though they had all of the same administrative departments. Jack G. Morrison, author of *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp, 1939-45* aptly points out that there was "no such thing as a typical concentration camp," in that each camp had its own special functions, management, and particularities, and each prisoner would experience each camp differently.[20] With that caveat in mind it is still helpful to look briefly at the basic structures which built the Nazi camp system, in order to gain an idea of how they worked; *Lager* women can then be added into that understanding.

In his article "Organizational Structure of Auschwitz Concentration Camp," Aleksander Lasik meticulously describes the basic organizational units and subunits of the camp. He points out that the same departments existed in all camps, indicated by the same Roman numerals.[21] Therefore, Auschwitz-Birkenau, a labor/extermination camp,

[19] Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 13.

[20] Ibid., 12.

[21] Aleksander Lasik, "Organizational Structure of Auschwitz Concentration Camp," in *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: The Establishment and Organization of the Camp*, trans. William Brand, vol. 1, Central Issues

and Ravensbrück, a concentration camp, operated within the same, fundamental structure.[22] Department I, the Office of the *Kommandant,* was the central hub of coordination within all camps. This office organized communications and staff transports, but perhaps most importantly, it handled all SS administrators.[23] Department II, the Political Department, housed the Gestapo and maintained certain powers of oversight within the camp as it had the power to intervene in cases of corruption on the part of camp staff, in general, and the SS, in particular. Department III, Camp Supervision, handled prisoner logistics (discipline, organization, lodging, and labor).[24] Department IV, the Administrative Department, provided for the necessities of the SS and prisoners. This included payroll, clothing distribution, and the confiscation and organization of prisoners' goods.[25] Department V, Medical Service, was responsible for all of the medical needs of the camp from the prisoner infirmary to the care of the SS. However, the vast majority of resources went to the care of the SS, while the resources that were used for prisoners were generally employed in medical experimentation.[26] Department VI, SS Staff Welfare

in the History of the Camp (Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000), 147. Lasik does point out that only Auschwitz had a Department IIIa (Prisoner Employment).

[22] Ravensbrück also differed as it was an all-female facility, but that facet will be discussed later.

[23] Lasik, "Organizational Structure of Auschwitz Concentration Camp," 147. I have chosen to spell "Kommandant" with a "K" as opposed to a "C," unlike the translator of this volume. I will employ this spelling throughout, regardless of the spelling found in a particular source.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 147–49.

[26] Ibid., 149 Lasik does point at that with the rise of certain epidemics around 1944, some camps began to utilize more of their resources for prisoner maintenance.

and Training, "provided ideological and political indoctrination to the SS men as well as organizing cultural and sports activities for them."[27]

The orderly structure sought by the Nazis, in which everyone knew his or her place and fulfilled its accompanying role, might have only existed on paper. The creation of the female camp at Auschwitz (*Auschwitz Frauenkonzentrationslager*, FKL) necessitated an overhaul of the camp structure, as new pieces were added and old ones were modified in order to fit new staff. This task was made especially tricky because women were not technically members of the SS. Fitting them into a system, most of which centered around SS organization proved unwieldy at times.[28] The *Kommandant* of each camp was responsible for making these accommodations, and so at Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss faced the complicated task of integrating women into his camp's systems. Generally speaking, Höss chose to double the various authority positions in the women's camp. Except for the block supervisors and the directors of various *kommandos*, all female positions within the women camp's hierarchy were duplicated by a corresponding male role. There was a male head of camp (*Lagerführer*) and a female head of camp (*Lagerführerin*). Both of these reported directly to the *Kommandant*, as opposed to going through the head of the men's camp. While both individuals held equal status and responsibility, the female head of camp could not give orders to male SS, regardless of their rank.[29] Höss's displeasure with the female staff led him to this decision to double most authority positions. Indeed, he became so frustrated with the apparent lack of

[27] Lasik, "Organizational Structure of Auschwitz Concentration Camp," 149.

[28] Obviously, the situation at Ravensbrück remained, more or less, steady because it was an all-women's facility and therefore did not need to undergo such structural changes.

[29] Lasik, "Organizational Structure of Auschwitz Concentration Camp," 283.

administrative ability of the female head of staff (at that time, Frau Langefeld) that he asked Himmler if he might demote her so that a male SS would be her direct superior, as opposed to her co-director. Himmler denied his request.[30]

Most Holocaust narratives also have something to say about camp power structures, even if only implicitly. They discuss the mundane structures and struggles within German hierarchy as well as those between German authority and the prison population. In this way, Holocaust narratives are extremely helpful in allowing their audience to piece together how systems functioned on a day to day basis in the camps, and what types of roles existed within those systems. Zippi Tichauer held a fairly privileged position at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as the prisoner who designed and coordinated the system for marking incoming prisoners. Zippi's abilities as a graphic artist and her efficient work within an administrative position secured her respect from camp authorities and provided her with interactions and connections within the camp hierarchy. Moreover, Zippi was an inmate in Auschwitz-Birkenau from March of 1942 through January 1945, giving her a unique perspective on the change over time which occurred in the camp.[31] During most of her time in Auschwitz, Tichauer explains, "all the high prisoner officials were Germans. You had the SS at the top. Each SS had an inmate functionary who helped him or her."[32] There was no confusion that in Birkenau (as was

[30] Höss, *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, 81.

[31] *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor.* Information presented is a summary of the Preface and the Introduction of this volume. Her position also kept her alive, as she was one of the few non-expendables.

[32] Qtd in Nechama Tec, "Recapturing the Past: Individuality and Cooperation in Auschwitz," in *Approaching and Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37.

the case in Ravensbrück) the female SS were in charge. This was the one essential division within *Lager* hierarchy which the prisoner needed to understand.

Creating Aufseherinnen

How did women come to be employed by the SS? The lack of a distinct profile for these women begs the question of their recruitment and training process. How did one go from working in a hair salon, to managing a concentration camp? Just as the population of *Aufseherinnen* was varied, their experiences did not necessarily fit into one particular outline. Nevertheless, there were certain aspects of their training and subsequent work as overseers which were intended to be universal. However, the difference between the ideal and the real is certainly instructive, as the training *Aufseherinnen* received did not always prepare them for their actual positions within the camp. Moreover, there was a sharp dichotomy between the theoretical training they received, in terms of rules and regulations, and the result of their internship education and subsequent work experience.

Recruitment to Conscription

The process of becoming a *Lager* woman varied depending on time frame and position vacancy. In the beginning of the camp system, women were recruited, either by "help wanted" advertisements or the stern encouragement of a male SS officer at a factory where women worked. Brown describes the process of recruitment as an attempt on the part of the SS to "lure" women with incentives and favorable job descriptions. This advertisement campaign was dominated by enticing phrases such as "one only

would have to watch over the prisoners" and "physically effortless work."[33] Indeed, many of those women who joined voluntarily did so because the pay was better as a guard than in their civilian job.[34] After 1941 the government began to imprison women in camps that were, unlike Ravensbrück, not solely for women. Unsurprisingly, 1942 marked the beginning of an invigorated campaign for female overseers.[35] This campaign, however, was not successful enough to fill the numerous female positions created by an influx of prisoners, and so in 1943 the Reich Labor Ministry gained the power to conscript women (between ages seventeen and forty-five) for "labor service," resulting in a conscripted majority by the end of the year.[36]

There were, apparently, two basic routes which most female guards seem to have taken in order to train for their positions as SS staff members. It is plausible that these two routes depended greatly on the type of assignment that the women would receive once their training was complete. *Aufseherinnen* were generally employed either in camps or factories, although the two assignments did sometimes overlap.[37] For example, fifteen of the sixteen female SS staff tried at the so-called "Belsen Trial" received

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[33] Brown, *The Camp Women*, 16.

[34] See, for example, Raymond Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others: The Belsen Trial* (London: Hodge, 1949), 207. Defendant Juana Bormann cited financial reasons signing a contract with the SS.

[35] Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, eds. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1993), 225; Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 25.

[36] Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 25.

[37] Clarification: Factories located near labor camps often required *Aufseherinnen* to oversee prisoner slave labor. Camps could, and were constructed near factories in order to take advantage of such labor. Women assigned to factories were therefore still a part of the camp system, and their responsibilities were much like those of *Aufseherinnen* assigned to various other work *kommandos*.

training at either Ravensbrück or Langenbielau.[38] Moreover, of the seven women trained at Ravensbrück, only one—Anna Hempel—was assigned to a factory before being evacuated to Bergen-Belsen. Even this assignment placed her well within the camp structure, as she mainly worked in the camp offices, managing administrative and logistical issues related to the factory and the camp.[39] The remaining six served more exclusively within the camp as guards and overseers, although their work might have taken them outside the camp on work *kommandos*, or they might have even been assigned, for a time, to a sub-camp which mainly existed to provide labor to a nearby factory.[40] Conversely, the eight *Aufseherinnen* at the Belsen Trial who were trained at Langenbielau were almost exclusively assigned to factory complexes after their training. Only Irene Haschke spent time (only three weeks) working at a labor camp before taking up her assignment as a factory overseer.[41] Many of these women were living in Silesia, and were working in some capacity in factories there, when they were called up for service. It was logical to have them sent to Langenbielau, a subcamp of Gross-Rossen which was located in Silesia, and then return them to their original factories as overseers.[42]

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[38] The training location of the sixteenth female SS staff member Hildegard Hahnel is not provided in trial transcripts.

[39] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 410.

[40] As was the case for Juana Bormann. See Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 207–08.

[41] Ibid., 394.

[42] US Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Holocaust Encyclopedia: Gross-Rosen--Map," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, n.d., http://www. ushmm. org/wlc/en/media_nm. php?ModuleId= 10005454&MediaId=2064. Ravensbrück was farther to the north.

We have more extant records on the curriculum, for lack of a better term, that the SS provided these women at Ravensbrück than we do for what occurred at Langenbielau, and other similar camps, and so our focus for understanding *Aufseherinnen* in training is more specific to Ravensbrück.[43] Moreover, Ravensbrück trained approximately thirty-five hundred female overseers, further justifying as close a look as possible at its training program.[44] The training process at Ravensbrück could take anywhere from one week to six months, as each trainee spent time being instructed by a senior overseer in rules and regulations, followed by time in an internship.[45] It can be surmised that the length of training often depended on practical matters, such as the urgency of requests for *Aufseherinnen* coming in from other camps. Already established camps required female overseers upon opening women's camps within their compounds. Even with the camps' streamlined organization and the education that the *Aufseherinnen* received, transitioning from training to a permanent assignment might not have gone as smoothly as the SS had hoped. In his autobiography, *Kommandant* Höss expressed his misgivings concerning the *Aufseherinnen* arriving at Auschwitz, claiming that he was not sent the most qualified women to work in his camp and that they "had been thoroughly spoiled at Ravensbrück . . . . These supervisors were now posted at Auschwitz—none came voluntarily, and had the job of getting the women's camp started in the most difficult conditions. From the very beginning most of them wanted to run away and return to the quiet comforts and the easy life at Ravensbrück." Höss also complained that *Aufseherinnen* were more or less

[43] Based on this information, it seems that Langenbielau sent out more workers suited for the factories, and we can draw some conclusions based on that information.

[44] Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 25.

[45] Ibid. However, especially as the war dragged on, training periods were drastically shortened.

inept and "ran hither and thither in all this confusion like a lot of flustered hens, and had no idea what to do."[46] Clearly, at least one *Kommandant* was of the opinion that the *Aufseherinnen* training was not equipping these women for their work in the *Lager*.

While the assertion that *Aufseherinnen* wanted to run away to Ravensbrück cannot be assessed, the lack of organizational capability was apparently also noticed by several of the inmates. Based on Zippi's experience, Nechama Tec explains that the female SS had a massive amount of responsibility in addition to their authority. They were expected to keep accurate population statistics concerning the camp, and they were also expected to transform this data into meaningful reports to be sent to Berlin on a regular basis. These tasks were, of course, in addition to the supervision and discipline of the prisoners, as well as the completion of other administrative duties. While female SS were certainly in charge of and responsible for the majority of the women's camp and its prisoners, they did not wield absolute power, if for no other reason than that they did not have the necessary skills to do their jobs efficiently. The first roll call demonstrated the guards' ineptitude to Zippi, at least in the area of organization. They could not record an accurate count, and they failed to obtain and organize the population information that their reports necessitated. Katia Singer, a Jewish Slovakian prisoner, volunteered her services. When Katia conducted roll call, it lasted fifteen minutes or less, whereas the SS efforts only produced hours of frustration.[47] Singer effortlessly preformed roll calls and

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[46] Höss, *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, 80–81.

[47] Nechama Tec, "Recapturing the Past: Individuality and Cooperation in Auschwitz," in *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 40. Later, unending roll calls will be used as punishment/torture for the prison population. For more information, see the essays in *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Various memoirs attest to this form of torture, but Tichauer recalls the evolution of this technique.

collected and ordered data for reports.[48] Ironically, a prisoner who was there because of her supposed innate inferiority proved herself superior, at least in this instance.

Whether Höss was impressed with the *Aufseherinnen* or not, once at Auschwitz, they became a permanent fixture and slowly settled into their various occupations. While the model of basic camp structure makes it seem as though all was neat and tidy concerning a guard's responsibilities, this was rarely the case. *Aufseherinnen* frequently filled more than one position at a time, and their positions changed quite frequently. *Aufseherin* Juana Bormann, for example, worked one year in the kitchen, one year on a *kommando*, and one year on assignment at the estate of Oswald Pohl (*Obergruppenführer*)—all while stationed at Ravensbrück.[49] Once she arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bormann was assigned to work *Kommandos* at the subcamps of Babetz and Budy.[50] Inside Birkenau, itself, Bormann worked as an inspector of sorts, and when she arrived at Bergen-Belsen, she was placed in charge of the pig sty.[51] Elisabeth Volkenrath served on work *Kommandos*, as head of the parcel store, and even as *Oberaufseherin*.[52] At Ravensbrück and Auschwitz, Herta Ehlert supervised various work *Kommandos*, including the garden *Kommando*. At Belsen, she worked in the "prisoner's clothing store," and served as *Oberaufseherin* while Volkenrath was in the hospital.[53]

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[48] Nechama, "Recapturing the Past: Individuality and Cooperation in Auschwitz," 40.

[49] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 211.

[50] Ibid., 207–8.

[51] Ibid., 210.

[52] Ibid., 213.

[53] Ibid., 227–28, 236.

Once at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Irma Grese was assigned to "telephone duties in the Blockfürer's room," and then spent time on the "gardening working party," "the parcel's office," and in *Lager* C.[54] While stationed in *Lager* C, Grese acted as senior *Aufseherin* with six or seven *Aufseherin* working under her; these staff were rotated weekly. Grese also ordered roll call, and was responsible for keeping population information after selections, a duty which will be discussed in more detail later.[55] The amount of variation in assignment was dependent on numerous factors including prison populations, incoming transports, and the number of available *Aufseherin*. Perhaps Höss's remarks did reflect a certain reality of ineptitude. The constant variation of assignment and transition in environment no doubt also played a role in the ability of female staff to adequately fill their roles. Nevertheless, a *Kommandant* expected staff to handle these transitions seamlessly and without confusion in duty, rank, or authority.

These defendants describe their occupations in a matter of fact tone which suggests they felt adequate for their tasks. To say that they were completely inept, or that their training did not prepare them at all for their assignments would be incorrect. However, this training did certainly present two opposing concepts: ideal regulations and spontaneous initiative. The first portion of training was designed to acquaint the trainees with the *Lagerordnung*—the official rules and regulations which governed all camps. During this period, trainees learned that they would be responsible for ensuring focused and efficient work from inmates under their supervision. They learned how to "detect sabotage and work slowdowns" and what punishments were appropriate in the camp.

[54]Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 248.

[55] Ibid., 249–51.

Trainees also learned their place in the camp hierarchy: subordinate to men. Prohibited from actually joining, women were merely hired by the SS as staff, thus providing them with a tenuous and confusing rank below men in similar roles within the camp structure. While this information was easy to swallow within the confines of the all-female administration of Ravensbrück, *Aufseherinnen* found its practical application much more difficult.

