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Remembering and narrating the ‘woman-as-Jew’: an oral history study of the female body in Nazi-controlled ghettos

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Remembering and narrating the ‘woman-as-Jew’:
an oral history study of the female body in Nazi-controlled ghettos

‘She refuses to let her body become simply a monument of pain, inscribed by the Nazis. She writes about her body as it is, scarred but not totally defeated.’

– Karen Remmler¹

¹ Karen Remmler, ‘Gender Identities and the Remembrance of the Holocaust’, *Women in German Yearbook*, Vol. 10 (1994), p.175.

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Introduction: Reimagining the boundaries of female experience

‘It never crossed my mind that I would have to sign a paper, giving up my child to be killed [...] Nobody threatened, the presence of the SS men was enough. But we signed it. But what I wanted to point out is that I have never found *ever* anything written about it in the books which I possess quite a lot of.’ – Anna Bergman²

When Anna Bergman imparted her personal story of the Holocaust as part of Steven Spielberg’s *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive* (VHA), she raised a prominent point regarding the omission of certain ‘types’ of stories that exposed more taboo or atypical female experiences. Through the politics of retelling, Anna Bergman restored some of the personal agency she felt she had lost over 50 years prior by ‘signing’ away her personal and bodily autonomy and her identity as a mother. It is arguable that her attempt to make sense of her gender-specific trauma was heightened by its absence and underrepresentation in academic and public discourse.

Anna Bergman’s suggestion of guilt and confusion surrounding her own experiences as a survivor vis-à-vis popular discourses of memory is not uncommon but change within public remembrance is slow and resisted. Last year, online Jewish periodical *The Forward* used its platform to problematise the cultural silence on nonconforming female Holocaust discourses with the publication ‘Can We Talk About Rape In The Holocaust Yet?’³ whilst Art exhibition *VIOLATED! Women in Holocaust and Genocide* similarly transgressed the boundaries of public remembrance. The exhibition statement mirrored Anna B’s sentiments by stating it was producing a space for a counter-narrative for survivors who ‘were frequently silenced by their own unwarranted sense of shame...those who spoke out were sometimes discouraged.’⁴ These expressions of troubled relationship between female *experience* and its *representation* serve as a poignant reminder that the study of gender within the Holocaust is still contested, as critics argue gender-based studies may trivialise and

² Interview with Anna Bergman (28239), USC Visual History Archives (1997)

³ Batya Ungar-Sargon, ‘Can we talk about rape in the Holocaust yet?’, *The Forward*, April 25 2018.

<https://forward.com/opinion/399538/can-we-talk-about-rape-in-the-holocaust-yet/> [accessed 20 Feb 2019].

⁴ ‘VIOLATED! Women in Holocaust and Genocide’, *Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery*, New York City, April 12-May 12, 2018. http://rememberwomen.org/Events/2018/violated_2018.html [accessed 20 Feb 2019]

even ‘naturalise’ the Holocaust, or saturate an already congested important field of study.⁵ However, by bridging what Ringelheim calls the ‘split between gender and the Holocaust’, and bringing peripheral, gendered-specific stories like Anna B’s to the forefront, there is an opportunity to gain a more complex, nuanced understanding and foster meaningful new enquiries into the experiences of women under the changing conditions of the ghettos.⁶

This dissertation aims to go beyond simply recovering and integrating women’s voices into the mainstream by critically engaging with how gender operated as a differentiator of experience in the increasingly isolated, liminal ‘space’ of the ghettos in Occupied Eastern Europe. This, in turn, has affected gender-specific representation of trauma in women’s oral history narratives. Whilst acknowledging that race was the primary category under attack during the Nazi assault on the Jews of Europe, Banwell’s framework of the ‘woman-as-Jew’ convincingly highlights that there were situations in which women were targeted *as women* in addition to and inseparable from their primary persecution *as Jews*.⁷ This framework can be applied to experiences of forced abortion, attacks on Jewish motherhood, and sexual violence within Nazi ghettos. It builds upon Cohn’s notion of the ‘woman as nation’/‘nation as woman’, recognising that in times of war and crisis, women’s bodies are perceived as a collective and targeted due to their capabilities to reproduce ostracised national, racial, ethnic and religious identities.⁸ This collective attack arguably affected and transformed female subjectivities and gendered behaviours in ways we cannot fully understand if we accept the notion of undifferentiated and ‘universalised suffering.’⁹

By scaling in on a sensory, emotional microgeography of women’s lives in the ghettos and positioning the focus at the intersection of gender analysis and the ‘spatial turn’ in Holocaust studies, one gains an insight into the most intimate of all ‘spaces’ for women, her body. The body as a space has profound connections to autonomy, agency and subjectivity of women in the ghettos. Whilst Giordano et al profess the importance of

⁵ For an example of criticism see: Gabriel Schoenfeld, ‘Auschwitz and the Professors’, *Commentary*, V.105 (6), June 1998, p.42–46.

⁶ Ringelheim, ‘The Split between Gender and the Holocaust’, in Dalia Ofer, Lenore J Weitzman (eds.) *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp.540-530.

⁷ Stacy Banwell, ‘Rassenschande, Genocide and the Reproductive Jewish Body: examining the use of rape and sexualized violence against Jewish women during the Holocaust?’ *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, V.15 (2), (2016) p.208-227.

⁸ Banwell, ‘Rassenschande’, p.210, p.223.

⁹ Remmler, ‘Gender Identities’, p.167-68.

studying the Holocaust ‘from the macro scale of the European continent...down to the micro scale of the individual body’, it is arguable the majority of studies on Nazi geographies of the ‘Final Solution’ take a more distant, macro, perpetrator perspective, foregrounding far-reaching spatial policies such as *Lebensraum* or mapping the scale of ghettos or camps.¹⁰ Goldenberg’s *Different Horrors, Same Hell* explores how gender differentiated experiences of persecution, but the female body *as a space* for gender-specific trauma remains a fairly emergent locus of study.¹¹ Accordingly, this oral history project adopts Smith and Watson’s notion of ‘reading for the body’, suggesting that ‘the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge’ while acknowledging that ‘the cultural meanings assigned to particular bodies affects the kinds of stories people can tell.’¹²

When ‘reading for the body’ or looking at more taboo or less spoken about stories, academic studies have tended to focus on the totalising space of the concentration camp.¹³ However, this ignores the fact ‘the road to annihilation was marked by events that specifically affected men as men and women as women.’¹⁴ This ‘road’ for many began in the ghettos. Ghettoisation, in essence, was the exertion of Nazi authority through the control of space. By 1941, an estimated 400 individual ghetto spaces existed in occupied Eastern Europe as the urban landscapes were demarcated and reworked to become *Judenfrei* (free of Jews).¹⁵ In the study of Ghettoisation, it is widely accepted that there was significant regional variation in the geography and functioning of the ghettos, however, one must note that this conclusion takes on the perspective of the perpetrator, and predominately refers to the difference in the implementation of ghetto policy.¹⁶ In terms of what the ghetto, as a figurative space, represented to Jewish people the testimonies surveyed showed similarities that transgressed the boundaries of static geography. Tec argues that the ghettos’ ‘basic

¹⁰ Eric B. Steiner, *Geographies of the Holocaust*. Edited by Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014) p.3. For spatial histories from a perpetrator perspective; Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca. (eds.) *Hitler’s Geographies: The Spatialities of the Third Reich* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016)

¹¹ Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro (ed.) *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013)

¹² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p.49-51.