The Battle of the Sexes

Unlike the thoroughly streamlined, standard organization represented by the department system, the doubling of official authority positions created inconsistent overlapping, friction between offices, and power struggles between male and female staff.[56] Male camp officials outranked their female counterparts, limiting their relative power, but these limitations did not always impede female SS from triumph when they were at odds with male officials. When Dr. Josef Mengele wanted Zippi to come and work for him, doing anatomical drawings, she credits a female SS with intervening on her behalf to keep her at her post.[57] Other altercations were not always settled in favor of the female participant. In her interview for the Shoah Foundation, Olga Lengyel described an incident in which Dr. Fritz Klein visited Birkenau on a Sunday (not the normal day for the doctor to come to the camp) in order to bring Olga packages of medical supplies for

[56] For a more detailed description of the chaos caused by doubling see Lasik, "Organizational Structure of Auschwitz Concentration Camp," 283–4. These disruptions occurred at other camps besides Auschwitz-Birkenau

[57] Qtd in Wendy Lower, "Distant Encounter: An Auschwitz Survivor in the College Classroom," in *Approaching and Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations,* ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108.

the prisoners which she was nursing.[58] Unfortunately, Irma Grese arrived on the scene at a run and began to yell at Klein, telling him that he was not supposed to be at Birkenau at that time. She demanded to know what the packages contained and then confiscated them. She and Klein began to yell back and forth; Klein claimed superior rank, but Grese claimed jurisdiction, calling Birkenau "my territory." Finally, Grese stormed away, and Olga thanked Klein for his interference. However, she also expressed her greatest concern about the incident: she told Klein that while he had saved her for the moment, he would not be there every day to do so, and Grese would take out her anger on Olga and send her to the gas chambers. Klein told her that he would see to it that Grese would do no such thing.[59] Whether Klein showed this benevolence out of a sincere desire to help Olga, or simply out of spite for Grese, is not the point. In this case, at least, the female SS lost her battle, as Olga Lengyel survived the Holocaust.

Violence

Morrison carefully points out, "In theory, overseers were not to punish prisoners themselves, but were only to send in Reports on them."[60] During her cross-examination by Colonel Backhouse during the Belsen Trial, Elisabeth Volkenrath seemingly regurgitated this policy regarding her training. Backhouse asked about the nature of her training stating, "I suggest to you that it was at Ravensbrück that S.S. women were taught to beat and ill-treat prisoners and that at that place you were taught that the only way to

[58] Mrs. Olga Lenyel was already married at the start of the war. She went by "Olga" or "Mrs. Lengyel." See below for further reference.

[59] Olga Lengyel, Interview 46138, interview by Nancy Fisher, web video, August 28, 1998, Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation, http://vhaonline.usc.edu/search.aspx.

[60] Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 26.

keep prisoners in order was to beat them and ill-use them until they were frightened to death of you?" Volkenrath succinctly responded, "That is not true."[61] Technically, Volkenrath did not lie in this instance. Officially, women were taught to submit reports, as clarified by *Aufseherin* Herta Ehlert when Backhouse asked *her* if prisoners at Ravensbrück were regularly beaten: "In Ravensbrück, you could never beat a prisoner publicly. For the slightest offence, you had to make a report and they were brought in front of the *Kommandant*, who asked whether they admitted the offence. . . ." The prisoner was then to be punished under the authority of the *Kommandant*.[62] Certainly, Ehlert's explanation represented the prescriptive process concerning prisoner punishment. However, most memoirs and interviews of those who were imprisoned at Ravensbrück, and even of the *Aufseherinnen* themselves, attest that the descriptive rarely mirrored the prescriptive.

The question of feminine nature and its supposed aversion to violence is affronted by research on female camp guards. Female SS displayed violence just like their male counterparts—whatever one thinks *ought* to have been the case. In her memoir *Playing for Time*, Fania Fénelon describes one such scene that occurred at the camp orchestra block. After a particularly upsetting bed check had been completed, Marta (one of the orchestra members) began to clean up the mess that the warden had left behind. Another SS warden entered the block and saw Marta washing the floor, and the girls immediately began to wonder what would happen to Marta: "We didn't have to wait too long; with a violent kick of her boot, the SS sent Marta to the other end of the room." Why? Marta

[61] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 217.

[62] Ibid., 235.

was not washing the floor properly.[63] Simple "infractions" such as these often resulted in the prisoner's abuse.

SS women also participated in group violence of the sort described by Charlotte Delbo in her memoir *Auschwitz and After*: "When there is a stampede ahead of us, we know we have reached the gate. . . . I do not know if I understood that we had to run because on each side of the gate, and all along the Lagerstrasse, a double row of the camp's female personnel, SS women, female prisoners [given jobs by the SS] . . . stood there, armed with walking sticks, clubs, straps, belts, lashes, whips, ready to flail and scourge whatever passed between the two rows." She continues her description by explaining that no one could avoid being struck, and that some of the guards, such as Drexler, would trip inmates while they ran the gauntlet.[64]

Violence as Insubordination

The norm of violence could often serve as a replacement for any type of positive personal interaction with prisoners, which was forbidden. Indeed, one could argue that the first premise of non-friendly interaction superseded all other rules of camp, including the authority of an *Aufseherin* to use violence against prisoners. Even though former guards testified that they were not allowed to beat prisoners, they also admitted to flouting this order. Gertrud Fiest corroborated Ehlert's assertion concerning beatings. She attested that at Langenbielau they were not permitted to strike prisoners, and that indeed they were instructed not to as a part of their training for overall service. Fiest, at the

[63] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 138–9.

[64] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 36–7. Delbo often went by the nickname "C. "

suggestion of her crossexaminer, also admitted to "openly" beating prisoners. She suffered no repercussions.[65]

Of the *Aufseherinnen* defendants at the Belsen Trial, Irma Grese most openly admitted to flouting the regulation concerning violence against prisoners, as evidenced by the following exchange between herself and (crossexaminer) Colonel Backhouse:

> In Lager 'C' you used to carry a walking-stick [and a whip], and sometimes you beat people with the whip and sometimes with the stick?—Yes.
> Were you allowed to beat people?—No.
> So it was not a question of having orders from your superiors to do it. You did this against orders, did you?—Yes.
> Were you the only person who beat prisoners against regulations?—I do not know.
> Did you ever see anyone else beat prisoners?—Yes.
> Did you sometimes get orders to do so?—No.
> Did you give orders to other Aufseherinnen working under you to beat prisoners?—Yes.
> Had you the right to give such authorization?—No.[66]

Other than her slightly evasive response to the question concerning other *Aufseherinnen* beating prisoners, Grese seemed to confidently answer the questions concerning her repeated violations of protocol. The meaning of these responses was further enforced by Grese's responses to a series of questions concerning the whip that she used while in the camp. Major Cranfield, Grese's defense attorney, asked her during her examination whether she carried a whip. Instead of answering with a simple "yes," Grese explained, "Yes, made out of cellophane in the weaving factory in the camp. It was a very light whip, but if I hit somebody with it, it would hurt. After eight days *Kommandant* Kramer

[65] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 399–400. Please note that enough documentation and sufficient testimony exist to either corroborate or contradict major claims made by those on trial after the war.

[66] Ibid., 256.

prohibited the whips, but we nevertheless went on using them."[67] While it is amazing that Grese offered this kind of information during her examination, what is perhaps more amazing is that she did not attempt to evade details concerning her whip during cross-examination:

> You thought it was very clever to have a whip made in the factory and even when the Kommandant told you to stop using it you went on, did you not?—Yes.
> What was this whip really made of?—Cellophane paper plaited like a pigtail. It was translucent like white glass.
> The type of whip you would use for a horse?—Yes.
> Then most of these prisoners who said they saw you carrying a riding whip were not far wrong, were they?—No, they were not wrong.
> Did other Aufseherinnen have these whips made too?—No.
> It was just your bright idea?—Yes.[68]

Grese openly, even shamelessly, admitted to flouting orders, and even to having an instrument of violence custom made for her. She did not even seem to flinch under the sarcasm of Backhouse's last question. Certainly, numerous defendants denied the accusations of violence brought against them by the prosecution, via former victims. However, the open answers of a few *Aufseherinnen* and the consistency in the testimonies of former victims support the conclusion that violence and the general flouting of orders, or at least of official regulations, were normal and expected in the *Lager*.

Absolute Power: Torture

Obviously akin to violence, torture could take on less obviously violent forms. These methods of punishment (often for imaginary or miniscule infractions) certainly did not come out of the *Aufseherin* handbook, and yet were employed quite frequently. One

[67] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 249.

[68] Ibid., 256.

such method was to have a prisoner kneel or stand while holding heavy rocks above her head. Numerous defendants at the Belsen Trial were questioned about this activity, including Irma Grese who flatly denied ever employing it. In her memoir *Fragments of Isabella*, Isabella Leitner provides a contrary and very personal account of such actions on Grese's part.[69] While at roll call, a prisoner sat down to rest next to Isabella's sister Chicha. When Grese saw her, she did not punish the girl, but chose instead to punish Chicha by making her kneel in the center of the *Lagerstrasse* and hold her arms up straight with two heavy rocks in hand. Her sisters and comrades watched in horror as Chicha held the rocks while Grese taunted her. She held the rocks for hours while her loved ones could only pray.[70] This instance demonstrates the helplessness of the victim, as well as the powerlessness of those looking on.

Ultimate Power: Selections

The selection process represented another form of power and another gap between that which was prescribed and that which has been described. While only doctors were ideally supposed to make the selections of prisoners for work or death during prisoner parades, numerous former victims attest to the fact that many lower ranking officials assisted in this process outside of their prescribed role.[71] In her trial testimony, Irma Grese described the way that a selection was supposed to go: As senior overseer in C *Lager*, she received notice from the chief overseer (*Oberaufseherin*), Dreschel at the time

[69] Leitner's maiden name was Katz, and she went by Isabella.

[70] Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: a Memoir of Auschwitz*, ed. Irving A. Leitner (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1978), 41–5.

[71] See, for example: Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 99, 219, 257.

about which Grese reported, that a selection would take place. Grese ordered the women in C *Lager* to fall into fives, and then she was to make sure that order was maintained while Dr. Mengele made the selections. After the selection was over, Grese had to take stock of those that "were leaving and I had to count them, and I kept the figures in my strength book." Then Dreschel would notify her that "they had gone to another camp in Germany for working purposes or for special treatment, which I thought to be the gas chamber." Grese entered the appropriate numbers in the columns of her strength book for those transferred and those who were receiving "special treatment." Although her superiors did not inform her of this, Grese claimed, "It was well known to the whole camp that [special treatment] meant the gas chambers." She learned this information from the prisoners.[72]

Other defendants were less forthcoming about selections, again referring to official regulations and insisting that they only possessed the kinds of information which they were supposed to possess. Volkenrath asserted that while her position required her presence at selection parades, she never took an active role in the actual selecting of prisoners. In her denial, she even utilized euphemisms for the gas chambers saying, "I personally have never selected anybody to be sent away."[73] Bormann took denial a step further, saying that in addition to never selecting anyone to be sent away, she never attended or even saw a selection. She also denied knowing that the vehicles transporting prisoners just outside her work place were going to the crematoria.[74] Trial testimonies

[72] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 250–51.

[73] Ibid., 214.

[74] Ibid., 210–11.

from both the defendants and the former victims acting as witnesses demonstrated that SS personnel knew more about the workings of Auschwitz, in this case, than they were willing to reveal. Holocaust memoirs often describe the various individuals who could and did make selections, demonstrating that SS doctors did not hold a monopoly over such a duty. The reality of such widespread culpability is demonstrated by the fact that memoirs often do not make a point to *prove* who selected and who did not. Rather they weave these details in with all of the other everyday *Lager* occurrences, lending further credibility by way of common occurrence.[75] Moreover, selections could take place outside of a specified selections parade. In her interview, Regina Weber (Isabella Leitner's sister) remembers that when Irma Grese would do roll call, she would pull people out who did not look well (relatively speaking). They were gassed.[76] The idea of an orderly selection for the gas chambers is perhaps horrifying, but the fact that selections were rarely, if ever, textbook examples provides no consolation.

The Golden Rule

Most importantly, trainees were indoctrinated with the concept that they were to, under no circumstances, develop personal relationships with the inmates. *Aufseherin* Ehlert testified that she was actually sent away from Ravensbrück because she had become too familiar with the prisoners. This transfer was a punishment for "not being severe enough with [the prisoners], getting them some food and giving them food which

[75] For a few examples, see: Judith Magyar Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 64; Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 61, 169, 173, 228.

[76] Regina Weber, Interview 1530, interview by Raquel Grunwald, web video, March 10, 1995, Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation, http://vhaonline.usc.edu/search.aspx.

was not allowed."[77] The essential goal was to imbibe within the future *Aufseherinnen* extreme contempt for the inmates.[78] Germaine Tillion describes this process quite clearly:

> The beginners usually appeared frightened upon first contact with the camp, and it took some time to attain the level of cruelty and debauchery of their seniors. Some of us made a rather grim little game of measuring the time it took for new Aufseherin to win her stripes. One little Aufseherin, twenty years old, who was at first so ignorant of proper camp 'manners' that she said 'excuse me' when walking in front of a prisoner, needed exactly four days to adopt the requisite manner, although it was totally new for her. . . . As for the others, a week or two, a month at the most, was an average orientation period.[79]

Outside of the categories of violence and exertion of power, most testimonies describe two other categories of interaction between camp personnel and prisoner: official and verbal/relational. While these categories do not include every single type of interaction, and while numerous episodes might encompass more than one category, they are, nevertheless, helpful in understanding inner-camp interactions. Many of the interactions described below cement the idea that *Aufseherinnen*, and SS personnel more generally, did not always abide by their training. The principle concern—not developing personal relationships with prisoners—was usually either blurred or mitigated by flouting other regulations.

Official interaction encompassed the daily, necessary actions that took place within camp routine. Fénelon describes a variety of such interactions from the time of her arrival in Auschwitz until the time of her departure. She had to audition for *Lagerführerin* Maria Mandel in order to be admitted to the orchestra.[80] While such an activity would not

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[77] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 227.

[78] Gudrun Schwarz qtd in Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 26.

[79] Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, 69.

[80] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 30–2.

have been mundane for most prisoners, it was the norm within the system that encompassed the camp orchestra. Inmates also routinely interacted with camp personnel through various inspections such as bed checks. Fénelon describes Frau Drexler's violent search for prohibited items, hidden under the girls' mattresses. After having the *blockowa* overturn one of the mattresses, she triumphantly collected the contraband that the girls had spent so much time "organizing."[81] Fania suspected that Drexler had been recently reprimanded by a superior and was merely taking out her anger on the girls. Of course, the anguish the confiscation caused the girls only made Drexler's victory that much sweeter.[82]

The girls in the orchestra block were also often subjected to musical "requests" from the SS without notice, at any time of day or night. Mandel, for example, came to the block late one night, ordering Fania to sing "Madame Butterfly." Camp officials often came in groups to hear the orchestra, ordering the performance of certain songs. These impromptu concerts were given in addition to the daily concerts given for the SS to organize the inmate march to work and the Sunday concerts for the leisure of the SS. The SS also frequently brought newcomers to the hierarchy to experience the orchestra, as a sort of welcome.[83] All of these musical performances were a part of the orchestra-inmates' duties in the camp and necessitated official interaction with camp personnel. Job assignments were, in and of themselves, a routine form of interaction. Upon her arrival to the camp at Hessich Lichtenau (in Germany) Judith "Jutka" Magyar Isaacson was

[81] "Organizing" items in the camps was to acquire them through careful conservation of bread—the camp currency. This is a common term discussed in numerous memoirs (Ex. *Playing for Time*).

[82] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 135–6.

[83] Ibid., 156–9.

selected for a special job during her first roll call.[84] The *Kommandant* asked for the *kapo* to select a "clean girl" for him; the *kapo* chose Jutka. She and her mother and aunt feared that she had been selected to sleep with the *Kommandant*, and yet the whole process had been so official and streamlined. Upon arriving at the *Kommandant* villa, Jutka discovers that he simply wanted someone to clean his house.[85] While Jutka's fears were not realized, this series of events is an example of one of the most basic types of interactions that inmates had with their guards (male or female).

Occasionally, former victims provide instances of a prisoner relating—not necessarily only interacting, but relating—to a guard either verbally or through gestures. Yvette Lennon (also a member of the camp orchestra) provides an example in her interview (also for the Shoah Foundation). When describing her encounters with Irma Grese while at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Lennon expresses her surprise upon finding out how other prisoners had experienced Grese: "She turned out to be—she was a very bad person; we didn't even know. She was so nice to the orchestra." Lennon goes on to explain that Grese knew many of the orchestra girls' names, and that when they would walk past her she would wave at them as if they were acquaintances.[86] Olga Lengyel who did not have such a positive encounter with Grese, did speak with Dr. Klein on a more personal level. (The previously described gratitude she expressed to him for stepping in on her behalf is one example of such an interaction.) When Klein was transferred to a

[84] Judith Magyar went by "Jutka." She wrote her narrative after her marriage.

[85] Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*, 89–96.

[86] Yvette Lennon, Interview 979, interview by Jay Straus, web video, February 12, 1995, Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation, http://vhaonline.usc.edu/search.aspx. Fellow inmates called her "Yvette." Her birth name was "Bonita Assael." This information can be obtained through the Archive.

different location, he came to say goodbye to Olga. She describes how he met her at the gate and told her that he had come to say goodbye and that the war would soon come to an end. He even joked about how his having to ride on a bicycle, instead of in a car, was evidence of how badly things were going for Germany.[87] One would not expect Olga and Klein to relate on such friendly terms considering the circumstances, but while such interactions were not the norm, they did take place. Alma Rosé, the orchestra's conductor, shared a certain level of intimacy with Maria Mandel that one might also find odd. When Mandel returned from an unexpected period of time away from the camp, she discovered that "her" orchestra had been kept from practicing and performing. The orchestra members had wondered about their survival, should they not be allowed to play soon. Fénelon describes a scene between Rosé and Mandel in which the conductor explains to Mandel what has happened in her absence. When Mandel had left, Rosé tells the orchestra girls how upset Mandel was on their behalf: "'She was incredibly angry when I told her that we had been ordered to stop rehearsing. Really livid. She won't have anyone interfering with her protégés as long as she is alive!"[88] This event demonstrates that at least a few inmates were able to speak to their guards with a certain level of candor, but only a very few.

Obviously, most verbal interactions were not as benign as the ones just described. Relating to the prisoner in a personal way broke the primary rule of *Aufseherin* training. This is not to say that beatings and various methods of torture were not, in some ways,

[87] Lengyel, Interview 46138.

[88] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 176. As will be seen, the familiarity of this relationship is further demonstrated when Rosé dies.

personal to the victims. Rather, the point was to keep the rightful heirs to the Reich uncontaminated by such interactions, and violence, although personal for the victim, served to dehumanize the prisoner for the guard.

Conclusion

The portrait of the *Aufseherin* within these pages is far from complete, and indeed often does more to complicate our understanding than define it. This blurred optic is, in part, due to the fact that there was no one *Aufseherin*; just as there was no one, typical concentration camp, there was no one, typical *Lager* woman. To encounter her real person would be impossible, especially considering the lack of personal writings of these women. Their role in society and in the camp, then, becomes central to our understanding of who they were. In many ways, whether or not they fit into a prescribed role for German women is just as important as their specific roles in the camp, or their particular life stories. Just as important to fleshing out their identity is how they were perceived by German society, their peers in the camps, their prisoners, and their captors and the general public, after their capture. These ideas will be assessed in more detail in the coming chapters as a means of continued exploration into the identity of the *Lager* women.

CHAPTER THREE

Former Victims and the Object-Identity of *Lager* Women

Introduction

"A personal interest in dress and open responsiveness to the changing whims of fashion depend upon a recognition that one is *seen*, that one is—among other things—an *object* of others' sight, others' cognition. . . . And yet we humans *are* seen—no one is really just a seer. There *is* a passive phase in the human being, and philosophy is wrong to deny or berate it. "[1] When Karen Hanson wrote those words she was referring to philosophy's "fear of fashion." Essentially, she pointed out that philosophers have a fear of things transient and superficial, viewing them only as screens covering the greater truths that philosophers seek. Moreover, philosophers as "lovers of wisdom" do not typically see themselves as "the beloved." Their "professional aim is to know, not to be known, to think, not to be thought about."[2] Nevertheless, all human beings are both subject and object, the "seer" and the "seen." Camp women were both subject and object. Just as survivors attempt to navigate their different selves in their narratives—actors and acted upon—so the historian must navigate the versions of self belonging to those they study, as they build a historical narrative. [3] As seen in Chapter One, female guards were

[1] Karen Hanson, "Dressing Down Dressing Up: The Philosophic Fear of Fashion," in *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, eds. Hilde S. Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,, 1993), 239–40.

[2] Ibid., 239.

[3] The different selves of former victims will be more fully explained in the introductory materials.

certainly both actors and acted upon; the limited level of autonomous power they wielded attests to this.

In addition to background and a more rudimentary profile sketch, a person's identity also includes how they see themselves, their personal convictions, ideas, and personality quirks, among other things. Since female SS did not leave behind voluminous diaries or mountains of personal correspondence, inscribed with their secret selves, a historical narrative must content itself with other avenues of introduction. There is one other aspect of their identity that is recorded—perception, too, is a part of identity. Identity is not *only* who someone is according to themselves, but it is also who they are *to* other people. Dismissing who the female guards were *to* the inmates would be foolish indeed. At the most basic level, those the *Lager* women hold captive give them their identity as guards. In a way, apart from the perception of others, humans do not have an identity. Female guards put forth an identity to the world in which they lived in their attitudes, actions, and appearances, and this identity was perceived and recorded by scores of former victims. While they wielded ultimate power over prisoners, they were certainly not exempt from the universal status of "seer" and "seen," subject and object. Since lack of source material makes it difficult to delve deeply into female guards' selves as subjects, descriptions of their selves as objects are indispensable. The female camp guard object-self, as related by former victims' narratives reveals the general object-nature of the guards, the role of femaleness in the *Lager*, and the human status of the camp women.

The Absurd Nature of the Lager *Officials*

The world of the *Lager*, as many famous narratives have informed us, was one primarily categorized by absurdity. The *Lager* was not governed by normal moral systems or causal relationships. Often, it was dominated by an anti-system that simply turned the outside world on its head. Describing this world in his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi uses a particular inmate as an example of the anti-system of the *Lager*:

> Elias had survived the destruction from the outside, because he is physically indestructible; he has resisted the annihilation from within because he is insane. So, in the first place, he is a survivor: he is the most adaptable, the human type most suited to this way of living. If Elias regains his liberty he will be confined to the fringes of human society, in a prison or a lunatic asylum. But here in the Lager there are no criminals or madmen; no criminals because there is no moral law to contravene, no madmen because we are wholly devoid of free will, as our every action is, in time and place, the only conceivable one. [4]

Female testimonies portray much the same world. It should come as no surprise, then, that absurdity would also characterize the *Lager*-world's chief operators. This absurdity was primarily acted out in the realms of caprice, dark irony, and the SS perceptions of the inmates.

Caprice: Arbitrary Absurdity

What initially looks like brazen brandishing of power, pure and simple (as seen in Chapter One), can also be seen at another level. In her interview for the Shoah Foundation, Yvette Lennon describes an incident exemplifying this absurd caprice. As a member of the Birkenau orchestra, Yvette was, at one point, ordered to learn a new

[4] Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, ed. S. J. (Stuart Joseph) Woolf and Philip Roth, 1st Touchstone (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 97–8.

instrument in order to fill a void in the orchestra's sound. In order to learn the instrument, the *Lagerführerin* provided Yvette with a teacher from the male orchestra at Auschwitz. One day, her instructor brought Yvette's brother from the men's camp to visit her. When *Lagerführerin* Mandel entered the block and saw Yvette's brother, he ran out one of the back doors. Mandel caught up to him and brought him back inside. When Yvette saw Mandel leading her brother back inside, she quaked with fear, knowing that her brother would probably be either severely punished or killed. Mandel demanded to know who he was and why he ran. Yvette's brother explained his relation to Yvette and that he ran because he did not have permission to be there. Satisfied, Mandel told him to continue his visit with his sister. What makes the story absurd is that Yvette knew of another such incident. Two sisters, mandolin players in the orchestra, had received a note from their brother. When the SS found the note, they gave the sisters twelve lashes each, and beat their brother to death. [5] There was no official policy for such infractions. Rather punishment or permission were left to the arbitrary discretion of those officials on the scene, who could then act as they saw fit in the moment.

Maria Mandel was also the main patron of the orchestra. She loved music and would frequently visit, commanding the orchestra to play certain pieces. The women in the orchestra block, therefore, had a unique insight into this SS woman's identity, as they had numerous fairly personal interactions with her. Fania Fénelon's memoir *Playing for Time* provides a vital account of the orchestra from the time of her arrival in Birkenau on January 23, 1944, until the liberation of many of the orchestra members at Bergen-Belsen

[5] Yvette Lennon, Interview 979, interview by Jay Straus, web video, February 12, 1995, Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation, http://vhaonline.usc.edu/search.aspx.

on April 14, 1945. [6] Her account also provides vivid descriptions and portrayals of Mandel. Perhaps one incident demonstrates Mandel's absurdity better than any other. A transport had just arrived, and the orchestra girls watched from the orchestra stand as Mandel picked her way through the women huddled and crouching. She walked "as one would walk through a snake pit: furious and disgusted. . . . Arms outstretched, a marvelous child toddled towards her, a ringleted angel of two or three. He ran up to her, clutched her boots, pulled at her skirt. My heart dropped; she'd surely send him flying with an almighty kick. But no, she bent down, took him in her arms, and covered him with kisses. The scene was so sensational that for a moment we stopped playing. " [7] The mother of the child became agitated when she realized that Mandel was not going to give the child back. She screamed for the child, but there was already a dense crowd between her and the SS woman carrying her child away from her. The girls were left wondering what became of the child, assuming that Mandel probably gave him back to his mother.

However, Mandel appeared during their rehearsal, with the child in her arms. She had dressed him in expensive clothes, and he was holding a chocolate bar, "which he offered her, prattling. 'No, No,' she said mincingly, but he insisted with a bell-like laugh. The old game between mothers and children: she pretended to eat some, shook her head. . . What fun they were both having. " After a while, the girls gathered around to meet

[6] In order to remain faithful to Fénelon's account, as well as the accounts of other orchestra members, such as Yvette Lennon, I will refer to the women of the Birkenau orchestra as "orchestra girls." For some, the use of the word "girl" is more appropriate than it is for others (as some were teenagers, while a few were in their late twenties). Nevertheless, this is how Fénelon and Lennon (for example) refer to themselves. It is also how they record others referring to them. The use of the term is out of fidelity, and is not meant pejoratively.

[7] Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, trans. Judith Landry (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977), 225.

the toddler, and Mandel proudly exclaimed how beautiful he was. He danced on her lap, getting footprints on her uniform, and he smeared chocolate on her face with a kiss, and to the girls' shock, Mandel laughed. This odd ritual continued daily—different wardrobe, but always the same pride. Big Irene, another orchestra member, even indicated that perhaps they were seeing Mandel's good side, while Anny cautioned her to "'reserve judgment. '"[8] In the end, Anny's reservations proved prudent.

Late one night, Mandel burst into the orchestra block, "abnormally pale, eyes ringed, she asked for the duet from *Butterfly*. Lips pursed, her face impassive, she seemed very remote. I saw inexplicable anguish in her eyes. " When the music ended, Mandel stalked out without a word. The following day, the girls received news that Mandel had taken the child to the gas chambers. The girls were shocked and upset by this information and immediately began wondering why Mandel would do such a thing. While some of the girls insisted she was crazy, they finally settled on the idea that Mandel was too committed to Nazi ideology to be able to justify (to herself) keeping the child. [9] Such an explanation, while plausible, is still only a judgment as to Mandel's real motives. The insistence on the part of some of the girls that Mandel was "mad" reflects the nonsensical nature of the situation. Mandel's actions were absurd, and they reflected the absurdity of her object-identity.

[8] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 226–27.

[9] Ibid., 225–28.

The Irony of Music in the Lager*:* Danse Macabre

The very existence of an orchestra in Auschwitz-Birkenau was absurd, and so it provides the best example of the darkly ironic nature of the *Lager* and its chiefs. In her memoir, *Fragments of Isabella*, Isabella Leitner describes her incredulity about the concert announced by the SS, "in the *Lagerstrasse* for all to enjoy—the most unlikely cultural event on the face of the earth." This particular event was staged so that the Nazis could take aerial photographs of the inmates "enjoying" the concert to have "proof of Germany's humanity to men."[10] However, there were other real, and equally inane events involving the camp orchestra. Because of their role in an absurd (yet salvific) camp institution, the orchestra members experienced moment after moment of dark, situational irony, marked by incongruity and the macabre.

The orchestra generally gave Sunday concerts for the SS, and while all of these concerts seemed absurd to the members of the orchestra, considering their setting, Fénelon describes one concert that was particularly ridiculous. The SS and the camp "aristocrats"—those prisoners deemed asocial and marked with a black triangle—were normal features of these events, but often (and this was one such occasion), there was also a mass of about one hundred female deportees: "Some had gone voluntarily, those who still had the strength to remember that they'd once found pleasure in listening to music. The others had been ordered here. "[11] The idea of prisoners being able to attend a concert in Auschwitz Birkenau, much less that they were ordered to attend, is ridiculous

[10] Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: a Memoir of Auschwitz*, ed. Irving A. Leitner (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1978), 34.

[11] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 98–9.

enough in itself. However, as the concert continued, the absurdity mounted. Fania and the other orchestra girls became aware that, astoundingly, some of the deportees were humming. Shocked, many of the girls strained to see if such a thing could possibly be happening. Moreover, "some officers, stiff necked, chins lifted, turned too, presumably scandalized that they dared sing. But No! They had deigned this slightest of gestures not to punish the grey mass that had dared to hum, but to reward them with a glance. Not able to pick out any one in particular, they bestowed this proof of their satisfaction on all: approvingly, the SS smiled at the deportees. "[12] The SS enjoying a concert in a death camp is an example of dark, situational irony. However, the presence of the humming deportees (some of them forced to attend) and the SS' pleased response to them add another layer of the absurd.

Another event provides an example of the macabre within the ironic setting of the concert. On this occasion, the orchestra played outside, due to the fine weather, noting that even in such a place, good weather was appreciated. Seated near the electrified fence, Fania saw a woman commit suicide by taking hold of its metal:

> Violently shaken by the current, her body twisted and she hung there, limbs twitching convulsively; against the light she looked like a monstrous spider dancing in its web. A friend rushed to detach her, seized her, and was welded to her arms by the current, writhing spasmodically from head to foot. No one moved, the music played on; the SS listened and talked among themselves. Another girl ran forward and tried to pick off the two twitching bodies with the legs of a stool. No one helped her; we continued playing. The SS laughed and patted one another on the back; Graf Bobby [nickname for SS man] shook his head, adjusted his monocle, and stared through it at the women, faintly disapproving. Silhouetted against the brightness, the crooked bodies formed grotesque swastikas. At last the girl managed to detach them from the deadly current and they fell to the ground motionless, rigid. . . The SS turned away with a final laugh, a last amused comment; the show was over. . . . The women

[12] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 99.

> dragged off the tortured creatures by their arms and legs, like ants bearing off a corpse of one of their own—a funeral to the strains of *The Merry Widow*. [13]

The obvious incongruity of an orchestra concert occurring in sight of something so awful is matched only by the SS' reaction to the scene. Not only were the SS enjoying their concert, but they were simultaneously enjoying the spectacle presented by the two women's mangled bodies. Such incongruity is as callous as it is ironic.

After the orchestra's conductor Alma Rosé, the famous violinist, died (most likely having been poisoned), a new conductor had to be appointed. The girls in the orchestra were thankful that a new conductor *was* being appointed, as opposed to the orchestra being dismantled. However, they were shocked when the SS selected Sonia, a Russian prisoner, who had no ability to read a score or conduct an orchestra. Sonia's favorite piece was one that she had selected and made the girls learn. It was called "Laughing Polka," and it was awful; it was, itself "completely absurd. " Fénelon describes it as "a few bars of polka, interspersed with a series of 'ha, ha, ha's,' not sung but laughed. When Sonia rehearsed it for the first time, I was horrified. "[14] She was even more horrified when Sonia announced that they would play it for the SS at the next Sunday concert. Already worried about their ship sailing smoothly with Sonia at its helm, the girls braced themselves for the idiocy of the "Laughing Polka. " Most of the girls played "mechanically," as Sonia's baton bore no relation to the score or the music produced by the orchestra. Instead, they relied on the discipline they had learned under Rosé. It was not completely surprising—and may have even been fitting—when Florette, perhaps

[13] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 192–3.

[14] Ibid., 215.

most mechanical in her playing, "was so visibly elsewhere that, without waiting for the signal, coming in before the chorus, she burst into such bizarre guffaws that she set off nervous and unmanageable laughter, which spread to the SS. This immense, absurd laugh echoed strangely within those vast, dingy walls."[15] The very idea of playing a piece called "Laughing Polka," within the confines of a death camp, for an audience of SS who were not known for their general good humor, was idiotic to say the least. Playing off of the already absurd idea of an orchestra in Birkenau, this song somehow managed to make the whole farce even more inane and ironic. Perhaps the most absurd aspect of this episode is that it actually causes the reader to laugh.