¹³ Nicole Ephgrave, ‘On Women’s Bodies: The Experiences of Dehumanisation in the Holocaust’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 28.2 (2016) pp.12-32

¹⁴ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (London: Lime Tree, 1993) p.126.

¹⁵ Tim Cole. ‘Geographies of Ghettoization: Absences, Presences, and Boundaries’. in Giaccaria, *Hitler’s Geographies*, p.266-67.; Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) p.39.

¹⁶ Christopher R Browning, ‘Nazi Ghettoization Policy in Poland, 1939–1941,’ *Central European History*, 19 (1986) p.343–63.

similarities', such as racially-motivated isolation, the acceleration of anti-Semitic policy and rapidly imposed social transformation, are more significant 'than the occasional variations', and as such I will look at how the ghetto as a symbolic space of persecution was experienced by women.¹⁷ Thus, this dissertation aims to contribute to re-examination of the role of gender within Jewish women's experience and memory, rather than contributing to the tradition 'straight' history of a single ghetto.¹⁸

The women's testimonies explored hereafter have been selected from the rich oral records of *USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive* (VHA) (and where multiple testimonies were given by the same survivor also from *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (USHMM)), and thus the methodological developments in the practise of oral histories must be considered. As the vast, rich records of the VHA alone contains over 54,000 audio-visual records, the testimonies included have been narrowed down through the use of systematic key word indexing as well as filtered by those given in English, a practical limitation of the study. Accordingly, the testimonies selected are simply an insight, and cannot claim to be representative of all Jewish women's experiences. However, whilst similar patterns of experience, survival strategies and narration were noted, it is personal truths rather than seeking broad generalisations that are of interest. For, as distinguished researcher of Holocaust testimonies, Langer, has stated, oral histories are '*human* documents rather than merely *historical* ones.'¹⁹ Portelli's pioneering argument that there are 'no false oral testimonies' allows us to engage with the peculiarities of oral sources such as subjective departures from objective fact, and selective self-censorship. Oral history 'tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*' for the given interviewee.²⁰ In the same way that Pollin-Galay and Shenker have suggested that the national and political context of Holocaust oral history projects permeates into the framing of the narratives they produce, it is arguable that the public and academic position on the proper role of women during the Holocaust affects the gendered framing of the stories women tell. This is reflected in what survivors perceive it is acceptable to tell (or not tell) and how it is told (language and discourse) in regards to the taboo topic of the sexualised and

¹⁷ Tec, *Resilience*, p.39.

¹⁸ Tec, *Resilience*, p.39.

¹⁹ Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 1991) p.xv.

²⁰ Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes Oral History different?' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006) p.36-37.

reproductive Jewish female body.²¹ Bos suggests that ‘performing an analysis of *discourse*’ not reality is the key to more complex and significant framework for gender analysis of Holocaust experience. This brings to the forefront questions about (gendered) subjectivities and autobiographical representation, the politics of memory and narrative, and the psychological function of testimony.²²

This study will firstly explore women’s memories of the Jewish reproductive body and the assault on Jewish motherhood within ghetto landscapes. Chapter 2 will explore narratives of the Jewish female’s sexualised body and the complex, troublesome narration of sexual violence and sex for survival. Both of these chapters will argue that women were forced to alter gendered beliefs and negotiate the meaning inscribed to their bodies in order to survive. The final chapter will explore the relationship of these difficult oral history narratives to present-day discourses regarding gender and the Holocaust and how this affects the stories women do or do not tell regarding the intimacies of the assault of their bodies. Thus, whilst oral history may be limited for traditional spatial history they can provide an alternative insight into mental emotional mapping and imaginative reconstructions of how the body as a space of persecution and gender-specific survival was experienced, imagined and remembered.

²¹ Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015)
Hannah Pollin-Gallay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018)

²² Rachal Pascal Bos, ‘Women and the Holocaust: Analysing Gender Difference’ in Elizabeth Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (eds.) *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003) p.25.

Chapter 1: Remembering the maternal body

‘To have a child was taboo’ Zipora Zygielbaum remembered, as she recounted the life-threatening consequences ascribed to pregnancy and motherhood in Riga Ghetto, Latvia.²³ Due to her background as a nurse before the war, Zipora witnesses first-hand the prevalence of abortions as she provided assistance to the sole remaining Doctor for Riga Ghetto with no formalised medical facilities and just one set of instruments. Motivated by the fear of their pregnancies becoming visible to the Nazi authorities, she recalled the great lengths women took as many as three or four women a time would be ‘smuggled’ into the small ghetto with the male work units traversed, undergo the illicit operations at night in secrecy.²⁴ Zipora’s insight exposes one way that gender specific attacks on the reproductive functions of women put them in impossibly challenging situations, often having to make unthinkable choices and maternal sacrifices to survive. Indeed, in all the demarcated landscapes of the ghettos of occupied Eastern Europe, women like Zipora quickly learnt that to have a child became synonymous with death and danger. The ritual of childbirth, and the bodies of the Jewish women bearing these children and nurturing the young within ghettos, became a target of gender-specific anti-Semitic persecution.²⁵ In this chapter, I will present multiple examples of how attitudes to women’s reproductive bodies became a central feature of their experience of Nazi persecution in the ghettos, and subsequently a central feature of their narrative representation of ghetto life.