Preposterous Perceptions

Holocaust narratives also note how the former victims perceived being perceived. They watched as the subject of their gaze, in turn, looked at them as an object. After the concert, during which the SS demonstrated approval of the inmates humming, Little Irene assessed the situation by pointing out the ridiculous optic of the SS' perception of the inmates: "'You see, they're pleased. At last they have been given credit: they did something for the prisoners and the prisoners appreciated it!'" A story relayed to Fania by an inmate from another block provides context for this "benevolent" action of the part of the SS: "Recently . . . presumably because they suddenly felt that your orchestra wasn't sufficient to ensure our entertainment and wanted to do something else for us apart from gas us, the SS decided to treat the internees to a picture show." Since attendance was not mandatory, many inmates did not go; they preferred to spend that free time attempting to

[15] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 216.

rest. One of the SS asked her why they did not go, and she told him that it was because they were sick. The SS remarked that such a response to their efforts was ungrateful, and that the inmates simply could not be pleased no matter how hard the SS tried. [16] The SS meaninglessly offered a film to prisoners whom they, the SS, had destined for death, and then they expected gratitude from these same prisoners. Such an expectation is ludicrous and demonstrates the skewed perception of the SS.

The SS also demonstrated their incongruous perceptions of the inmates especially clearly when those prisoners—especially Jews—acted outside of the stereotype propagated by Nazi ideology. Fénelon remembers that when Irma Grese heard her sing for the first time, she looked as though she were shocked that something so beautiful could have come out of a Jew. [17] According to Nazi ideology, Jews were a vermin that threatened to infect the goodness of the Aryan people with their degenerate ideas and culture. However, this ideology must have produced a sense of cognitive dissonance in at least some of its adherents. For example, so much of the fine music that Germans enjoyed, had been banned because it was composed by Jews. Grese experienced this dissonance (ironically, a musical term) when she heard Fania Fénelon, Jewess, sing so beautifully. *Lager* authorities also betrayed their ideology when they recognized an expertise in an inmate, and then used those skills to run the *Lager*. The vast responsibilities of Zippi Tichauer and Katia Singer (Chapter One) exemplify this point. Jews were a threat to life itself, and yet, in the *Lager* the SS sometimes found that they could not live without some Jewish inmates' services. Women such as Zippi and Katia,

[16] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 223.

[17] Ibid., 159.

of a disposable race, in a place engineered for their disposal, benefitted from their guards' perceptions that they were, in fact, valuable. All the while, there were no officially valuable Jews, especially in the *Lager*.

This absurdity was a part of the female (and male, for that matter) identity, because it was a part of their object-nature. The absurd world of the *Lager* had to be governed by people who were at least willing to be absurd. This inane feature of identity was preset in all those who flourished in the *Lager*. Like Elias, they were neither criminal nor insane—such categories did not exist in that world. Without embodying the absurd anti-system, one could not have hoped to rule over it.

The Second Sex in the Lager

Femaleness in the *Lager* was complex, as gender affected how inmates experienced themselves and others, and as it determined the ways in which they interacted with and reacted to their female guards. As Claudia Koonz points out in her essay "Consequences: Women, Nazis, and Moral Choice," sex was the only defining characteristic in the *Lager*, evidenced by the fact that the administration only bothered to consistently separate prisoners on the basis of whether they were male or female. [18] As has been carefully documented, female inmates experienced the *Lager* differently than did male inmates. The fear of rape haunted many women, and the loss of their hair and their menses often represented the loss of their womanhood. An inmate's gender also affected his or her perception of guards. Female inmates frequently (almost obsessively) observed and noted the clothes and cleanliness of their captors. While physical

[18] Claudia Koonz, "Consequences: Women, Nazis, and Moral Choice," in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, eds. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1993), 291.

appearance certainly plays a role in former victims' descriptions of both male and female guards, female former inmates often left meticulous accounts, not only of their female guards' general looks, but also of their hygiene, hairstyle, and clothes. This fixation was, in part, due to their own loss of female identity, evidenced by the fact that their narratives are riddled with references to their attempts to create some semblance of normalcy out of their clothes. Destitute female inmates understandably focused on the trappings of normal female indicators.

The Trifles of Survival

Koonz also points out that the camp system was designed to murder—not only the body—but the individual, while still alive. [19] Clothing, and fashion more generally, while often seen as silly and superficial, have long been tools for self expression and indicators of identity. Interestingly, these material identifiers have been more strongly associated with women than with men, and for much of history, women have indeed mastered the use of fashion as a tool of expression. This expression of identity, need not be seen as superfluous. Fashion is often a deeply meaningful form of expression for women, who have generally mastered it better than have men. [20] A few examples will demonstrate the importance of clothes for female inmates. The first pages of Isabella Leitner's memoir are devoted to fashion. Written from the frame of reference of New York, May 1945, Leitner describes some of the fashions: the hairstyles, the accessories, the colors, the textures, the options for different seasons and different types of weather. Of the fashion-

[19] Koonz, "Consequences: Women, Nazis, and Moral Choice," 291.

[20] Please see Hanson, "Dressing Down Dressing Up: The Philosophic Fear of Fashion" for a fuller exploration of the possible meanings and depth of fashion.

conscious female she proclaims, "they are colorful and perfumed. They are healthy. They are living. Incredible!" The tone quickly changes as Leitner looks back to that same month only a year ago: "Our heads are shaved. We look like neither boys nor girls. We haven't menstruated for a long time. We have diarrhea. No, not diarrhea—typhus. Summer and winter we have but one type of clothing. Its name is 'rag. ' Not an inch of it without a hole. Our shoulders are exposed. The rain is pouring on our skeletal bodies. "[21] The absence of anything resembling fashion in the *Lager* causes the scene in New York to stand out starkly. However, it is not merely that these women lack fashion options in the *Lager*; they also lack identity. Rather, they have been reduced to androgynous, typhoid-ridden, skeletons. The *Lager* was designed to produce just such an existence.

Isabella and two of her sisters managed to escape while on a forced death march, and they took shelter in an abandoned house. The death march was organized, and the town had been deserted because the Russians were closing in. The sisters and several other escapees helped themselves to the home's contents. Other than the food, which Leitner describes in detail, the only other items she discusses are clothes. The girls spent their days eating, defecating, and sleeping snugly in the nightgowns they had discovered. Isabella wore a "blue cotton dress for a nightgown. Some of the nightgowns worn by the others are fancy. . . . Had we not been so busy eating, we could have had quite a fashion show of embroidered undies. "[22] Leitner most vividly describes the food she ate, and the dress she used as a nightgown. Her transition from rags to clothes receives as

[21] Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: a Memoir of Auschwitz*, 1–2.

[22] Ibid., 83.

much attention as those items which are, perhaps, more essential to sustaining life—but then, identity is a part of the life in need of sustaining.

In her memoir Judith Magyar Isaacson also expresses the importance of clothes, even though her camp self knew that clothes were relatively insignificant in the world of the *Lager*. In the *Lager*, bread was currency, and it paid for any item (within reason) that an inmate might want to organize. [23] Jutka discovered that one of her comrades had a needle, and she used part of her bread ration to rent it from her; she wanted to make a kerchief to cover her head. Isaacson's narrative recognizes the simultaneous importance and frivolousness of something like a kerchief, and also recognizes that such a desire was peculiarly female: "Why do I even bother?—I asked myself, as I hemmed my kerchief with some unraveled thread. We women are a strange sex, I decided: we sustain our sanity with mere trifles. Even in hell. Yes, even in hell. "[24] While any head covering would have been practically advantageous to protect the inmate's skin from the elements, Isaacson clearly had another purpose in mind: she wanted to preserve her individual human dignity, and she did it with clothing.

In her three part memoir, *Auschwitz and After*, Charlotte Delbo describes the secret and forbidden liaison between two prisoners. [25] Her comrade Lily had become engaged during her time in the *Lager*. She and her fiancé maintained their relationship

[23] In the language of the *Lager*, "to organize" meant to procure by means of various amounts of bread rations. Female inmates usually organized the following items: toothbrushes, soap, scent, undergarments, more calorie dense food (such as butter or a bit of sausage), paper, and feminine products (if they still menstruated).

[24] Judith Magyar Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 77.

[25] Delbo's nickname was "C. "

through notes left in secret spots, secret glances, and secret gestures. Often, Lily would pass under the window where her fiancé worked, providing him with an opportunity to see her. Delbo explains, "It was for him, for her fiancé, that Lily took care of her appearance. . . . having caught a glimpse of her fiancé through the window . . . precisely on the side of the path she would be taking, Lily put a white collar on her dress, a white collar she was hiding between her breasts. " Not only were the material and instruments necessary for making a collar difficult to organize, but inmates were also not allowed to wear them. [26] Lily's bold expression was apparently worth the risk, if it meant communicating her love to her fiancé. Since they would not be able to talk to one another in the *Lager*, often signs would have been the only way to communicate, and clothing became one such method. The importance of clothing to the inmate is perhaps most bitterly and succinctly captured by C's experiences during a morning roll call. After describing the warm wardrobes of the SS, Delbo points out, "Their dogs too, in their dog coats, sporting the two SS letters black on a white circle. Coats cut from flags."[27] What world was this where dogs were better dressed than people?

Female SS Fashion

Having established the importance of clothing for female inmates—as an avenue for the protection and expression of individual identity and an attempt to maintain their humanity—their reactions to the female SS' appearance are all the more telling of the female SS' identity *to* the inmates. Fania Fénelon's first interaction with *Lagerführerin*

[26] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 159.

[27] Ibid., 31.

Maria Mandel receives careful attention in her memoir: "She was under thirty, very beautiful, tall, slender, and impeccable in her uniform. And there I was in front of her, arms dangling in my ridiculous flowered garden-party dress which hung so strangely, barefoot, my face dirty. . . . "[28] Already, in the first moments of their meeting, Fénelon describes herself comparing her appearance to Mandel's. Alma Rosé (the orchestra's conductor) introduced Fania and her friend Clara as the newest potential members of the orchestra, and Fénelon's description continues:

> Mandel, hands elegantly on hips—long, white, delicate hands which stood out against the grey cloth of her uniform—stared at us, her hard china-blue eyes lingering searchingly on my face. . . . She took off her cap and her hair was a wonderful golden blond, done in thick plates round her head—in my mind's eye, I saw mine again. . . I noted everything about her: her face without a trace of makeup (forbidden by the SS), was luminous, her white teeth large but fine. She was perfect, too perfect. [29]

The description expresses envy and shame as Fania engages in a stereotypically female activity: comparison by physical appearance as a means of assessing social standing and even worth. Upon arrival, camp staff shaved Fania's hair, and gave her ridiculous, dirty clothing. In the barracks, before being brought to the orchestra block, the *blockowa* had beaten Fania, leaving dried blood on her face. Compared to the *Lagerführerin*, Fania was pathetic indeed. Throughout her narrative, Fénelon provides rich descriptions of Mandel's appearance and clothing: "The long leather topcoat of the lovely Frau Mandel opened elegantly to reveal her silk-clad legs."[30] Mandel was not only the antithesis of the

[28] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 30.

[29] Ibid., 30.

[30] Ibid., 98.

grungy female inmates, but she was also the picture of luxury, and even comfort, dressed warmly and fashionably, even while in uniform.

Interestingly, once Mandel had approved Fania and Clara for the orchestra, her first command was to get them clothes that actually fit. Mandel, satisfied with their clothing, glanced down only to notice that Fania's shoes did not fit; Fania's tiny feet did not fit into the more standard sizes. Frustrated with the staff in Canada (the storehouse of confiscated goods), Mandel sent the girls back to the orchestra block. She returned to the block later that same day, carrying an assortment of shoes. She ordered Fania to sit down, and then "[s]he put one knee on the ground, like someone in a shoe shop, said: 'Give me your foot,' and tried shoes on me. The other girls watched, wide eyed . . . . I savoured the spectacle. . . . Mandel straightened up, I rose, and she expressed her satisfaction: 'My little Butterfly will have warm feet. It's vital for the throat. '"[31] Whether Mandel dressed Fania up out of kindness or as a pet project, was not the point for Fania. In a way, she had been raised to Mandel's level when she was better dressed, and especially when Mandel, the *Lagerführerin*, knelt down to complete the ensemble.

Charlotte Delbo does not generally describe appearances in much detail. Most of her writing has an otherworldliness quality which aids her description of experience, but does not necessarily help the reader create clear, specific mental images. In this way, while she does not include as many detailed "facts," she certainly conveys her experience truthfully. In her work, C attempts to express her experience to a reader who did not share it; "facts" are not central to such a goal. [32] Delbo invites the reader to experience

[31] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 35 Mandel frequently called Fénelon "little Butterfly," due to the fact that Fénelon's specialty was singing *Madame Butterfly*.

[32] As previously mentioned, Delbo often went by "C."

and feel the Holocaust through her writing. Such an invitation allows for the facts to fade to the background, pushing the portrayal of that other world—through a stream of consciousness, disjointed narrative, unbound by time, personal and intimate, yet alien—to the fore. They are present, but not prominent. Her narrative is memoir and art. Firsthand narrative and artistic creation need not be mutually exclusive. The artistic nature of her writing, does not cancel out its truth; if anything, it enhances the truth. In this way, many of her descriptions act as literary symbolism acts in a novel. These descriptions are not to be dismissed because of their similarity to a literary device; indeed, this similarity is in and of itself a tool to demonstrate the unreality of a place like Auschwitz. The reader might catch themselves slipping into that world, an act so similar to sliding into the world of a novel. They jump with a start, awakening from the dream of fantasy which, in fiction, so often acts as a salve to reassure the reader that all is well; it is only a story. They awake with a start because the "story" they are reading is reality, and the place into which they have slipped, although it bears no resemblance to the world in which they live, is this world even in its status as otherworldly. Delbo has at least closed in on her goal.

With this in mind, details concerning female guards' attire acquire a new depth as reality and symbolism, simultaneously: "The SS women officers stride by—tall in their black capes, boots, high black hoods. They count us as they pass. And it takes a long time. "[33] Were this example taken from a piece of fiction, one would freely analyze the symbolism. However, in the case of Delbo's art/memoir, such analysis is not inappropriate in an effort to understand the possibilities of her meaning. Take away the

[33] Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 66.

first clause announcing the identity of these figures, and the reader is left with a description similar to that of the grim reaper. Their clothes are what matter in this description, and their clothes describe them as death, counting the rows of inmates at Auschwitz, hell on earth. C is aware that these figures are humans, and not merely symbolic tropes. However, her identity as a numbered prisoner allowed, even caused, her to encounter these women as grim reapers, death in human form, deciding which number they would take with them, and which they would leave behind for another day. [34] Indeed, nearly every time Delbo describes the SS (male or female), she employs the color black. We know that they did not always wear black uniforms, but for C they might as well have. [35] In fact, clothing is the only distinguishing characteristics for the guards. They are "SS in skirts and britches," and in this way, their sex does not matter to C. What does it matter if the death that beckons you is male or female? For C, and most likely many other female prisoners, when the day ended with her heart still beating, the sex of her captors was immaterial, even if throughout the day their clothing or hygiene served as a constant reminder of her powerless situation.

Woman or Bitch?

One other aspect served as a constant reminder of the difference between male and female guards. While both male and female guards were violent, capricious, harsh, and despicable, only female guards could attain the status of "bitch. " Obviously, this

[34] Delbo frequently describes *Kapos* and other camp staff (comprised of inmates) as "the furies." (Example: 91). Such a metaphor only lends credence to understanding her descriptions for their larger, symbolic meaning.

[35] Fénelon, for example, describes Mandel's uniform as gray.

word's usage only applies to women. Nevertheless, the point remains that female guards could be, and were, described and experienced with all the same negative traits as men, but they had the additional ability to be a bitch, a much more all-inclusive identity. After a nighttime visit from Mandel, the orchestra girls vented their anger: "Florette said vituperatively, 'To get woken up just to see her filthy Nazi mug. . . ' 'Figuratively I agree, but in fact she's rather beautiful. ' 'Are you mad? Beautiful, that bitch?' I stood my ground. 'As an SS she's a bitch, but as a woman she's exceedingly beautiful. ' The girls stared at me almost hatefully, noisily backing up Florette. . . "[36] For many prisoners, as evidenced by this episode, the title "bitch" trumped any other identity descriptors. This mutual exclusivity did not necessarily apply only to beauty. It was a catch-all term which applied only to the summing up of a female guard's identity. No such male equivalent existed.

Interestingly, women guards frequently saw women inmates as bitches also, and while male guards certainly "related" to female inmates as female, women guards did so at a different level. Fénelon describes on example of male guard-female inmate interaction in which femaleness certainly played a role: ". . . [Tauber, male SS][37] had brought a thousand women out into the snow, lined them up entirely naked, in the freezing air, then, moving along their ranks, lifted their breasts with the tip of his whip. Those whose breasts sagged went to the left, those whose breasts remained firm went to

[36] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 62.