The relationship between gender and space operate at the forefront of many of these women’s holocaust survivor oral testimonies as the Jewish female body is located as a site of complex, difficult memories of maternal trauma. When mapping the distinctive spatial characteristics of Nazi spatial policy, a key dissimilarity of the ghetto in comparison to the gender-divisive internal spatial arrangement of the camps was that families ‘basically remained intact, allowing for the possibility for men and women to pursue intimacy.’²⁶ Thus, when listening to survivor oral testimonies, stories detailing the development of intimate relationships,

²³ Interview with Zipora Zygielbaum (Interview 4896), USC Visual History Archive (1995)

²⁴ Interview with Zipora Zygielbaum (1995)

²⁵ David Patterson, ‘The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul through the Murder of the Jewish Mother’ in Goldenberg, *Different Horrors*, p.163-176

²⁶ Jonathon Friedman, ‘Togetherness and Isolation: Holocaust Survivor Memories of Intimacy and Sexuality in the Ghettos’, *The Oral History Review*, 28.1 (2001) p.4.

of getting married, of falling pregnant and giving birth are pronounced in most of the women's narratives of ghetto life surveyed. However, whilst traditional pre-war socialisations like marriage and family structure remained a possibility, the assault on Jewish motherhood, which originated for most women in the acceleration of Nazi policies in the ghetto, marks one of the most prominent, traumatic ruptures from their pre-war feminine subjectivities and identities, and is present as an initial, intimate erosion of the self. As such, responses to the threat of childbearing were agonising and diverse and are best refracted through Langer's notion of a 'choiceless choice' in which 'crucial decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victims' own choosing.'²⁷

When 'reading for the body' in female Shoah testimonies, one crucial theme that emerges across many narratives is the conflict between the personal 'space' of the body and the Nazi-controlled 'space' of the ghetto, related as the loss of female agency and identity when they describe their experiences of motherhood and childbearing. For, as defined by Cole, ghettoisation was the 'exercise of power through space', and this invasion and control of space arguably extended, metaphorically and physically, to intimate microgeography of the Jewish female reproductive body.²⁸ Luba Librowitz's testimony takes the complexity of agency vis-a-vis the site of body as the narrative point of departure in her retelling of pregnancy in Warsaw Ghetto. She recalled with defiance her memory of refusing to give over any children she may have:

'Usually they used to say that when a child was born, if it's a little boy they keep it but if it's a little girl they kill it. I say I don't want to give them a girl and I don't want to give them a boy. I don't want to give them *nothing*. So one time I went and I gave away my bread and [bought] a piece of poison and I had it always in my pocket. Always. And I said if they are close to closing in on me and they want to kill me I will never give them that satisfaction. I am going to kill myself first.'²⁹

²⁷ Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and The Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p.72.

²⁸ Cole, 'Geographies of Ghettoization', p.266-67.

²⁹ Interview with Luba Librowitz (Interview 34921) USC Visual History Archive (1997)

This is just one of many examples of a women expressing her battle over her reproductive space. Her description of Nazi ‘satisfaction’ in taking innocent Jewish children suggests that for many women this particular act of antisemitism penetrated the deepest of emotional, religious and human bonds for the many women, that of a mother and child.³⁰ A similar construction of the morally agonising plight of pregnancy is remembered by Ruth Widder when she describes how her and her Husband ‘did a very *stupid* thing’ by becoming pregnant:

‘You could not get pregnant there and you should not get pregnant there, if you got pregnant you had by law to go and have an abortion. But I didn’t *want* this, we *wanted* to have the baby [...] We really *wanted* this baby, we really *wanted* it. It came from the heart and we *wanted* something for ourselves. But like I said, it was not the right place.’³¹

Indeed, Ruth W’s testimony, although fragmented, foregrounds how the anti-motherhood policies of Nazism were central to her loss of personal choice and agency in the ghetto as they stripped her of her desperate desire to be a mother. The repetition of how much they ‘wanted’ this baby in a landscape they felt they had nothing closely parallels Luba’s narrative, which centres the trauma of her pregnancy around not wanting to ‘give’ the Nazis her children, encoding the realisation that in the Nazi-controlled space of the ghetto, ownership of your own body and identity as a Jew and as a woman was under contestation. In Ruth’s impressionistic narration, the space of the ghetto is abstract, an emblem of Nazi authority, and thus her words appear to take on symbolic rather than geographical significance when she frequently repeats how you couldn’t get pregnant ‘*there*’ as it was the *wrong* ‘place.’ Her language is indicative of how, in some women’s testimonies, the ghetto is presented as representing its own set of rules and meanings in regards women’s reproductive bodies. Smith and Watson advocate that memory, identity, spatialization and agency are key components in understanding subjectivity when interpreting of autobiographical narrative, of which oral testimonies are a key example.³² Indeed, Ruth’s spatial rhetoric, expressing location and dislocation within the ghetto indicate not simply her sense of physical

³⁰ Patterson, ‘The Nazi Assault’, p.173.

³¹ Interview with Ruth Widder (3485) USC Shoah Foundation (1995)

³² Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, p.42. p.46.

dislocation from familiar, pre-war spaces of home, but also the dislocation from her identity as a mother in the ghetto landscape.

Nonetheless, during the Nazi assault on the Jewish mother, it was not agency over decisions connected to the reproductive body that were confronted and contested, but also the cultural *meanings* assigned to female Jewish body and its reproductive capabilities. Under the 'chaotic scheme of values created for the victims by the Germans.', women's experiences were mediated by the conflicting demands of new meanings attached to pregnancy in the ghetto vis-à-vis the struggle to traditional gendered and religious roles attached to the ritual of childbirth and motherhood.³³ Such observations are crucial as Waxman suggests that research on women's experiences, whilst correcting absences in androcentric works, often falls short by 'avoiding questioning [of] the categories of meaning they have applied to understanding women, and which women have applied to understanding themselves.'³⁴

Despite the official penalties and explicit dangers they faced, some women narrated the experience of falling pregnant or bringing up a child in the ghetto as a symbol of 'hope', for the child symbolised a purpose in the mother's life and a connection to pre-war Jewish teachings on motherhood and sanctity of new-born life.³⁵ Anna Bergman foregrounds the spirit of resistance that imbued her state of mind when she tells the interviewer that her second pregnancy in Theresienstadt was 'planned', emphasizing that for her, to have a child suggested an investment in a Jewish future and thus the potential to resist their fate.³⁶ By the time they conceived, Anna reveals that she and her husband had already been in the ghetto three years, and after learning of the allies invasion of continent Europe, she remembers how they questioned 'how long can it be' until they were liberated and they would have the possibility of taking the child back to Prague. For Anna, the act of returning home with child is presented as a source of strength to survive, 'one of the few pleasure left' 'which kept us alive'.³⁷ Similarly, Chasia Klarman expresses the miracle of having a child as she recalls, 'the baby's

³³ Lawrence Langer, 'Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimony' in Ofer, *Women in the Holocaust*, p.357.

³⁴ Zoe Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford Scholarship Online: January 2010) p.124.