[37] Throughout her memoir, Fénelon refers to a fairly high ranking SS man named Tauber. It seems plausible that He is Anton Tauber, also referred to in some documents as Anton Taub, who served as SS Unterscharführer in Birkenau. Delbo refers to a Taube in her account, and it seems more than likely that these two names stand for the same individual.

the right and were spared a little longer. . . ."[38] One can only really gain insight from this episode by comparing it to another in which the guard is female. Judith Magyar Isaacson describes a scene in which the "homeliest overseer," whom the inmates nicknamed "Hyena," suddenly came upon her, giving her a start:

> with her rough voice: 'You're playing hooky, bitch!' she barked at me. 'Instead of pissing, you're loafing here. Thinking of men, no doubt. Haha!' Mutely I shook my head. . . . Hyena grabbed my arm and slapped me across the cheeks: 'Don't lie to me!' she roared. 'I can read your face. But dreaming is all that's left for you, bitch. After the war, you'll be transported to a desert island. No males—not even natives. Much use'll be your fancy looks, with snakes for company. [Should the Allies win the war], we'll shoot you Jewish bitches before the Americans come. . . Your fate is sealed either way: No men. No sex. No seed of Sarah. '[39]

Isaacson entitled her memoir *Seed of Sarah*; the incident obviously made an impression on her. Tauber physically abused and sexually harassed the women whom he was selecting for death or another day in the *Lager*. Hyena also physically abused, but she attacked Jutka's internal female desires, in a way that only another woman could. Tauber harassed the women's bodies (their outer femaleness), while Hyena harassed Jutka's inner femaleness.

Human or Monster?

Perhaps what is most surprising about these narratives is the level of ambivalence that inmates record feeling toward their guards. Guards did not always play the role of the cruel and sadistic type often seen in films; numerous memoirs and interviews attest to the range of behaviors guards displayed. The same guard could, one day, fit a prisoner

[38] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 158.

[39] Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*, 108.

for shoes, and on another, she could turn over a toddler to the gas chambers—a range of behaviors attributed to Mandel. Certainly and understandably, most descriptions found in these narratives are by no means favorable. However, the female guards (as well as male guards) do not usually appear in memoirs as tropes, stereotypes, or static villains. It is their capacity for benevolent, even kind, behavior which makes their cruel acts all the more disturbing. Static villainy is usually met by an incredulous audience. Whereas real, complex, human evil frightens and horrifies; people have something in common with realistically described people committing atrocious crimes. Not only does this human evil narrate the complicated reality of the world of the Holocaust, but is also portrays the complex experiences of the victims. Guards wielded ultimate power over inmates, and at times used this power to keep them alive. The motivations for such actions are unimportant. Rather, their demonstrations of humanity, usually through a display of kindness or weakness, created within the prisoner intense ambivalence characterized by gratitude, fear, and hatred. The phenomenon of "ambiguous gratitude" and, ultimately, the human reality of their guards, best explain this ambivalence.

A Monster's Humanity

While certainly tainted by caprice and absurdity, numerous actions can also be seen as the signs of the guards' humanity. Overwhelmingly, former victims portray their guards not as characters, stereotypes, or tropes but as complex human beings—cruel and hard, but human. Following a dinner to celebrate her upcoming release from Birkenau to go play for German troops, Alma Rosé became violently ill. Fania entered the conductor's room to find her pale, gasping and vomiting, and she had one of the girls send for Mandel. Mandel arrived quickly with a doctor who carried Alma out on a

stretcher to take her to the infirmary. Alma received private treatment and specialized care, but in the end succumbed to what was believed to be poisoning; the SS even ordered an autopsy. [40] The orchestra girls were allowed to say their farewells to their conductor in what would have been, in any other setting, a wake. Upon entering, Fénelon describes the following scene: ". . . the SS had put up a catafalque covered with white flowers—a profusion, an avalanche of flowers. . . To get those flowers, the SS must have had to . . . go into town, to florists—there were such things in Auschwitz; it was incredible. . . . She was very beautiful; her long hands, crossed on her breast, held a flower. I wondered who had had that delicate thought. " The girls in the orchestra stood around the bed of their conductor, sobbing. Mandel and other SS also stood around the bed, hats removed, touched, many crying: "Mandel's eyes were full of tears; in honour of Alma, we mingled our tears with hers—we were in complete communion! An unforgettable scene. "[41] At one level, the scene was absurd, mocking the thousands who had no proper funeral, no wake, only an insidious version of cremation. However, from another angle, the SS displayed their humanity quite profoundly. Not only did they allow the orchestra members to mourn and honor their conductor, but they themselves mourned and honored her. Laying the body in state, covered in pure, white flowers in a place of degradation, filth, and atrocity demonstrated both their absurdity and their humanity. That the orchestra girls and the SS shared a common grief would have, no doubt, complicated their perception and experience of the SS.

[40] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 206–08.

[41] Ibid., 208.

Yvette Lennon describes an incident in which Irma Grese, infamous for her sadism, demonstrated great and prolonged kindness to her and her sister while they were at Bergen Belsen. Yvette's sister had become extremely ill once they had arrived at Belsen. Yvette, despite tremendous fear, went to the officers' building to ask if she might be able to get some sort of job in order to earn more food for her sister, so desperately in need of nutrients. Since Grese had always favored the orchestra and knew Yvette by name, Yvette decided to ask her for help. Yvette's first attempt failed, as Grese did not recognize her. Just as she was deciding whether or not to try again, she saw Grese walking through the camp and summoned the courage to approach her: "She stopped, like 'Who are you?' You know? Like she could kill me. She says, 'Well, wait a minute, you are the girl from the orchestra. ' . . . she says, 'Where is the orchestra now?'" Yvette explained that the orchestra no longer existed, at which point Grese asked what she wanted, and Yvette explained her sister's situation. Grese, making sure she knew who they were discussing, asked, "The fat one?" which Yvette confirmed. [42] Grese asked to be taken to Yvette's sister. Upon Grese's entrance to the block, everyone stood frightened and at attention. After seeing Yvette's sister, Grese ordered the block leader to give the girl two rations of soup a day. Grese took Yvette to the office and gave her a whole loaf of bread, and then secured her a job in the kitchen. After three days, Yvette saw Grese again and explained to her that the work in the kitchen was too difficult for her; her emaciated and weakened body could not lift any of the pots in the kitchen. Grese laughed, and gave her a cleaning job instead, for which Yvette received extra soup, which

[42] Lennon explains that her sister had maintained some of her weight, and so next to the others she did appear quite large.

she often traded for more nutrient dense foods. [43] Had it not been for these benevolent actions, Yvette's sister (and maybe even Yvette herself) would have died. This realization in no way erases the individuals who died at Grese's hand, but it does demonstrate the human side of an SS woman usually associated with pure "evil."

Near the end of the war, Charlotte Delbo and all those left from her convoy were transferred from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück. While waiting for their transport, one of C's comrades Carmen struggled to tie her shoes with her cold hands; the laces were simply unmanageable. Delbo comments:

> And this is when we witnessed the most extraordinary scene. Taube—the Taube we've seen send thousands of women to the gas chamber, set his dog on many of us. . . take out his revolver and shoot the Jewish women of block 15 because they were not entering it fast enough. . . Taube, whose high silhouette filled us with fear, Taube, the most cruel of the SS—kneeled before Carmen and, with his pen knife, sharpened the end of the laces so they'd slip through the eyelet holes. [44]

Male and female, alike, guards were capable of random acts of kindness, or even prolonged aid. Again, motive is both indiscernible and immaterial. These acts were a part of their object-identity, regardless of motive, and they affected the way prisoners experienced guards.

Many narratives make a point of demonstrating and conveying this aspect of *Lager* guards so as to intentionally dispel the myth of their identities as monsters. They want the world to see that the guards who committed the individual atrocities that collectively add up to Holocaust were human beings. The Monster myth simultaneously provides too much meaning and not enough to the world of the *Lager*. It instills the

[43] Lennon, Interview 979.

[44] Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 177.

meaning of the language of *ought* within a world where the only one language matters: *is*. Inmates themselves struggled to conceptualize these realities, and even fell back on overly simple constructs. After the orchestra girls discovered what Mandel had done with the child, many girls pronounced her insane; that was the only understandable explanation for such an act. Fénelon, records her reaction to these statements: "Many of them avoided the question by saying she was mad, purely and simply. I protested that she wasn't, that it was too easy to deny her responsibility."[45] Denying someone's humanity, just like denying their mental capacity, also denies their culpability and responsibility, and with them the reality of the situation.

Ambiguous Gratitude

It is perhaps these human elements which created feelings of what Holocaust survivor and historian Eugen Kogon called "ambiguous gratitude." Konrad Kweit helpfully summarizes this term as one used to "describe an adaptation process in which privileged victims are drawn closer to the SS."[46] These feelings are communicated time and again by former victims, and are often presented in tandem with general feelings of ambivalence toward guards that have shown any sort of softness or weakness. Rather than being dismissed as Stockholm syndrome, this concept needs to be understood for what it was: the realization by inmates that their guards were humans, and as such were

[45] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 227.

[46] Konrad Kweit, "Desiging Survival: A Graphic Artist in Birkenau," in *Approaching and Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations*, ed. Jürgen Matthäus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

complex individuals capable of an array of actions and sentiments. This realization allows for an understanding of a guard's human agency within a dehumanizing system.

Numerous historians in the volume *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor*, devoted to Helen "Zippi" Tichauer, note her ambiguous gratitude toward some of the SS. Kweit points out, "While [Zippi] had no sympathy for her cruel German masters, she felt she owed them gratitude and loyalty." Moreover, Tichauer only testified in one war crimes trial, and on this occasion, it was to counter a charge of willful murder brought against one of the female guards. Kweit notes that her long-term interaction with the camp hierarchy and the "coexistence between order and chaos, normality and extreme violence" most likely deeply affected her judgment and subsequent assignment of terms like "criminal" and "decent" to the camp staff. [47] Professor Wendy Lower describes the surprise of her students when Tichauer told them that she did not really have very many dealings with the German camp hierarchy. She notes that Tichauer "presented the SS personnel at the camp as shadowy figures to whom reports were sent, but who were generally absent. . . . There is a certain incongruity in her characterizations. On the one hand, she seemed chummy with powerful SS leaders (including Maria Mandel), but on the other, she constantly feared them. "[48]

The seeming contradictions of Tichauer's statements concerning the SS can perhaps be reconciled by remembering Lawrence Langer's admonition that seemingly contradictory statements can both be true, in that they are various versions of the truth,

[47] Kweit, "Desiging Survival: A Graphic Artist in Birkenau," 20.

[48] Wendy Lower and Jürgen Matthäus, "Distant Encounter: An Auschwitz Survivor in the College Classroom," in *Approaching and Auscwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 114.

and they may even represent the teller's different versions of self (both inside and outside the *Lager*). Tichauer's assertion that she did not have very many interactions with the German hierarchy can be quite easily reconciled with the fact that she was "chummy" with certain SS. Her "anguished memory" seeks to give order to her experience in the *Lager*, and to reconcile her various selves of that world with her this-world self. In the *Lager*, she certainly had interactions with SS, but they were not the types of interactions which her this-world self might be able to classify or assign meaning. Her relationship to the SS was not what one, in this world, might term "employer-employee." Neither was it a "master-slave" relationship, strictly speaking. Indeed her interactions with the SS, do not really fit into any category in normal life. In a way, their reality within the *Lager* faded away when Tichauer was liberated. Moreover, her "tainted memory" attempts to take that nearly-reconciled information from the "anguished memory," and apply it to a redemption or justification of the *Lager*-self. Rational moral code and ethical systems did not exist in the *Lager*, and so her "chummy" association with certain SS, while perhaps seen as reprehensible, or even seditious in this world, simply *was* in the *Lager*. Perhaps one *ought* not develop friendly dynamics with the likes of Maria Mandel, but such a relationship *was* helpful in the *Lager*. Moreover, an even simpler understanding of her "shadowy" descriptions of her captors is easily discovered when one remembers that Zippi probably did not see herself as "knowing" these individuals. They were at once phantom, and ever present. Her ambiguous gratitude created a sense of loyalty within her, but this loyalty was tempered by and inseparable from her fear of and dependence on them for her very existence.

The girls in the orchestra also developed a similar dynamic with "their" SS, as they experienced them at once as saviors and executioners. One day, word reached the orchestra that Mandel and Kramer—both powerful patrons of the orchestra—had gone away from Birkenau, for an unknown purpose and time. As far as the orchestra knew, they might never return, and so the members worried about their own existence: "They loved their orchestra, they were proud of it, they were our most faithful clients, our protectors. Without them, our future was at best uncertain. "[49] Words such as "faithful" and "protectors" stand in sharp relief against the background of Auschwitz. The girls applied these same words to the people who could end their lives just as easily as save them. Moreover, these descriptors stand in direct conflict with Fénelon's assertion that while standing at attention for Mandel, "A blink could land you in block 25."[50] However, the irony and seeming contradiction of this perception continues, but consciously this time, as Fénelon explains, "This evening, everyone addressed their own gods to pray for the return of Kramer and Mandel! No one seemed to note the extraordinary paradox, the bizarre humour of the thing: the victims clamouring for their executioners."[51] The orchestra girls' response to the news of Kramer's and Mandel's return aligned with their response to reports of the SS' absences: "We were seized with something like delirium, we hugged each other, yelled, danced, clapped, we were happy, *happy*! Our beloved SS were back! That was the state we were reduced to on learning that tender-hearted figures

[49] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 171.

[50] Ibid., 61. Inmates were sent to Block 25 to await the gas chamber; this fact is clear from numerous accounts.

[51] Ibid., 174.

like Kramer and Mandel were back."[52] The cognitive dissonance which would have been experienced by her this-world self, no doubt faded in the world of the *Lager*.

Certainly, Fania experienced the absurdity of this reaction once away from the camp, as seen in her pointing out the "bizarre humour" of praying for her executioners. However, more strikingly, she experienced this realization while still in the world of the *Lager*: "When I grasped what had happened I was deeply alarmed. It required incidents like this for me to realize that, gradually, my judgment was deteriorating. I was beginning to accept the perpetual presence of horror, of death, the incoherence of the camp. . . What kind of state would I be in when I got out of here?"[53] This series of events and metered realizations also reminds the reader of Langer's memory layers, with a slight twist. While Langer discusses the former victim's attempts at self-reconciliation *after* their time in the *Lager*, Fénelon describes her experience of this attempted reconciliation *within* the *Lager*. Fania Fénelon's "anguished memory" was already active within the world of the *Lager* as she attempted to reconcile her this-world self with her *Lager*-self. Moreover, she claims to have never doubted that they (she and her comrades) would live to be liberated. She therefore complicates her memory dynamics by involving past, present, and future, in her self-inventory. This struggle is extremely relevant to the task at hand of assessing the object-identities of female guards, in this case Mandel. It is perhaps safest to say that, at least for some former victims, the identity of these guards changed as their own attempts at self-reconciliation succeeded or failed. In that moment, as Fania's *Lager*-self experienced her, Mandel was a returning savior. Yet, Fénelon's

[52] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 176.

[53] Ibid., 176.

this world-self and the other *Lager*-self also attempted to remind her of Mandel's identity as executioner. Essentially, Mandel was both.

Olga Lengyel's story from Chapter One about her interactions with Dr. Klein and Irma Grese provides another such instance where ambiguous gratitude affected the object-identity of the guards. Her further interactions with Klein continued to demonstrate his normal, human qualities. When Klein was transferred to a different location, he came to say goodbye to Lengyel. She describes how he met her at the gate and told her that he had come to say goodbye and that the war would soon come to an end. He even joked about how his having to ride on a bicycle, instead of in a car, was evidence of how badly things were going for Germany. Lengyel's this-world-self managed to reconcile the obvious gratitude her *Lager*-self felt toward Klein for his interference with Grese and the medical supplies he brought her, with her various selves' convictions concerning his overall identity. She was satisfied with his fate after the war—death by hanging.[54] For these women, and their various selves, the individuals within camp hierarchy also had various selves, or at least more than one facet to their identity. They were at once stabilizers and maintainers of chaos, saviors and executioners, helpers and harmers.

Conclusion

The optic found in the testimonies of former victims provides an indispensable avenue of introduction to *Lager* women. As seen in Chapter One, former victim

[54] Olga Lengyel, Interview 46138, interview by Nancy Fisher, web video, August 28, 1998, Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation, http://vhaonline.usc.edu/search.aspx. This episode will be much shortened, as the bulk of it will appear in Chapter One. I have not yet decided which parts to include here simply as reminders of the initial telling in Chapter One.

narratives can provide details and factual explanations of how the *Lager* ran, of its hierarchy and purpose, and more specifically of its mistresses. More than that, as has been seen here, former victims can provide insight into a deeper meaning of the identities of these *Lager* women. As far as an individual's identity exists at all, it dwells partially and necessarily in the eye of the beholder. In this case, the beholder is represented by surviving testimonies. Their layers of memory not only negotiate their own identities, but also those of others, including female guards.