³⁵ Patterson, 'The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul', p.173

³⁶ Interview with Anna Bergman (1997)

³⁷ Interview with Anna Bergman (1997)

name was Tikvah, it means hope – I hoped maybe she would bring us a better future.’ For Chasia, her daughter was the embodiment of promise, optimism and faith amidst oppression.³⁸

However, whilst narratives of hope and resistance like Anna and Chasia’s dominate perceptions of the Jewish Mother in popular remembrance, a darker and more sombre subtext was far more common in the stories of pregnancy and motherhood in the testimonies surveyed. For hope was undeniably a double-edge sword for women, as the Nazis annihilated children precisely because they symbolised a Jewish future.³⁹ Separated from her family in Lodz ghetto, Nellie Ash’s testimony reflects a darker counter-narrative. Hiding alone in her husband’s basement, in a makeshift hiding place designed to conceal her, she recalled, ‘I used to put my hand over my mouth and stifle the screams and I thought I am not going to be able to make it.’⁴⁰ Whilst noting the hope that the ‘life’ inside of her brought, Nellie A’s testimony suggests that her experience of hiding whilst pregnant in the ghetto was ‘like being in a grave’ and perhaps encodes reflects her fears that pregnancy meant always awaiting death.⁴¹

Recognising the complex layers of meaning at play in the assault on the Jewish mother raises the question ‘*what* did the Nazis set out to exterminate in the extermination of the Jews?’⁴² In the specifically prohibiting female reproductive capabilities, Nazis understood the religious as well as the metaphysical and ontological implications of their actions against the Jews procreation. For, in Jewish teachings on the feminine and the mother, the ‘woman is the one through which holiness enters the world’, she is the spiritual access and relation to God and thus the instigator and sustenance of the continuation of Judaism.⁴³ Thus, in the criminalisation of the Jewish female body, it was not the individual woman under attack, but the collective Jewish female *body-politic*. Epitomising this, Emil Fackenheim has argued that “the very concept of holiness, must be altered in response to the conjunction, unprecedented in the annals of history, of ‘birth’ and ‘crime’”, similarly recognising the religious connotations of the attack on the Jewish mother.⁴⁴ Consequently, the

³⁸ Interview with Chasia Klarman (Interview 34767), USC Visual History Archive (1997)

³⁹ Tec, *Resilience*, p.67.

⁴⁰ Interview with Nellie Ash (Interview 30733), USC Visual History Archive (1997)

⁴¹ Interview with Nellie Ash (1997)

⁴² Patterson, ‘The Nazi Assault’ p.163.

⁴³ Patterson, ‘The Nazi Assault’, p.167

⁴⁴ Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) p.87.

contours of the female body take on new layers of meaning in the testimonies and representations of the women, representing the complex interaction of being a ‘woman-as-Jew.’ The language of the women’s Shoah narratives reflects their struggle to negotiate the religious and cultural gendered beliefs of women as mothers and caregivers vis-à-vis the need to survive in a landscape of extremis and oppression. For instance, Anna B explicitly describes pregnancy as a ‘crime’.⁴⁵ Whilst Halina Laster, interned in Lodz ghetto, is preoccupied by the cultural shame of abortion.⁴⁶ After Aktions left just one doctor in Lodz, a good friend of Halina’s Father’s before the war, she recalled the ‘embarrassment’ she felt at the thought of seeing him regarding her ‘situation’, associating the termination of pregnancy with cultural disgrace. As such, she describes how her Husband arrange her for her to covertly see a Polish Christian doctor outside of the ghetto, willing to increase personal risk to maintain her social dignity.⁴⁷ Through Anna and Halina’s discussion of emotionally-charged but conflicting categories of meaning, of crime and danger juxtaposed by sin and cultural shame, we see the complexities of their choiceless choices as ‘women-as-Jews’. Survival was structured around the negotiation of pre-existing and new gendered beliefs regarding the proper use of her reproductive, maternal body.

Furthermore, listening to the women’s narratives of gender-specific trauma sheds light on the connection of racism to the assault on the Jewish Mother, which was by extension an ‘assault on the Jewish soul’.⁴⁸ When Luba speaks of the normality of violence against women in Warsaw, she mentions ‘when they saw you with [child], they think they can take their bayonet and go through your stomach. They didn’t like a woman pregnant.’⁴⁹ The stomach, the bearer of the child, is attacked simply because it is visible. When Halina L. travelled in secret to see the non-Jewish Doctor outside of Lodz Ghetto, she painfully describes “‘The only thing – what happened was, either the Doctor did it on purpose because of anti-Semitism, or maybe he was drunk, or what-ever the reason was, he perforated my uterus and I was in such agony for weeks that I have no idea how I survived it. I was screaming in pain.’⁵⁰ Whether or not the wound Halina experienced was an act of anti-Semitism or not we will not know. However, in taking the body and pain as narrative points of departure

⁴⁵ Interview with Anna Bergman (1997)

⁴⁶ Interview with Halina Laster (Interview 2023), USC Visual History Archive (1995)

⁴⁷ Interview with Halina Laster Archive (1995)

⁴⁸ Patterson, ‘The Nazi Assault’, p.174.

⁴⁹ Interview with Luba Librowitz (1997)

⁵⁰ Interview with Halina Laster (1995)

in their testimonies, it is evident that women perceived their reproductive bodies and maternal identity as source of vulnerability to perpetrators. By acknowledging that ‘cultural attitudes and discourses encoding the public meanings of bodies that have for centuries underwritten relationships of power’, it is evident that in transforming what it meant to be publicly and visibly pregnant in the ghetto, women were forced to negotiate the cultural norms of their body and identity as mothers and carers.⁵¹ Thus, the point that at which the German and non-Jewish perpetrator came into contact with the Jewish mother was frequently expressed as poignant and intimate one.

⁵¹ Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, p.50

Chapter 2: Remembering the sexualised body – ‘In the ghetto there should only have been martyrs and Joans of Arc, right?’⁵²

Do cultural norms and gendered beliefs dictate the boundaries of what is ‘acceptable’ to be remembered and discussed in official Holocaust testimonies? Why, when the Holocaust is defined by totalising horror and suffering, are intimate stories of rape and sexual vulnerability beyond the realms of articulation for many survivors and marginalised by the post-holocaust society? As chapter 1 has shown, through stories of maternal sacrifice and pain, the Holocaust was experienced and narrated by women on a distinctly intimate level. Thus, Berger encourages the significance of understanding how women narrate ‘horrors via things intimate’, in which the violation of the body, and the pain it endured and embodied, was intimately connected to their experience as victim and a survivor.⁵³ Indeed, these sanitized boundaries were challenged in an ‘intimate’ oral history interview in 1986 with one of the last remaining leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Dr Marek Edelman, in which the interviewer broached this question of the ‘appropriateness’ of discussing ghetto prostitution. Edelman’s reply, that the ghetto is often imagined only as a space for heroic ‘martyrs and Joans of Arc’, raises an important question regarding how women’s experiences of sexual violence or sexual vulnerability in the ghettos were and still are silenced by the narrative construction of the Jewish female as an ‘unproblematic victim.’⁵⁴ In response, this chapter will continue to view the body as a ‘space’ of interaction between victim and perpetrator and a complex gender-specific site of vulnerability and trauma, exploring the way that racism and sexism enmeshed in the landscape of the ghetto to give rise to issues of sexualised violence and coercive systems of sexual exchange for survival. The sexualisation of the female body was the source of great personal shame and dehumanisation for many women yet with distressing simultaneity it was for others a source of survival. The silencing of these stories emphasizes a present-day replication of oppression.

⁵² J. Stasinska and L. Weschler (trans.) *Shielding the Flame: An Intimate Conversation with Dr. Marek Edelman, the Last Surviving Leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), p.40.

⁵³ Doris L Berger, ‘What do studies of women, gender and sexuality contribute to understanding the Holocaust?’ in Goldenberg, *Different Horrors*, p.26.

⁵⁴ Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, p.125.

The most explicit violation and contestation of the body as a 'space' of Jewish women's agency is perceived through testimonies that refer to experiences of sexual violence. These memories, whether inadvertently or consciously, employed euphemistic language as a narrative strategy by some women in their retelling of sexual threats. As rape was not an explicit tool of Nazi genocide, episodes of sexualised violence were and are ostensibly harder to explain in relation to Nazi ideology due to the law of *Rassenschande* ('blood disgrace') which officially outlawed sexual relations between Aryans and Jews as an act of racial defilement.⁵⁵ This complicated survivor's personal understandings of their vulnerability to and experience of rape, as noted by one woman who stated 'they were not supposed to do that, not with *Jewish* people. But they tried.'⁵⁶ The contradiction between Nazi ideology and sexualised violence is seen to complicate Ruth A.'s retrospective attempts to explain her experience, particularly as rape of Jewish women has at times been disregarded by academics because of *Rassenschande* and the ensuing lack of Nazi documentation to provide evidence.⁵⁷ However, unlike the Nazi assault on the Jewish mother, vulnerability to rape was an experience that ranged beyond German perpetrators and Nazi ideology of the Final Solution. As sexual violence is widely recognised as a characteristic of all wartime societies, it was a point of feminine vulnerability in relation to other groups including non-German allied forces, collaborators and civilians and even Jewish men.⁵⁸

When seen through the eyes of these women, the interrelationship between shame and cultural silencing is evident, perhaps explaining the reluctance to speak about the sexualised body in comparison to the maternal. Miriam Frankel's memories of sexualised violence in Tacovo ghetto were not specifically encouraged by her Interviewer, but proffered voluntarily. She disclosed how 'drunken' Hungarian soldiers abused their authority and 'used to raid the ghetto from time to time':

'There were stories about girls being raped at different times. You could hear the singing coming closer... and shots being fired and screams and yelling... During this time, my mother – it became almost a ritual, they used to hide me under the sewing

⁵⁵ Stacy Banwell, 'Rassenschande, Genocide and the Reproductive Jewish Body: examining the use of rape and sexualized violence against Jewish women during the Holocaust?' *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 15:2, p.208.

⁵⁶ Interview with Ruth Abarbanel (Interview 17890), USC Visual History Archive (1996)

⁵⁷ Banwell, 'Rassenschande', p.210.

⁵⁸ Goldenberg, 'Sex-based violence and the Ethics of Survival', in Goldenberg, *Different Horrors*, p.99.

machine and cover the sewing machine with coverlet and I would spend hours until you could hear the noises dying down and the voices getting further and further away.

Then we would know that it is safe to get out of my hiding place again.’⁵⁹

Although Miriam herself does not endure sexual violence, her explanation of her ‘ritualistic’ response to the drunken soldiers shows that fear of her own sexual vulnerability became a habitual aspect of ghetto life, and involved her mother developing gender-specific strategy of concealment in light of the prevalence of ‘stories’ of rape. Her narrative is intimate and sensory, vividly recalling the spaces and sounds she associate with safety and danger in relation to the violation of her bodily agency. Interestingly, Miriam notes that silence surrounding acts of rape occurred immediately in her situation, recalling that ‘whenever anything like this happened, the whole ghetto was like a funeral. Nobody spoke, nobody said anything.’⁶⁰ We see, therefore, that the culture of silence surrounding sex and sexuality in the Holocaust transcends the distance from victim experience through to survivor representation. For, at the other end of the spectrum, survivor narratives of gendered experiences are sometime incongruous with the aims and direction of the historical projects, and thus are met by disinterest or lack of engagement by scholars and post-holocaust listeners. For instance, when Frieda Rosenblatt divulges a poignant sexual encounter with a German soldier, the interviewer asks no further questions, and simply asks her to elaborate on other aspects of Jewish life in the ghetto.⁶¹ This strengthens Goldenberg’s observation that forty or so years after the event, as the majority of Shoah testimonies were recorded, sex-based questions were not asked of survivors and the link between racism and sexism not realised.⁶² It reinforces need to read between the lines to dissect peripheral stories, obscured, encoded and embedded in their testimonies. For, as Eva articulates, sex-based violence in the ghetto was ‘‘an experience that haunted me all my life’, yet its significance to the consciousness and subjectivities of survivors, as both Jews and women, is unmatched by the undeveloped, peripheral status of research.’⁶³ Sally Alebarda’s second hand account of a young girl whom the Germans forcibly raped testifies to the durational impact that sex-

⁵⁹ Interview with Miriam Frankel, (Interview 54081), USC Visual History Archive (1989)

⁶⁰ Interview with Miriam Frankel 1989)

⁶¹ Interview with Freda Rosenblatt, (Interview 523), USC Visual History Archive (1995)

⁶² Goldenberg, ‘Sex-based violence’, p.116.

⁶³ Interview Eva Abrams (Interview 3492) USC Visual History Archive (1995)

based abuses had on the subjectivities of survivors. She remembered how they 'had sex with her and they brought her back to the synagogue. She went crazy. She couldn't forgive herself.'⁶⁴ Sally recalls how the violation of the female body by an Aryan man was so stigmatised that it led to madness, her physical dehumanisation central to the erosion of the psychic self.⁶⁵

Some narratives of sexualised attacks on the 'woman-as-Jew' portray the body as a site of personal shame and dehumanisation, but, conflictly, some portray this as a potential but troubling source of survival. The notion of 'sex for survival', which acknowledges that in certain scenarios women were able to 'use their bodies as commodities, as items of value to exchange for life.'⁶⁶ It was an experience that often only emerged in the subtext of some women's testimonies, hinted at or discussed in euphemistic, encoded language. Nonetheless, its occurrence introduces another layer of complexity to the moral dilemmas that ran through the bodies of some women. Weber has suggested that within these changing social hierarchies of the ghetto, understanding the 'social' and 'cultural' capital of the ghetto, which she defined as 'power related to personal contact as well as formal and informal forms of knowledge', became central to both men and women's learnt strategies of survival.⁶⁷ Countless women speak of the emergence of a system of bartering, in which women would often take responsibility for their families, even exacerbating risks by smuggling out of the ghetto, and exchanging any remaining belongings of value for extra food.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, as the ghettos were communities in flux, the value surrounding bartering also transformed in line with the increasingly desperate and chaotic system of survival.