It is clear that in many ways, female guards' object-identities held much in common with male guards' object-identities. They both shared a certain absurdity and a tendency toward the darkly ironic, even to the point of enjoying the macabre. Both female and male SS were harsh, violent and capricious. They ruled over the arbitrary anti-system of the *Lager*, personifying many of its chief characteristics. However, female guards, as opposed to their male counterparts, often had an additional identity: bitch. Only a *Lager woman* could be assigned that title, and perhaps only a woman could earn it. Perhaps the relation between female inmates and female guards complex and volatile in a way that female inmates' interactions with male guards were not. It is possible that the ability of a female guard to "get inside the head" of a female prisoner far surpassed that ability in a male guard. Their ability to assault the inner femaleness of women inmates was singular to their sex, even if every female inmate did not experience this particular capability. Moreover, the close identity between female guards and female prisoners made the actions of *Lager* women particularly repulsive, at least to other female inmates. Taking a child to the gas chamber, for example, existed far outside the norm of female behavior outside the *Lager*. For C, Jutka, and Isabella who had only ever known

the tender care of mothers, sisters, and aunts, the brutality displayed by their guards was foreign. The orchestra girls had lived lives of creativity and creation outside the *Lager*; so much energy focused on destruction was anathema to them. The actions of *Lager* women were deviant just as much because of their beholders' previous life experiences as they were because of society's normative expectations for women as wives and mothers.

Amazingly, or perhaps more fittingly—ironically—both female and male SS were also capable of very human acts which would be called "kind" or "benevolent" in this world. They shared many of the same emotions expressed by their prisoners. At times, they even wielded their extraordinary power to "save" or "sustain" certain inmates. Such actions in the world of Holocaust were, in and of themselves, absurd, and they certainly cannot now infuse the suffering of millions with some sort of meaningful salve. While they did not cancel out heinous crimes against humanity, scholars cannot categorize such acts as completely devoid of meaning or their actors as monsters, completely devoid of all humanity. While these actions do not hold an intrinsic framework of meaning, the meaning for the individuals acted upon did exist. In a world designed to destroy, Irma Grese saved Yvette's sister from death by Typhus. While such an action is rendered meaningless by a larger understanding of the *Lager*, the extra soup and bread meant life for Yvette and her sister. Where life is at stake, people often do not care about the lack of overall meaning in the act that sustained life; such realities are phenomenologically unimportant to them. It is, therefore, possible for Olga Lengyel to gratefully recognize the services performed on her behalf by Dr. Klein, and to also be satisfied with his execution after the war. Grese was sadistic and kind. Mandel was harsh and tender. The most important reality, regarding *Au* women, gleaned from former victims' testimonies is

their human identity. They were sadists, executioners, bitches, and monsters. They were also cultured and even tender, saviors, women, and human beings. To take away their human status would be to deny their agency and, perhaps more importantly, their culpability. As Fania Fénelon so simply stated, "it was too easy to deny her responsibility."[55]

[55] Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, 227.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lager Women in the Dock

Introduction

Background

As the war came to a close in the European theatre, units from the Allied armies practically stumbled upon the Nazi concentration camps in their paths. The news media informed the world of Nazi atrocities, and told the stories of the living victims in the camps liberated by the Allies. The unfolding horror story raised numerous questions, not least among them "Who was responsible?" and "What should be done with those responsible, upon apprehension?" With striking speed and efficiency, the Allies began to organize a system (albeit imperfect) of jurisdiction, trial procedure, and even international tribunals. While the famous Nuremberg Trial often comes to mind first when considering post-World War II war crimes and genocide trials, it was only one among many, and only one type among several. While such trials had never occurred on as a grand a scale as they did after World War II, there was established, legal precedent for the actions of the various courts. On May 13, 1945, the *New York Times* printed an open letter written by the Right Honorable Lord Wright of Durley. Lord White, the chairman of the United Nations War Crimes Commission, understood the public outrage concerning Nazi camps and sought to explain the process by which the Allies were working to bring the perpetrators to justice. This system would require the cooperation of the various national governments, the War Crimes Commission, the Allied military,

and the trial personnel in tracking, apprehending, housing, and trying the suspects. In order to establish the legitimacy of the trials at hand, Lord Wright pointed to the Hague and Geneva Conventions, and to the declaration made at Moscow in November of 1943 which distinguished between two types of war criminals: those which would be tried by the government of the nation where their crimes were committed, and those who had committed crimes without national boundaries, and would need to be tried by international military tribunal. Those belonging to the first category would be tried according to the legal process of the respective nation, while those belonging to the second category would be tried by military courts "held under the authority of the Commander in Chief and [acting] on the principles of international law."[1] By the end of 1945, the Allies had abandoned their plan to try more war criminals jointly and had adopted one which required each member to try those crimes within their jurisdiction (that is, within their zone of occupation). [2] While the courts Lord White described were certainly bound to international law, the Nuremberg Trial, for example, also created precedent by applying "Allied Agreements and Proclamations deigned for that purpose."[3] All of the law applied to war crimes tribunals following World War II was not already established, but was rather a mix of established law (Geneva and Hague Conventions, for

[1] Lord Wright, "That the Guilty Shall Not Escape: A Far-reaching Plan Has Been Devised to Find and Bring War Criminals to Justice. Guilty May Not Escape Guilty May Not Escape," *New York Times*, May 13, 1945, sec. The New York Times Magazine, 34, http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/docview/107094011/abstract/13D B3246B62AC2D7F1/5?accountid=7014.

[2] For a fuller treatment of this legal evolution see Adalbert Rückerl, *The Investigation of Nazi Crimes, 1945-1978: a Documentation* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1980) specifically pages 24-31.

[3] Raymond Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others: The Belsen Trial* (London: Hodge, 1949), xxxi.

example), laws of the nation trying the particular case, and statutes mined from a sort of legal limbo. [4]

Female War Criminals

Trying women as war criminals was a fairly novel idea. Fewer women were tried than men primarily because there were fewer of them to be tried. No women were charged at the Nuremberg Trial, as this tribunal investigated the Nazis within the upper echelons of the state's government/party, and as previously discussed, women were not allowed in these circles. Another, less apparent, reason that there were fewer women charged and tried was that women were not tattooed with their blood type, as was mandatory for all SS members. As individuals contracted to work for the SS, but not actual members, women were not given this identification marker which served to keep male guards from blending in with civilians as easily after the war was over. [5] However, the question for the present study concerns how these women fared once in the dock. Often Allied military legal personnel, the men who sat in judgment over these women would not have necessarily known the Nazi ideal for womanhood, and so in most cases this concept did not affect their verdicts. However, they certainly had their own conceptions of womanhood, and the historian must ask whether this concept influenced the outcome of the war crimes trials with female defendants. Did judges view females

[4] The matter of international law as applied to war crimes tribunals, particularly in the years just following World War II and the Holocaust, is not a simple matter. The above discussion was painted broadly and by no means thoroughly, so as to provide a basic understanding of the difficulties these military courts faced and the various means which they employed to overcome them.

[5] Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System*, Schiffer Military History; Variation: Schiffer Military History. (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pub., 2002), 20.

with less culpability than their male counterparts? These trials also attracted attention from the public, and the news media provided fairly regular coverage of the events. How were women represented in these magazines and newspapers? In order to answer these questions I will use the so-called "Belsen Trial" as a case study.

This chapter will explain and analyze the proceedings of this trial with a particular focus on the verdicts of both male and female defendants. These results will also be compared to Aleksander Lasik's findings concerning the prosecution of former Auschwitz guards. One of the defendants in the Belsen Trial—Irma Grese—will provide a case study within a case study, in an effort to look at the discrepancy of media portrayal of men and women. Based upon this investigation, it is evident that the *Aufseherinnen* defendants of the Belsen trial were given sentences disproportionate to their population and incongruent with their authority, especially when compared to the death sentences handed down to male and female defendants. The media's portrayal of these women, and especially of Irma Grese, bolsters this conclusion by demonstrating the ways in which the actions of these women in the camps and during the trial violated the popular understanding of femininity.

The Trial

While Nuremberg created precedent which other war crimes trials could follow, this was not the case with every trial, particularly those which took place in the early stages before the Nuremberg verdicts were reached. The British military court in charge of the "Belsen Trial" charged its defendants "under existing international law. "[6] The

[6] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xxxi.

court which utilized a partially refurbished gymnasium for its courtroom in Lüneburg, Germany, received its authority from the King of England. In his introduction to the edited volume of the Belsen Trial proceedings, Raymond Phillips explained, "His Majesty, by Royal Warrant dated the 14th June, 1945, made certain 'Regulations for the Trial of War Criminals. '" After a period of discovery, the court was convened and the trial began on September 17, 1945, and it ended on November 17 of that year, "having occupied fifty-four working days."[7] The Royal Warrant provided a standard definition of "war crime" (which did not include "crimes against humanity"), authorized the creation of a court to try such crimes, designated positions of authority within the court, specified appropriate evidence (significantly admitting affidavits as valid testimony), and listed available punishments in the case of a conviction. [8] The court itself was made up of five judges, all British officers, and it was assisted by a Judge Advocate who advised them on matters of regulation and procedure, and who summarized the evidence at the end of the case as well as the law which was applicable. [9] The Prosecution consisted of "four officers of the Legal Staff, Headquarters British Army of the Rhine, headed by Colonel T. M. Backhouse. " Eleven British officers and one Polish officer comprised the Defense; during the course of the trial, the Defense requested, and was granted, the aid of Colonel Smith, an expert in international law. The German defendants were given the option of German counsel, but opted for British counsel instead. [10] The defendants

[7] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xxiv–xxv.

[8] Ibid., 647–651 being a printing of the aforementioned warrant within this volume. The above summary is by no means exhaustive.

[9] Ibid., xxv; United Nations War Crimes Commission, *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals. The Belsen Trial* (New York: H. Fertig, 1983), 128.

[10] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xxv.

themselves were sixteen (male) SS, sixteen (female) *Aufseherinnen*, and twelve prisoner functionaries, such as *kapos* (seven male, and five female). [11]

The Law

While it is often referred to as the "Belsen Trial" because the accused were arrested when the British liberated Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, numerous defendants were also implicated in crimes at Auschwitz. Therefore, the court handled two charges; the first was for Belsen and the second was for Auschwitz. Of the forty-five defendants, thirty three were arraigned on the first charge (Belsen) alone, while only one defendant was arraigned on the second charge alone, and twelve were arraigned on both. [12] As Raymond Phillips succinctly explained, "In short, the accused were charged with having either personally killed or ill-treated Allied nationals, or with having been concerned with such killing or ill-treatment as to share in the responsibility for it. "[13] In determining the guilt or innocence of the defendants of these two charges, the court had to consider two major categories of responsibility. The first was the individual act of murder or ill-treatment, and the second was the complicity "for death, suffering and conditions in general."[14] Individual instances of the first category were much the same at both Belsen (charge one) and Auschwitz (charge two), but the second category manifested itself differently in the two camps. Overall responsibility at Auschwitz was

[11] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xxxviii–xxxix.

[12] In his summary of charges in his introduction (p. xxx), Phillips states that there were eleven defendants arraigned on both charges, but the documentation of the trial records twelve such defendants. See, for example, pages 641-643.

[13] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xxx.

[14] Ibid.

linked to taking part in the selection process which sent people to the gas chambers (indirect murder), while at Belsen, which was not an extermination center, the issue "was raised as to responsibility for conditions which had arisen by callous neglect."[15] The court was well aware that the culpability of staff in lower positions (such as cooks) would be difficult to ascertain. [16] However, considering the complicated Nazi system of power and authority, rank and role, even a staff member's place in the overall hierarchy could muddy the waters in and of itself.

One of the legal concepts which played a central role in the trial composition, procedure, and the verdicts and sentences rendered was "Regulation 8 (ii)" of the Royal Warrant. It stated that if it could be proven that group criminality had occurred and that the participants of these criminal acts had knowingly been a part of such an apparatus, they could all be tried together. Any petitions to have individual defendants tried separately in such cases were denied. Moreover, each member of such a criminal organization could be legitimately held responsible for the actions of the organization as a whole. [17] The application of this concept of responsibility was aptly summarized by the Judge Advocate upon advising the court before their deliberation. Speaking specifically of the second charge, he reminded the court of the Prosecution's argument that those employed at Auschwitz were involved in a system designed to brutalize and murder, and that they were knowingly working within that they system. If the court considered this to have been proven, then under "Regulation 8 (ii)" the defendants who were a part of that

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[15] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others,* xxx.

[16] Ibid.

[17] United Nations War Crimes Commission, *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals. The Belsen Trial*, 138.

system "must, each and every one of them, assume responsibility for what happened. " Nevertheless, the Judge Advocate stated, although he thought the idea obvious, that when the court considered "the question of guilt and responsibility, the strongest case must surely be that of the *Kommandant*, Kramer, and then down the list according to the positions they held."[18] Such distinctions would be difficult to make without an intimate knowledge of the camp hierarchy and organization.

The Defendants

The defendants represented the full spectrum of camp hierarchy. Defendant number one, Josef Kramer, was the *Kommandant* at Belsen and had been the director of the women's camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Number two was Fritz Klein who served as a doctor (often in charge of selections) at both Belsen and Auschwitz before that. At the other end of the spectrum were the prisoner functionaries who had been arrested for allegations of particularly cruel behavior in carrying out their assignments to keep order in the blocks. The rest, Phillips explained in his introduction, fell in the middle and were the "less important members of the S.S. who had performed comparatively humble duties in the camp such as cooks and clerks."[19] By dividing the basic ranks of the defendants into *Kommandant*, clerk, and *kapo*, Philips left out a very key group of people. Many SS held positions below Kramer, but certainly above the camp clerks. The positions of *Lagerführer*, *Blockführer*, *Oberaufseherin*, and *Aufseherin* all possessed considerably more power than an administrative secretary. However, to say that an *Aufseherin* like

[18] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 637.

[19] Ibid., xxx.

Irma Grese or Elisabeth Volkenrath possessed authority comparable to someone like Kramer (as either *Lagerführer* or *Kommandant*) would be incorrect. Their power over prisoners more or less absolute, but their authority within the camp hierarchy placed *Lager* women in roles comparable to their male "doubles," but without the same amount of authority, as they could never give any male SS an order. The complex relationship between female and male SS staff could potentially confuse those trying such a case. Phillips explained that the *Aufseherinnen* in the camp were "employed to administer the women's compounds, to run cookhouses, and to do similar work of a minor administrative kind."[20] Such a job description summary might lead one to think that the roles of the *Aufseherinnen* were indeed "minor." However, their power relative to prisoners was absolute, and they were frequently trusted with vast administrative tasks. Their fate, it seems, was determined not only by their own actions and the court's perception of them, but also by the number of witnesses against them, the ability of witnesses to identify them, and the court's ability to understand the complex system of the *Lager*.

Rendering a Verdict

Lasik's Auschwitz study: a comparison. In his article investigating the rate of prosecution of the SS who worked in Auschwitz, Aleksander Lasik argues that in order to ascertain if the correct level of responsibility was assigned to each defendant in a war crimes tribunal, the historian must know the rank and role of the defendant. Likewise, the judges ascertaining levels of responsibility needed to now the rank and role of each

[20] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xxviii.

defendant. Additionally, both military judge and historical judge need an understanding of the relation of the various camp departments to each other and, in the case of Auschwitz, to the extermination apparatus. Lasik argues that the vast majority of camp staff, in general, and at Auschwitz specifically, were not prosecuted appropriately because of the difficulties involved in understanding the camp systems, functions, and hierarchies, as well as the other obvious problems of direct evidence of guilt and so on. [21] Indeed, where guilt could not be specifically and individually established, a thorough understanding of the relative positions in the camps, both to each other and to the gas chambers, could have helped to "indicate [guilt] *a priori*."[22] For example, the members of the seemingly benign "camp commandant's motor pool" were directly involved in genocide, as they were responsible for transporting inmates to be gassed. Conviction in such a case would not necessarily require eyewitness testimony concerning the individual. [23] In seeking to document the sentences of those defendants associated with Auschwitz, Lasik provides a detailed analysis of those tried by Polish courts between 1947 and 1953, since Polish courts tried more Auschwitz defendants than any other nation's courts. Lasik was able to obtain complete records for 673 Auschwitz staff members prosecuted in Poland. [24] From the data of this sample size, Lasik was able to conclude that the most frequently meted out sentences were three and four years'

[21] Aleksander Lasik, "The Apprehension and Punishment of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Staff," in *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: Epilogue*, vol. 5, *Central Issues in the History of the Camp,* (Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000), 105–108.

[22] Ibid., 110.

[23] Ibid., 106–107.

[24] Ibid., 108.

imprisonment, while the least frequently imposed were life imprisonment and the death sentence. [25] Still, an overall lack of understanding of the camp system prohibited judges from efficiently handing down sentences that were an accurate reflection of the defendant's level of culpability.

Did the British court at Lüneburg render significantly different verdicts than those reached by courts in Poland?[26] One obvious difference between the two was the range of sentences available to the judges. While Polish courts sentenced guilty defendants anywhere from six months to life imprisonment (and the death penalty), the British court only utilized the following sentence periods: one year, three years, five years, ten years, fifteen years, and life imprisonment (and the death penalty). Compared to the twenty-two sentencing periods listed in Lasik's study, six options seem somewhat confining. [27] Of the forty-five defendants at the Belsen Trial, one was not sentenced owing to his inability to be present at the trial and twelve were prisoner functionaries. After removing these individuals from the total, one is left with thirty-two defendants who were actually members of the SS or contracted to the SS. Ten of these thirty-two were acquitted, representing approximately thirty-one percent of all of the Belsen verdicts. In Lasik's 673 verdicts, only eight were acquittals, representing only a little over one percent of all verdicts. When one only looks at the verdicts rendered concerning those Belsen defendants who were staffed at Auschwitz at any time (the subjects of Lasik's study), the

[25] Lasik, "The Apprehension and Punishment of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Staff," 110.

[26] Statistics given (outside of those provided by Lasik) were calculated by the author based on data gathered from Raymond Phillip's edited volume of the proceedings of the Belsen Trial.

[27] Lasik, "The Apprehension and Punishment of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Staff," 111; Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 643–44. The British court at Lüneburg could also have imposed a fine, but they did not utilize this sentence.

numbers are more similar. Still, one out of ten Auschwitz staff members was acquitted, comprising ten percent of the verdicts of Auschwitz staff. Overall, the most common sentences passed at the Belsen trial were acquittal (ten) and the death sentence (eleven), while the least common sentences were life imprisonment (no SS given this at Belsen Trial) one year, three years, five years (each with only one representative.) No Auschwitz staff member received a sentence from the options in the least common category. Unlike the Auschwitz staff members in Lasik's study, by far the most common sentence for former Auschwitz employees at the Belsen Trial was the death sentence, the result of seven cases. Upon seeing that ten individuals were acquitted, one might suppose that the British court was also being lenient on its Auschwitz defendants. However, since only one former Auschwitz staff member was acquitted (comprising ten percent of all acquittals) and seven were handed the death sentence (comprising nearly sixty-four percent of that sentence), such a conclusion would be inaccurate.

More interesting and more pertinent for the study at hand are Lasik's conclusions about female Auschwitz staff. In the records Lasik obtained, he was able to identify seventeen women and the information concerning their sentences. Based on these numbers and general knowledge, he concludes, "The women in the SS service were treated significantly more harshly than men . . . . Four of the seventeen women sentenced received the death penalty and others received prison terms significantly longer than did men. " He speculates that this could have been because there were fewer female overseers at Auschwitz (two hundred, compared to nearly seven thousand males), they were more recognizable and memorable. Therefore more witnesses who were able to

identify them and recall specific instances of their abuses survived. [28] Unfortunately, this is all the information Lasik provides concerning women and military court verdicts, but it is enough information to begin a fruitful comparison and either bolster or detract from his argument.

Judging Jezebel. There were sixteen *Aufseherin* and sixteen (male) SS in the dock at Lüneburg. Such an even split is another reason that the Belsen Trial is helpful for a study of this kind. We do not have statistics providing us with the ratio of female to male guards in Belsen at the time of the British liberation. However, based on the information gathered by Brigadier Hugh Llewelyn Glyn Hughes who was Deputy Director of Medical Services, Second Army, one can begin to arrive an educated guess. During his testimony, Hughes stated that, excluding Camp Number Two, there were about 28,185 female prisoners and twelve thousand male prisoners. In Camp Number Two, there were an additional 15,133 men. [29] Taken together, the number of male prisoners totaled somewhere in the vicinity of 27,133, a population almost equal to the female prisoner population. Considering that Belsen became so populated because of the constant transports from other, evacuated camps, we know that most of the guards from those camps accompanied their prisoners to Belsen. That said, this does not necessarily mean that there were equal numbers of *Aufseherin* and their male counterparts at the camp. *Aufseherin* constituted a little under three percent of the guard population at Auschwitz and under nine percent of all guards in the entire camp system were female, it

[28] Lasik, "The Apprehension and Punishment of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Staff," 110.

[29] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 30–1, 34.

is very likely that there were significantly fewer female guards present at Belsen than there were male guards. [30] Lasik's explanation of female guards as more visible because they were rarer than male guards seems a plausible reason for why equal numbers of male and female staff were arrested. Despite the equal numbers of the accused, women made up only forty percent of the court's acquittals. [31] Women were also handed down sixty percent of ten year imprisonment sentences and one third of all fifteen year sentences. The representatives of the female guard population from Belsen—the total population of which was perhaps between two and nine percent of the camp's personnel population—constituted approximately nine and one third percent of all death sentences.

When looking only at the former Auschwitz staff members at the Belsen trial, certain aspects stand in sharper relief. Of the ten Auschwitz staff defendants, four were *Aufseherin* and six were (male) SS. While the only Auschwitz staff member who was acquitted was female, the sentence of fifteen years was handed down to one male and one female. Women accounted for just under forty-three percent of the death sentences handed down to the defendants in this group. Since women made up forty percent of this population, this division might seem quite fair. However, when one takes into account the rank of those receiving the death sentence, this fairness is called into question. Of the four males who received the death sentence, Kramer was the *Kommandant* at Belsen and the *Lagerführer* at Birkenau, and Klein was one of the doctors involved in selections at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Hoessler's rank was somewhat more difficult to pin down, as he

[30] Statistics from Lasik, "The Apprehension and Punishment of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Staff," 102; Brown, *The Camp Women*, 16.

[31] These percentages, again, are based only on official camp personnel, and do not account for prisoner functionaries.

was called both *Lagerführer* and *Kommandant* of Belsen Camp Two. [32] Of the female defendants in this category, only Volkenrath served as *Oberaufseherin* in a somewhat equal capacity to the male position of *Lagerführer*. [33] If one removes *Kommandant* Kramer and Dr. Klein from the death sentence population, one is left with two males and three females of middle to upper-middle-range authority. Within this category of comparable level of authority, women made up sixty percent of the death sentences. While there were certain difference between Lasik's data and the data from this study, the findings from the Belsen Trial provide overall support for Lasik's conclusion that women received disproportionate sentencing. Based on Lasik's reasoning, there were more witnesses to accuse these women in the first place, and based on the reactions of the press and public, it is possible that the decisions of the judges were influenced by their perceptions how these female defendants not only violated human nature, but feminine nature, more specifically.

The Press

Background of a Case Study: Irma Grese

The public wanted to know how the various trials were proceeding as they were, understandably, outraged by what the Allied armies had discovered as they liberated Nazi camps. Both magazines and newspapers provided regular coverage of the military tribunals, especially those tried by Allied courts. Magazines provided a more detailed

[32] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 37.

[33] Aleksander Lasik, "The Auschwitz SS Garrison," in *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: The Establishment and Organization of the Camp*, trans. William Brand, vol. 1, *Central Issues in the History of the Camp* (Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000), 284.

description of the setting and characters of their stories, taking time for everything from the lighting and the color of the drapes in the courtroom, to the countenances both the accused and the court. Newspapers, on the other hand, generally presented shorter, less vivid descriptions of events as they unfolded, meticulously listing the number of accused and what witnesses the prosecution called. They also printed stories more regularly, and could therefore afford shorter length, as the reporter covered one or two days at a time, unlike the magazine correspondent who often covered a week or more in one piece. While magazines often provided descriptions of numerous individuals in an article, newspapers rarely provided their readers with mental images. In a sense, the press provided the "evidence" to the court of public opinion. The Belsen Trial provides the historian with a case study within a case study because of the media's focus on Irma Grese. The *Aufseherin* had attracted the attention of the media, and therefore the world. During the course of the trial, the Judge Advocate remarked on this phenomenon saying of Grese, "this woman seems to have had more than her share of publicity. She seems to me to have been tried many times by unofficial courts all over the place, and found guilty by all sorts of people. "[34] In their coverage of the trials, magazines and newspapers focused on Grese for one apparent reason: she was an attractive female. Their focus on male members of the accused was based on rank in the camp or importance in the party. Even magazine articles, which tended to describe everyone present at the proceedings gave an undue amount of attention to the physical appearances of female defendants, especially to Irma Grese.

[34] Judge Advocate C. L. Stirling qtd in Giles Playfair and Derrick Sington, *The Offenders; Society and the Atrocious Crime,* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1957), 178.

An Eyewitness Perspective

In their book *The Offenders: Society and the Atrocious Crime*, Giles Playfair and Derrick Sington outlined six cases of various types of crime in order to highlight their beliefs concerning crime and its appropriate punishment. They clearly stated their stance against capital punishment for any reason, that capital punishment should be abolished as the first step on the road to reforming the penal system, and that this reform would eventually replace retribution with treatment in an effort to clinically cure criminals. [35] One of their case studies was Irma Grese. During World War II, Captain Derrick Sington (one of the authors) was the first British officer on site when the British arrived to liberate Bergen-Belsen. As such, he was a key witness for the Prosecution, and his first-hand experience allowed him to write the section in this volume on Irma Grese from a uniquely personal example. Playfair and Sington argued that Grese's case was exemplary for their purpose, because Grese so obviously needed clinical, psychological treatment. Indeed, she should have been recognized as a "psychological casualty of war."[36] However, the circumstances of the trial led to an unfair process whereby Grese's case was not properly considered. Normally, they claimed, any judge would have requested a thorough history and family background of a convicted twenty-one year-old "girl" in order to see that too harsh a sentence was not meted out. They added, "In Sweden, as we have seen, a woman of any age—found guilty on such grave charges as those preferred on Irma Grese—would be carefully examined for her mental condition."[37]

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[35] Playfair and Sington, *The Offenders: Society and the Atrocious Crime*, ix.

[36] Ibid., 184.

[37] Ibid., 164.

The problem exposed by these passages is that the authors' analysis of Grese and her trial were firmly rooted in their preconceived notions of womanhood.

Throughout the chapter, Playfair and Sington referred to Grese as a "girl," and argued that the icy exterior that the press portrayed was actually more immaturity than anything else. While that may have been the case, their classification of Grese as a "girl" is subjective at best, and wrong at worst. At twenty-one, Grese was surely in that awkward young-adult phase of life, but she was not a child any longer. Even some of her reactions which Playfair and Sington have deemed childish were simply human. After her sentence had been read to her, Grese broke down crying in the back room of the courthouse, a reaction that Playfair and Sington described as "that of a comparative child."[38] Many people would weep upon hearing that they were to be hung by the neck until dead; this reaction did not make her a child. Additionally, their example of Swedish protocol demonstrates their preconceived notions that women and violent crime do not go together. They very carefully pointed out that *women* were in need of psychological analysis before being sentenced. The underlying assumption is that women in control of their faculties would not behave in an extreme or violent manner, while men apparently have a higher range of acceptable sadism. Whether they realized it or not, the authors made much of Grese's sex and their own ideas of gender in crafting their argument.

Playfair and Sington pointed out that "[t]he newspapers of the victor countries had indeed seized on the value to their circulation of her ringlets and her pretty blue eyes. For weeks in scores of screaming headlines Irma Grese had been 'the blonde beastess', just as

[38] Playfair and Sington, *The Offenders: Society and the Atrocious Crime*, 181.

a year later, in a different context, Neville Heath was to be 'the monster'" (sic). [39] What the authors did not point out was the categorical difference between the remarks the press made about Grese and those made about other criminals (Neville Heath, in their example). The fascination with Grese was not merely about her actions, but it was also firmly rooted in her looks. Playfair and Sington acknowledged that the press utilized her pretty face to the advantage of their circulation, but they did not acknowledge the explicit connection the press made between Grese's beauty and her beastliness. The headlines concerning Heath called him a "monster"; no adjectives accompany this epithet. That Grese's cruelty was associated with her physical beauty was not coincidental; the inextricable link was forged because Irma Grese was a female.

It is possible that Playfair and Sington did not make this connection because they had, themselves, fallen prey to physical appearances, but in another way. Throughout the chapter, the authors somewhat randomly inserted comments which they seemed to have thought would mitigate her actions, or at least produce indignation over her sentence. When discussing Irma's failed attempts to become a nurse before being assigned to the SS, they added a parenthetical comment: "A photograph of her taken at about this time shows a pretty girl, with a warm smile."[40] Such commentary has nothing to do with Grese's career path, her aspirations to become a nurse, her training at Ravensbrück, her actions as an *Aufseherin*, or her trial. They also utilized such commentary to indicate that the system to which she had fallen prey had turned Grese into a monster, and that "when one looks at the warmly-smiling, pretty girl in the 1941 photograph, when one considers

[39] Playfair and Sington, *The Offenders: Society and the Atrocious Crime*, 178.

[40] Ibid. , 172.

a statement of her sister Helena . . . that she had been childishly and charmingly gay at her last birthday party" one simply could not miss the extenuating nature of her circumstances. [41] A photograph of Grese warmly smiling is not evidence of her nature before her training to become an *Aufseherin*. Neither does it absolutely indicate extenuating circumstances. While Playfair and Sington were not guilty of sensationalizing Grese's looks, they certainly made much of her apparent youth and vulnerability.

Grese in Perspective

Playfair and Signton even noted, "[Grese] was, by any standards, a pretty girl—the only one in the dock."[42] One almost wants to protest that there must have been other attractive female defendants in the Belsen Trial for the press to note. This, however, skirts the issue. Observers did comment on other women; the point, however, is that they commented on female defendants in ways that they did not comment on male defendants. Even in his introduction to the edited proceedings of the Belsen Trial, Raymond Phillips managed to comment on Grese's attractiveness and her frequent appearances in the print media. Just after describing her "handsome" looks, Phillips commented, "With other teaching capable of good, that her setting should have been the dock is a sad commentary upon human affairs."[43] The connection here was that someone who looked like an angel would certainly have acted like one, had she been educated and influenced by good,

[41] Playfair and Sington, *The Offenders: Society and the Atrocious Crime*, 176–77.

[42] Ibid., 159.

[43] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xlii.

instead of evil. Phillips also commented on Juana Bormann's physical appearance, describing her as "diminutive in stature and frail in appearance." Charlotte Klein's "pitiful" and "bedraggled" appearance in the court room was owing to the fact that she had lost her hair during a bout with typhus. The only other defendant whom Phillips described physically was Stanislawa Starostka, a female Polish *kapo*. The rest of the prisoners were described as "ordinary-looking persons."[44] Phillips also discussed the age of several of the defendants, giving special attention to both ends of the spectrum. Grese and Volkenrath, for example, were both quite young, while Bormann was among the oldest of the defendants, at fifty-two. That they were women is the only apparent reason why age was a consideration in describing these defendants, as age was not an issue when discussing male prisoners.

Magazines often featured pieces describing male and female court participants, most likely owing to the nature and length of their articles which allowed writers to provide their audience with a setting. In the October 8 edition of *Time* magazine, described the female defendants in the dock at Lüneburg as keeping "insolent composure," and continued by saying, "There was prune-faced Juana Borman[n]. . . . There was wispy-haired Anna Hempel. " The men were described as a group as simply, "grave and sodden." Kramer did earn a personal mention: "a thin-lipped, narrow-eyed man with a low [,] receding forehead and brows grown together in a constant frown" However, Irma Grese received multiple mentions as the "fierce-eyed, coldly pretty blonde" and as "21-year-old Irma Grese (who had worked in concentration camps since she was 17, and liked it). " The article also pointed out that during a film watched in

[44] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, xliii.

court, showing a bulldozer pushing piles of human corpses into mass graves, "Irma Grese calmly fixed her hair and blew her nose."[45] It was especially disturbing that a woman should seem so cold and heartless in the face of such horror.