Lucielle E.'s testimonies is one of the few that explicitly engage with this notion. Deported from Hamburg, Lucielle arrived in Lodz Ghetto with her mother and younger sister Karin. Upon her mother's death, Lucielle assumed a maternal role for Karin, and attempted to enrol her in a clandestine ghetto school at the back of a factory:

⁶⁴ Interview with Sally Alebarda (Interview 6670), USC Visual History Archive (1995)

⁶⁵ Interview with Sally Alebarda (1995)

⁶⁶ Goldenberg, 'Sex-based Violence', p.100.

⁶⁷ Weber, 'Life and Death In the Forests: Landscape Agency During the Holocaust', (ProQuest University Publishing, 2007) p.70.

⁶⁸ Smuggling and Bartering discussed by Dalia Ofer, 'Gender Issues in Diaries and Testimonies of the Ghetto', in Ofer, *Women in the Holocaust*, pp.152-162.

‘I was asked by the directors of the factories, “If I give you a place for your sister, what will you give me in return?” And I explained that I had no jewellery nor did I have money. And the answer was laughter. I did not comprehend.’⁶⁹

Further into the testimony, Lucielle explains that she later learned ‘in three years in the ghetto, that you pay for sex – you pay with sex for a favour, but I did not understand it then.’⁷⁰ The loss of one’s ‘childhood years’ is recurrent, in which the shift in the women’s feminine subjectivity from innocent, naive girls is positioned in relation to their exposure to the reality of the sexual vulnerabilities within the space of the ghetto.⁷¹ Referring back to Weber’s notion of socio-cultural ‘capital’, Lucielle’s experience demonstrates that the ghetto’s fluctuating, increasingly disordered social values had gender-specific ramifications for some women. The female body became a form of ‘social capital’ in certain context, reflecting Lucielle’s consciousness that ‘ghetto currency’ had assumed unspoken, troubling connotations.

Lucielle suggests that these propositions were not ‘not an unusual feature of ghetto for women.’⁷² She tells a story of her friend Elie who, ‘knew how to survive’, which euphemistically refers to her engagement with coercive sexual propositions with social superiors of the ghetto. Lucielle explains ‘the power [Elie] gained was the additional food, the apartment, those were the obvious gains.’⁷³ The darker subtext to Lucielle’s narrative is revealed when we see sexual vulnerability was experienced in relation to Jewish men, a ‘grey area’ in the camps dissolving boundaries of socialised normality. In her interview with the USHMM, Lucielle reclaims agency by voicing her own experience of sexual assault by Rumkowski, leader of the Jewish Judenrat in Lodz, who selected her to work in a special Kitchen in the ghetto. Her narrative is imbued with the shame she felt, but she acknowledges her reluctance to speak out at the time was motivated by the suppressed fear that Rumkowski had the ‘power’ to move her to other parts of the ghetto, potentially leaving her more vulnerable.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (interview 2001.251), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2001)

⁷⁰ Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (2001)

⁷¹ See also: Interview with Freda Rosenblatt (1995), Interview with Ruth Abarbanel (1996)

⁷² Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (2001)

⁷³ Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (2001)

⁷⁴ Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (2001)

Within the women's impressionistic testimonies of ghetto life used in this study, particular focus has been given to Lucielle's testimony due to its unusually frank and exceptionally detailed discussion of oft-marginalised gender-specific experiences of ghetto persecution and survival. The distinction owes to the wider framing and context of this particular audio-visual interview, which is not placed within dominant, androcentric master narratives of the Holocaust. Whilst it appears part of the officialised memory landscape of USHMM collection, the interview was in fact conducted by Joan Ringelheim, a historian at the forefront of pioneering feminist analysis of the Holocaust and later donated to the archive. The role and influence of Ringelheim as the interviewer gains marked significance when this testimony is compared with a previous audio-visual testimony Lucielle recorded with the VHA 5 years prior, in which notable absences and omissions of sex-based assaults, intimate relationships and Elie's sex for survival are evident upon cross-examination.⁷⁵ Her self-censorship, whether conscious or unconscious, provides a potent insight into the politics of narration in which survivors' mediation of their experience can be seen as an attempt to harmonize with dominant ideologies and discourses. This is an act of witnessing that Summerfield argues brings 'composure' and 'relative psychic ease' to traumatic narratives of the gendered self.⁷⁶ Consequently, Lucielle's later decision to reassert agency over these uneasy, sex-based traumas by taking control of and redefining the boundaries of her narration discerns the interviewer's potential to unearth new, meaningful directions of enquiry *if* the framing of the oral history project allows so. Ultimately, High contends that effective oral histories should foster collaboration between interviewer and interviewee, in turn 'wrestling with the past and its legacies' particularly in vis-à-vis the controversial integration of gender and Holocaust studies.⁷⁷ Thus, the link between the *present* memorial landscape on survivors' reconstructions of the *past* will be the subject of the final chapter.

⁷⁵ Value of inconsistencies explored by Roseman, 'Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony', *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, Vol.8, 1 (1999) pp.1-20.

⁷⁶ Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1:1 (2004) p.67-69

⁷⁷ Steven C. High (eds.), *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence Shared* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015) p.15.

Chapter 3: Memory and the Jewish female Body—‘The times have changed[...]twenty years ago, we didn’t talk about it. It’s very painful to go public with something you’re not proud of.’⁷⁸

Towards the end of Lucielle Eichengreen’s testimony for the USHMM, Ringelheim questioned why she had not spoken about certain experiences, for example of her sexual assault, in intervening 60 years since the event. Lucielle had presented her life-narrative of the Holocaust in various mediums, many times, at various stages of her life: in person as she tried to speak out amidst the culture of silence surrounding survivors in the 1940s and 1950s, speaking publicly at post-Holocaust remembrance events, in her written autobiography *From Ashes to Life* and in the audio-visual testimony for USHMM. Yet, crucially, the amount she told (or chosen not to tell) varied. Lucielle E’s oral testimony, reflecting on the ‘pain’ of going public with difficult stories that do not fit with the ‘public norms of versions of the past’, introduces an additional layer of complexity to the discussion of women’s experiences of the ghetto.⁷⁹ This provides a window into the intrinsic and inseparable relationship of oral testimony from present-day discourse’s regarding gender and the holocaust, which will be problematised in this final chapter. Within popular landscapes of Holocaust remembrance, the tendency to portray female survivors as either passive, unproblematic victims or as resistant, communal networks of mothers and sisters has engendered a heroic master narrative of women in ghettos.⁸⁰ This has obscured the darker reality of survival that more aptly characterised life for others. As Langer has suggested ‘to valorise the one whilst disregarding the other is little more than an effort to truth with myth.’⁸¹ Indeed, until it is recognised that ‘the cultural meanings assigned to particular bodies affects the kinds of stories people can tell’, popular Holocaust remembrance will remain incongruent with the framing of the female body evident in these women’s Shoah testimonies, in which it takes a central and important place within their memory of the ghetto life and suffering as a *Jewish woman*.⁸²

⁷⁸ Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (interview 2001.251), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2001)

⁷⁹ High, *Beyond Testimony and Trauma*, p.19.

⁸⁰ Gurewitsch, Brana. (ed) *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women* (USA: The University of Alabama Press, 1998).

⁸¹ Langer, ‘Gendered Suffering?’ p.355.

⁸² Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, p.51

Lucielle E's consciously constructed and mediated narrative representation of ghetto life reflects what Langer describes as 'the troubled interaction between past and present', which has the potential to produce 'complex layers of memory' that give rise to multiple 'versions of the self'.⁸³ Most notably, in her published autobiography *From Ashes to Life* she does not discuss her unwanted sexual encounters with Rumkowski, and other more taboo issues such as references to her friend Elli's sex for survival, are mentioned only implicitly and ambiguously.⁸⁴ In her VHA testimony, Lucielle conceals her own experience of sexual abuse, and instead briefly and ambiguously mentions the presence of sex-based abuses within the ghetto in relation to other people.⁸⁵ Removing first-person narrative intimacy, and adopting the removed perspective of the 'casual onlooker' is common in women's Shoah testimonies.⁸⁶ Thus, it would appear that Lucielle's narrative reconstructions are not uncommon, reflecting her early reluctance to depart from cultural norms and the language boundaries of 'appropriate femininity.'⁸⁷ For instance, popular Holocaust remembrance has transformed Anne Frank into 'the paradigm of the accessible Holocaust witness.'⁸⁸ Yet, Ephgrave importantly notes 'it was references to sexuality and Anne Frank's body that were edited out of her infamous diary', suggesting their incompatibility with public expectations.⁸⁹

Cole's study of oral testimonies demonstrates that survivors replace and reposition the self and others when imparting traumatic stories. The presence of spatial (re)constructions in survivors' narrative reflects their efforts to gain composure over inexpressible ordeals and appears to be significant in relation to issues of gender, trauma and public discourse also.⁹⁰ For instance, Rena Goldberg was living in Radom Ghetto, Poland, when she married her Husband in April 1942 and soon after became pregnant. Yet, the first time Rena relayed her experience of her ghetto life to the Interviewer, her pregnancy was absent from the discussion. This interview followed the typical structure of Holocaust testimony interview, a framework that High suggests has become 'familiar' with 'conventional forms and rhetoric' and as such the redemptive master narrative of

⁸³ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 1991) p. xv.

⁸⁴ Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994)

⁸⁵ Eichengreen L., interviewed by Dora Sorell, USC Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archives, Jan 12 1996, Interview 10893.

⁸⁶ Goldenberg, 'Sex-based violence', p.121.

⁸⁷ Ephgrave, 'On Women's Bodies', p.20.

⁸⁸ Zoe Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, p.128-130

⁸⁹ Ephgrave, 'On Women's Bodies', p.15.

⁹⁰ Tim Cole, '(Re)Placing the Past: Spatial Strategies of Retelling Difficult Stories', *Oral History Review*, Vol.42, 1 (2015) p.30-49.

the VHA interviews ends with more reflective, reflexive questions.⁹¹ The interviewer asked her ‘When you reflected on your experiences prior to coming here what do you think was the most difficult?’ to which Rena G responds ‘the loss of our child’. After initial reluctance, we learn that Rena and her Husband choose not to have an abortion in the hope the war was soon to be over, but when they realised this was far from the reality and Rena’s pregnancy made her vulnerable, it was too late to abort normally:

‘And so they took out the child with instruments. The child was alive. It was a little girl. And he asked me “Did I want to see it?” and I said no because it was plenty [inaudible] that he would give the baby injection straight away because the baby was alive. So it was a very... it was a traumatic thing for me. It was too, the pain was incredible.’⁹²

Her decision to pinpoint this as ‘the most tragic thing that happened to me during the war’, leaves the listener questioning why she would, consciously or unconsciously, omit such a major memory from her initial narrative. It shows the complexity between recalling a personal trauma and presenting the experience as an acceptable gendered norm. Her choiceless-choice to kill her new-born child places Rena within a ‘climate of anti-mothering’ which sits in conflict with the dominant narrative of the ‘Jewish Heroine’ as the unwavering, sacrificial mother-figure.⁹³

For Clara Horowitz’s, the inability to fulfil her roles as a mother result in an immediate acts of self-censorship as she felt ashamed to reveal the truth regarding the fate of her child. She recalls with pained emotion how she had placed her child in the care of a Polish civilian family outside of the ghetto, but found out a week later the child had died with no explanation. She admitted to the interviewer, ‘And later they both, the polish, they asked me, ‘what happened to the baby? what’s happened to the baby?’ I said the baby was dead, I didn’t give birth to a child that was alive.’⁹⁴ In the same manner, Lucielle E.’s decision to erase intimate, painful details of sexual assault was the result of her shame with which she ‘agonised for years’. She suggests she a fear of the reaction of others, suggesting she should have:

⁹¹ High, *Beyond Testimony and Trauma*, p.3.

⁹² Interview with Rena Goldberg (Interview 19221), USC Visual History Archive (1996)

⁹³ Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, p.141.

Jewish Heroine explored by Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998) pp.143-150.

⁹⁴ Interview with Clara Horowitz (Interview 5981), USC Visual History Archive (1995)

‘Maybe I should have run away. Maybe I should have slapped him. I don’t know. Maybe I should have done something. Its difficult to say, but that’s why I didn’t write it...I agonised with that for years.’⁹⁵

Ultimately, whether they reconstructed their testimonies retrospectively or instantly, these examples of narrative agency demonstrate the women’s need to ‘create meaning’ through personal selection and filtering of their memories, in turn renegotiating and easing their troubled relationship with the past through the stories they choose to tell.⁹⁶

However, we must question *why* women felt that their stories were not suitable to tell? How much agency did women actually have to tell their own stories when recording audio-visual tapes? Archival institutions such as the Shoah Foundation’s VHA and USHMM, whilst appearing more unmediated than constructed mediums of popular memory like museum and film, give survivors limited influence over the stories they choose to tell. Embedded in a vast large-scale audio-visual project, the survivors become part of politics of witnessing in which collective storytelling takes preponderance over individual stories and inevitably means testimonies will be diffracted through the institution’s own ideal of how oral histories should be conducted, framed and received by the listener.⁹⁷ This has the potential to produce ‘depersonalized discourses of knowledge and power’, disregarding Langer’s observation oral histories sources are both historical and human documents in which the diversity of the personal autobiographical subject should be acknowledged.⁹⁸ For instance, Shenker encourages us to acknowledge that creation of the Shoah Foundation in 1994 was the outgrowth of Stephen Spielberg’s cinematic project *Shindler’s list*, which he argues is both problematic and ‘distressing’ when one realises that this results in the implicit framing of testimony around ‘redemptive and accessible narratives over anti-redemptive, impenetrable accounts’, a typical implication of the Americanisation of the Holocaust.⁹⁹ In one interview from the VHA surveyed, the woman explicitly roots her narrative in accessible tropes of memory, as she explained how she taught her daughter to hide from the

⁹⁵ Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (2001)

⁹⁶ Bos, ‘Women and the Holocaust’, p.31.