Life magazine printed a particularly interesting example of the media's fascination with the female Nazi, and with Grese in particular. The article entitled "Mass Murderess: Woman Leader of Nazi Guards at Belsen Camp sets Record for Evil" appeared below a three-quarter page photo of the prisoner's dock, carefully cropped so that Grese was the only woman pictured. Rather her head is framed by the faces of the two male defendants behind her. The magazine's readers were introduced to the *Aufseherin* by the opening lines of the article: "The good-looking, clean-cut, well-groomed young woman above is Irma Grese, 21."[46] The article continued with the following superlative: "Testimony of ex-prisoners painted Irma Grese as a woman who in her short life has surpassed the most blood-curdling murderesses and sadists of previous history." As evidence of this assertion, the article listed four particular offenses. Grese had been accused of "ferociously" beating female prisoners with her riding crop until they fell to the ground and of setting dogs on weaker prisoners "for her amusement." The article also stated, "She tied together the legs of women in childbirth, so that they were unable to deliver and died in agony." Ex-prisoners said that while she was at Auschwitz she selected "young girls for experiments in artificial insemination that killed many of them."[47] Significantly, the first two accusations portray an animalistic Grese—she "ferociously" beat prisoners,

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[45] "Inferno on Trial," *Time*, October 8, 1945.

[46] "Mass Murderess: Woman Leader of Nazi Guards at Belsen Camp Sets Record for Evil," *Life*, October 8, 1956.

[47] "Inferno on Trial."

and she used her dog to pick off the weaker members of the prisoner herd. The last two offenses related to childbearing, a particularly female task. Such actions would undoubtedly be seen as exceptionally unnatural, especially on the part of a woman. Indeed, based on gendered ideals of the time, such actions could have been seen as the antithesis of femaleness.

Because they were fairly brief newspaper articles generally included less description, suggesting special attention for those items which were mentioned or described. Newspaper articles on the subject of the Belsen Trial provide another interesting angle from which to view the public opinion trial of female defendants. Numerous articles mentioned only a few specific defendants and then grouped the rest by number. For example: "Twelve of them—including Kramer and the SS woman Irma Grese who, Colonel Backhouse said, had been called the worst of the women guards—were charged with crimes at [Auschwitz], where Kramer commanded the Birkenau compound. "[48] This generic, informational article mentioned only two of the accused by name, and one of those was Irma Grese. Articles which mentioned Grese frequently employed what became more or less standard epithets: "Irma Grese, 21-year-old blonde" or "21-year-old Irma Grese, blonde SS leader."[49] This became a pattern, as numerous articles mentioned the *Aufseherin* by name when there was apparently only space for a few specifics. In fact, ten years after the trial, Colonel Backhouse passed away and the *New York Times* ran an obituary commending the Prosecutor of the Belsen trial. Only

[48] "SS Killed 4,000,000 at Oswiecim, Prosecutor Says at Kramer Trial: 13,000 Corpses Discovered," *New York Times*, September 18, 1945.

[49] "Eyewitness Tells of Belsen Horror: First British Officer to Arrive Averted Shooting of Crowd," *New York Times*, September 20, 1945; "1,000 More in Reich Sought for Crimes: United Nations Board Issues New Secret List," *New York Times*, September 28, 1945.

three defendants were listed specifically: *Kommandant* Josef Kramer, Dr. Fritz Klein, and Irma Grese. [50] Both men ranked significantly above Grese, and yet she was listed alongside them, as if she were organizationally as important.

Many articles tried to legitimize their focus on Grese by saying that she was the head female guard at Belsen or that she was Kramer's right hand "man." After the first day of the trial, *The Times* of London reported on its highlights. The article mentioned Klein and gave special attention to Kramer before stating, "The prosecutor added that Irma Grese, commandant of the women's punishment department, had been described by some of the prisoners as the worst woman in the camp."[51] Interestingly, in his opening statement, Colonel Backhouse mentioned specifics on each of the defendants, and yet the article selected only three. [52] Moreover, Grese had headed the women's punishment department at Auschwitz, not at Belsen, and Volkenrath was the head of the *Aufseherinnen* at Belsen, with Ehlert as her deputy. [53] The reporters who were able to summarize Backhouse's assertion that Grese had been singled out as the worst female guard, had surely also been present when he informed the court who was in command over the women at Belsen. Grese certainly achieved a formidable rank at Auschwitz, and her position at Belsen was certainly one of great responsibility, but she was by no means singular in these particulars. Coupled with the fact that reporters could scarcely mention

[50] "British Judge Thomas Backhouse Dies; He Prosecuted 'Beast of Belsen' in 1945," *New York Times*, September 17, 1955.

[51] "Case Opened Against Belsen Guards: Prosecution's Tale of Horror: Applicaton for Separate Trial Refused," *The Times*, September 18, 1945.

[52] Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others*, 26–30.

[53] Ibid., 29–9.

her name without making some reference to her appearance, and the veneer of rank as a motive for focus becomes thin indeed.

Just as *Time* magazine made a point of Grese attending to her physical appearance during the film demonstrating the horrors of the Nazi camps, newspaper articles also frequently harped on Grese's inappropriate emotions. In an article headlined "Eyewitness Tells of Belsen Horror" a subsection headed "Defendants Lose Impassivity" aptly described the responses of the defendants as they heard the evidence against them. While observers noted that all of the defendants seemed to have "lost their impassivity," Irma Grese apparently appeared as one who "managed to maintain the defiant, contemptuous look that marred her undeniable good looks."[54] Whether or not Grese was in fact the only defendant to maintain defiance, or whether her facial expressions were merely a screen to mask inner reactions, is not the point. Rather, this incident served as further evidence to the press and the public that their initial reaction to this woman was correct: there was something unnatural about her. There must have been something fundamentally wrong for any woman to have behaved as she had, as such violence and cruelty must have directly conflicted with her feminine nature. That she did not react emotionally to the charges against her or the sights of the camps on film further testified to this imbalance. She was certainly the paragon of physical womanhood, but her cruelty and her lack of appropriate emotional response suggested that she might not be a woman at all, but a monster instead. Her beastliness was in direct conflict with the concept of femininity.

[54] "Eyewitness Tells of Belsen Horror."

When read alongside court records, newspaper articles can provide excellent supplementary material. Official court proceedings, while extremely helpful, do not provide the expressions and tones of court participants, nor do they record the reactions of the participants to the interaction between witness and examiner or cross-examiner. While the reader might obviously assume certain tones, an eyewitness account which focuses on this more human element of a trial can paint a more vivid picture, with very few words. During witness for the prosecution, Dr. Ada Bimko's testimony on September 22, the cross-examiner suggested to her that her allegations of brutality on the part of *Kommandant* Kramer were "pure fabrication." Reporters must have known they were in for an interesting response, and so they waited with pens poised. The *New York Times* gave a faithful account of Bimko's response (as verified by the official court documents) and also provided the reaction of other court room participants: "'I would like to point out I was present and not the defending counsel during those conditions that I have described,' she said. Irma Grese burst into laughter—the first sign of emotion she had given during the five days of the trial. Herta [E]hlert, a woman camp guard sitting beside her, joined in. Some spectators also laughed. "[55] Not only was the press pleased to see some sort of emotion on the part of the "cold blonde," but her reaction was, while inappropriate considering the setting, at least somewhat understandable and even normal. She was, after all, not the only one to see the humor in Dr. Bimko's response. Grese's emotional displays, therefore, both honored and violated her humanity and, more importantly, her femininity.

[55] "Kicking of Doomed by Nazi Described: Belsen Trial Hears Woman Tell of Kramer's Handling of Oswiecim Gas Victims," *New York Times*, September 23, 1945.

Closing Argument

The evidence of a double standard for *Aufseherin* at the Belsen Trial should not indicate that these women were not responsible for their actions or that they did not merit their sentences. One can still consider their sentences as both appropriate, individually, if disproportionate, as a group. Moreover, should one see their fates as appropriate, acknowledging that the judges were influenced by their own conceptions of femininity does not invalidate the appropriateness of the sentence, only the appropriateness of the thoughts (sub-conscious or not) which caused a judge to arrive at such a decision. The public was horrified by the cruelty and violence committed by these convicted defendants, both male and female. However, their reaction to female camp staff was perhaps more acute because their actions violated both their human and feminine natures, as defined by society. The actions of an *Aufseherin* were perceived as being worse than those of a man because she was a woman. Her actions could be perceived as worse still if she were an attractive woman. Instead of seeing the disproportionate sentencing as evidence of a sexist system, it might be more appropriate to see the system and society's standards as more generally flawed. One might see the need for harsher sentencing, overall, instead of simply calling for more just sentencing for females. The violation of humanity which occurred in the Lager was a violation perpetrated by humans. These acts were not inherently more male than female. Rather, they are representative of the seemingly contradictory nature belonging to humans of both sexes: the inhumanity of violence is somehow very human. Violence *ought* not be perpetrated by humans against other humans, but it *is*.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In the "Foreword" to Raymond Phillips's edited volume of the Belsen Trial transcripts, Lord Jowitt wrote, "One of the accused said that she always tried to remind herself that she was a human being and a woman. It is all too plain from the evidence which this book records that she failed in both respects."[1] This simple selection presents the reality of acceptable behaviors for females within the Nazi system, as well as the reality of the dissonance which often occurred as a result of the coexistence of other behaviors encouraged by that same system. Moreover, it demonstrates that members of the allied nations had their own ideas about gender roles which significantly influenced their perceptions of the actions and overall identities of the war crimes trials' female defendants.

This thesis has explored the ways in which the interplay between *ought* and *is* of femaleness among *Aufseherinnen* impacted the perpetration of the Holocaust. It has attempted to sketch at least a fuzzy portrait of the female guard's position in the power structures of the Nazi totalitarian state, her specific roles within the camp systems, and some of the more specific, personal points of individual identities. Moreover, it has attempted to point out that although certain prescribed concepts of the ideal German woman existed and certainly influenced the daily lives of many women, these concepts

[1] Raymond Phillips, *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-four Others: The Belsen Trial* (London: Hodge, 1949), xxii.

were malleable to the times, as Jill Stephenson and other have pointed out. While most women undoubtedly experienced pressure to conform to these ideals, the ideals themselves were prescriptive, not necessarily descriptive in nature. Therefore, many *Aufseherinnen* were able to serve in the various concentration camps in capacities outside the prescriptive traits of womanhood without violating the overall Nazi goal to employ every person for the good of the *Volk*. Additionally, these women could conceivably have existed in such an environment where the ideals of womanhood were phenomenologically unimportant.

It is also clear that women within the Nazi state did not only act in supporting roles, but also acted as primary agents of its systems. While Claudia Koonz's works do not claim to focus on every facet of female involvement within the Nazi state, and while her ideas concerning the culpability of supporting female roles are certainly valid, her omission of female guards in her larger analysis is a glaring.[2] Her assertions that women, as wives and mothers, were instrumental in the perpetration of the Holocaust by providing a shelter of emotional stability to men (its main perpetrators) does not account for the role of female guards.[3] Who provided the homes with love and stability for the female guards within the camps? Could men have provided this stability for women, or did women not need such stability to act out their roles? If women did not need a haven, one begins to wonder if men needed one either, and to what extent this emotional support

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[2] See Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

[3] See Claudia Koonz, "Consequences: Women, Nazis, and Moral Choice," in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, eds. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1993), 287–308 reprinted from her monograph (see above). This shorter selection will still provide the main elements of her argument.

was a particularly female method of involvement. The main issue with Koonz's interpretation of female involvement is that it does not take into account the co-existent *is* and *ought* of women's roles within the Nazi framework. Certainly, females were not actually *supposed* to be involved in the Nazi systems in a direct or significant way. However, that same system allowed for their involvement in what Hannah Arendt has labeled the zenith of Nazi totalitarianism: the *Lager*. The very existence of female guards within this world which was the ultimate expression of Nazism, belies the complexity of female involvement in Nazism.

In daily camp life, there was a suspension of certain gendered expectations, even if women were to remain in subservient positions of power, relative to men. Wendy Adele-Marie Sarti posits a framework wherein the blurring of gender norms, as seen in the camps, were exceptional to the overall gender system throughout the Reich. However, her understanding of "blurring" results in her defining behaviors of female guards in masculine terms, alluding to a male normative paradigm. In order to see the inherent issues with describing the suspension of gender norms in terms of women's behavior as being more masculine, one must take another look at the overall goals of Nazi Germany, and take into account the pragmatic shifts in policy discussed by Jill Stephenson. This suspension did not result in women behaving like men, as Sarti and others have suggested. Rather, it resulted in women working within the overall Nazi system, as members of the one *Volk*, taking up the task which was set before them. Their actions in perpetrating the Holocaust did not fit into the Nazi idealized concept of either gender, but into the category of faithful citizen.

The student attempting to understand how female guards fit into the Third Reich and, more importantly, attempting to understand the meaning and significance of the female guard would do well to adopt an attitude toward gender similar to the one espoused by Gisela Bock, in varying degrees. Studying gender through the lens of history requires one to look for similarities and differences between the sexes and between the genders. One must assess gender standards and norms on the terms of the society being studied, or else risk serious misinterpretation. Bock asserts that a gendered approach to studying Nazi Germany and the Holocaust is certainly valid, both as a means of coming to a more nuanced understanding, and as a means of realizing the inherent limitations of a gendered approach. Concretely and phenomenologically, "female perpetrators were perpetrators not so much because they were female but because they believed themselves to be ordinary Germans, like men."[4] By incorporating Bock's position, the scholar can allow for the phenomenological reality of gender difference in the Third Reich, but s/he can also assert the suspension of this reality, especially under extreme circumstances. Nazi society, camp inmates, and the *Aufseherinnen* themselves lived amidst a cognitive dissonance between *ought* and *is*. The *Aufseherinnen* may not have even experienced themselves as particularly female by society's standards, even though they knew that such standards existed.

This suspension, dissonance, and the resulting experiences tell of a different meaning of the female guard than many historical narratives have thus far related. The average *Aufseherin* (if there was such a person) held a position of tremendous, even

[4] Gisela Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 94.

unparalleled power as an official in the world of total domination. The fact that she officially ranked below her male counterparts—a fact which, under normal circumstances would be categorized as sexually discriminant—becomes meaningless in the face of the life and death power she wielded over the camp's inmates.[5] The life-destroying actions, which accompanied their positions of power and authority, contradicted the more traditional roles assigned to the ideal German woman—famer, nurturer, sustainer of life. However, the world of the *Lager* operated under the conditions of suspended gender expectations, even if official rules and regulations suggested otherwise. That said, her actions did not contradict her womanhood, because such an idea was more or less irrelevant in the *Lager*. Moreover, she did not contradict her role as a woman within society more generally. As a citizen of Germany, she was doing what was required for the good of the *Volk*. In a way similar to the scholar unlearning in order to enter the world of a former victim's testimony, the scholar must also unlearn many of the historical narratives of German women in order to begin to grasp the reality and meaning of the *Aufseherin*.

As Christina Herkommer has demonstrated, the debates concerning female involvement in the Holocaust have frequently been framed around the issues of equality and difference.[6] In addition to arguing past one another, these two camps make the mistake of assuming that inherent identity based on gender creates the foundation for

[5] Bock makes a similar argument in her explanation of the primary power relationship in Nazi Germany (German Gentiles over Jews). See Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," 96-97.

[6] Christina Herkommer, "Women Under National Socialism: Women's Scope for Action and the Issue of Gender," in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, trans. Richard Littlejohns, The Holocaust and Its Contexts (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 99–119.

study and debate.[7] Gisela Bock probably hits closer to the mark in saying, "In this wider sense, all Germans were responsible for the Holocaust, but not in their specific identities as women or men, and not because of their marital state, motherhood or fatherhood. However, in order to explore the precise extent of women's participation in Nazi crimes, we should not ask who they were but what they did."[8]

At the end of the war, women tried in military tribunals were subject to the ideas, constructs, and notions not of the *Lager* world, but of this world. Their convictions and sentences, as exhibited in the Belsen Trial and by Aleksander Lasik's work, were generally disproportionate to their numbers, and were often relatively incongruous when compared to male sentences. As Lord Jowitt remarked, women were tried as humans and as women, and in many ways they were judged not only for war crimes but also for acting outside of their gender. It was bad enough for a male to perpetrate such atrocities, but for a woman to violate life was understood as even more heinous. The actions of *Aufseherinnen* were judged in light of their femaleness. In other words judges did not suspend gender expectations in their courtrooms. The media concurred with the courts, as its members sensationalized the stories of female accused, especially attractive females like Irma Grese.[9] Essentially, they were judged in light of their actions and their identities. This judgment in turn forged a new identity for these women, one indicative

[7] The ideas of "difference" and "equality" are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

[8] Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders," 94.

[9] In many ways, current literature on the subject of female guards continues to sensationalize, to the detriment of grasping actual meaning. See Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life & Crimes of SS-Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Ventura, Calif.: Golden West Historical Publications, 1996); Wendy Adele-Marie Sarti, *Women and Nazis: Perpetrators of Genocide and Other Crimes During Hitler's Regime, 1933-1945* (Palo Alto, CA: Academica Press, 2011).

of how the courts and the public perceived and experienced them. Therefore, in the eyes of the public, their actions as members of the Nazi apparatus of Holocaust took a supporting role to their actions as females, facilitating death instead of life.

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