⁹⁷ Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, p.4

⁹⁸ Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* p.8-9.

⁹⁹ Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, p.8-9.

Germans 'like in the movie, Spielberg's movie, [crying] when they show a little child going under the bed.'¹⁰⁰ Her reference to 'cultural frames of reference' demonstrates both an explicit awareness of the expectations and knowledge of her audience and the way that her testimony fits in (or does not fit in) to popularised portrayals of women and mothers in ghettos.¹⁰¹

Gigliotti has alerted that whilst emotional geographies, like this oral history analysis, are beginning to advance, they are rarely put in context in terms of 'place'.¹⁰² However, in locating the Jewish female body, both individually and collectively, as a site of gender-specific attack between perpetrator and victim, it can also be located as a key 'place' of emotional and embodied memory. The locational relationship between memory and perceptions of the body is epitomised in the testimony of Riva Thatch, in which the centrality of the body as a site of trauma and as a catalyst of embodied memory is explicit.¹⁰³ Whilst in Kovno ghetto, like many of the women aforementioned, Riva fell pregnant and learnt to survive by negotiating the visibility of her pregnant body vis-à-vis the boundaries of the ghetto. For instance, when explaining life within the ghetto, Riva's language centers around fear and concealment, vividly relaying the clothes she wore to render her pregnant body undistinguishable. Yet, when she would smuggle over to the Lithuanian side, Riva explained that visible pregnancy became an advantage and gave her with the possibility of receiving more sympathy when bartering for food to support her family. Poignantly, the impact of this attack on her motherhood resulted in a life-long obsession with concealment of her maternal female body:

'I found a way not to show that I was pregnant. I found a way to walk and to hold my stomach in. As a matter of fact, I was like that not only this time [ref. to pregnancy with Aviva in Kovno] but when I was pregnant with my second daughter. For some reason I decided that I shouldn't show even though we were *free*. And if this wasn't enough, when I became pregnant with my son in the United States I did not want anybody to know, and I hid it even then. I found a way to walk and hold in even a baby that weighted 9lbs.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Riva Thatch (Interview 25957), USC Visual History Archive (1995)

¹⁰¹ Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure' p.87-88.

¹⁰² Simone Gigliotti, 'A mobile Holocaust? Rethinking Testimony with cultural geography', in Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca (eds.) *Hitler's Geographies: The Spatialities of the Third Reich* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016) p.341.

¹⁰³ Interview with Riva Thatch (1995)

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Riva Thatch (1995)

For many women like Riva, resettlement and the return to normal life after the war meant the re-introduction to pre-war gender roles and socialisations.¹⁰⁵ Yet, whilst Riva notes her embrace of her newly reclaimed identity as a mother and a wife, she simultaneously reveals that effect of the Nazi assault on motherhood is so internalised that she continues to bear witness to its effects. This partial liberation, in which she struggles to let go of her body's vulnerability as the carrier of the next generation, testifies to her unhealed relationship to her identity as a *Jewish female* survivor and the assaults she endured.

¹⁰⁵ Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: Feminist interpretation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2017) p.145.

Conclusion – ‘She refuses to let her body become simply a monument of pain, inscribed by the Nazis. She writes about her body as it is, scarred but not totally defeated.’¹⁰⁶

Through the eyes and words of female survivors, this dissertation has presented an emotional microgeography of life in the Nazi-controlled ghettos, contributing to the re-examination of the role of gender within Jewish women’s experience and testimonies. As the Germans rewrote the urban landscape of Occupied Eastern Europe through the control of space, they exercised control over and transformed women’s relationship with most intimate of all spaces, her body. The collective assault on Jewish motherhood and the more taboo, but prevalent attacks on the sexual vulnerability of the victims by a multitude of perpetrators, German and otherwise, gave rise complex and troublesome gender-specific strategies of survival. Thus, it has demonstrated that women’s reproductive and sexualised bodies became a central feature of their experience of Nazi persecution in the ghettos, and subsequently a central feature of their narrative representation of ghetto trauma. Moreover, Waxman notes that post-war life did not bring complete psychological ease for the woman-as-Jew, as ‘it marked, in fact, a self-conscious attempt to reset the clock; to return to the gender norms and gender roles of a pre-Holocaust period.’¹⁰⁷ Thus we see that, until recently, gender-specific, unsuited narratives of sexuality, abortion, rape and survival lay beyond the boundaries of appropriate of articulation in many post-Holocaust settings.

As Lucielle poignantly points out, ‘The Holocaust has become a matter of scholarly research, of history, and it is viewed differently than it is viewed by those who were there’, but soon there will be no remaining survivors to correct our increasingly institutionalised approach to Holocaust remembrance.¹⁰⁸ This resonates Langer’s observation that oral testimony should be treated as an human document as much as historical ones. This intimate and discursive engagement with the narrative agency of the survivors, foregrounding the significance of the stories they can (and cannot) tell, has aimed to demonstrate the potential of survivor oral

¹⁰⁶ Remmler, ‘Gender Identities’, p.175.

¹⁰⁷ Waxman, *Women and the Holocaust*, p.145

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Lucielle Eichengreen (2001)

histories in reimagining the boundaries of female experience. Rather than widening scope, this approach to post-Holocaust listening has scaled in, recognising the significance of 'horrors via things intimate' for revealing the taboo, and silenced subtexts that often lay beneath dominant memories and master narratives.¹⁰⁹ By reimagining the boundaries of female experience beyond the dominant master narrative of the Jewish heroine and sacrificial mother, the realities of survival within ghetto landscapes become becomes more complex, dynamic and inclusive. Thus, whilst oral history may be limited for traditional spatial histories, they have been shown to provide an alternate insight into the mental emotional mapping and imaginative reconstructions of how the body as a space of persecution and gender-specific survival was experienced, imagined and remembered by the woman-as-Jew.

¹⁰⁹ Doris L Berger, 'What do studies of women, gender and sexuality contribute to understanding the Holocaust?' p.26.

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