Sex for Life: Conditions that Necessitated Sexual Barter in the Holocaust

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Politics, religion, sex. Some topics are so difficult to discuss that they have been relegated to the category of taboo. One problem with taboo subjects is they are often used by perpetrators to simultaneously abuse and silence victims. Perpetrators count on society to, at best, frown at their mention and, at worst, revictimize those who dare to speak out. Two major topics that are notoriously difficult to discuss are the Holocaust and sexual abuse. What happens when they are combined and a third component – sexual economy – is introduced? To many, this inclusion justifies the opinion that since the sex was voluntary, the "victim" was complicit and is the one to blame for any harm incurred.

This paper aims to investigate the current literature surrounding the use of sexual barter by women in the Holocaust. Since few survivors remain, we probably cannot expect those who are left to speak out about their sexual experiences. We are, however, left with an abundance of survivor testimonies that mention controversial activities undertaken to survive unspeakable conditions. Those who spoke out

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did so knowing society may not approve of their actions, yet they risked judgement anyway so that their story would be told.

Historian Anna Hájková states that no first-person testimony exists "from women who engaged in instrumental sex."[1] She says, "When survivors mention pragmatic motives in relationships or sexual encounters, they are typically describing other people's actions, seldom their own."[2] Since researchers rely on survivor testimony, and those testimonies are often fraught with shame, I analyze narratives for language that may be an attempt to circumvent stigma. My goal is not to rewrite documented histories but, rather, to view the stories through a lens that is compassionate and open-minded enough to consider the possibility that the encounter or others like it contained a bartering element. Would we view these stories differently if we knew sexual barter was involved? If so, why?

This paper will begin with a discussion of existing scholarship on the topic, primarily as it relates to shame and stigma. Most scholarship is relatively new since discussions of sexuality were not commonplace in the decades immediately following the Holocaust. The paper will then examine survivor testimonies and representation through a 21st century lens that better understands – even if only slightly – the many facets of sexual trauma survival. My goal is to destigmatize the use of sexual barter and put into perspective its use as the survival tactic that it is.

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1 Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2013, pp. 503–533.

2 Ibid.

Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel's *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* is a collection of women's stories of various facets of sexual violence in the Holocaust. In the introduction, the editors acknowledge the relative lack of evidence compared to what we may be accustomed to seeing in historical research. There is very little hard data but, they say, there is "a solid core of testimonies and memoirs by victims and witnesses that serve as evidence. In the absence of official documents, we must accept that a large number of testimonies by victims and witnesses do constitute documentation and proof, however subjective and personal they may be."[3] Holocaust historian Anna Hájková offers guidance on how to study these testimonies. She says we should "look at narratives... for their form, emotionality, stress and omissions, and narrativity" to answer questions about how taboos are defined, created, maintained, and transmitted.[4]

Considering the events of the Holocaust occurred approximately 80 years ago and given that there has been plenty of time and opportunity to gather data, there is relatively little information available about sexual violence or barter during the Holocaust. Much of the literature begins by acknowledging this unfortunate fact and goes on to explain that discussions of sexuality with Holocaust survivors have largely been silenced by shame on the part of the victim, and stigmatization by society. Nomi Levenkron argues that counting the dead is still easier than counting sexual abuse victims since skeletons are more

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3 Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010.

4 Farges Patrick et al., "Forum: Holocaust and the History of Gender and Sexuality," *German History*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2018, pp. 78–100.

tangible and visible.[5] She says it is nearly impossible, especially this long after the war, to determine how many people were subjected to sexual acts against their will. She says, "...the living women who were raped hide, for they fear the stigma that is likely to cling to them if they reveal what was done to them."[6]

When the war was over and men were brought to trial to answer for their crimes – of which rape was only sometimes considered when "ancillary to other crimes" – the justice system did not jump at the opportunity to convict perpetrators.[7] In some cases, like in the Tokyo court where Japanese war criminals were tried, rape was not even considered a crime but more of a "transgression of the rules of engagement."[8] The lack of justice from the courts only served to embolden perpetrators and legitimize their actions. Meanwhile, survivors who wanted to tell their stories were left to suffer alone and in silence. A survivor's memories and pain belong not only to the individual but to the collective community. By speaking about their traumatic experiences, survivors force their communities to acknowledge the trauma involved as well. Speaking turns "a painful personal trauma into a mortal blow to national pride."[9] If a single person does not want to admit being sexually assaulted, an entire nation certainly would not.

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5 Nomi Levenkron, "Death and the Maidens: 'Prostitution,' Rape, and Sexual Slavery during World War II," in Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.) *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 13–28.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Levenkron explains how shame was used as a "social weapon" to keep victims from discussing their experiences.[10] Many women spent their entire lives deeply loving their communities so, to avoid being told that their sexuality had been dishonored by sex with the enemy (whether voluntary or forced.), they would rather risk suffering in silence than bring disgrace to themselves, their family, and their name.[11] In some cases, women who were raped were considered "worthy of condemnation" and "the real enemy" for not having chosen suicide in the face of an impending assault.[12] Had the woman "chosen" and admitted to sexual barter, the vilification likely would have been far worse.

Leading trauma expert and psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk writes about shame in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*. He says that after a person has experienced something as horrible as trauma, it can be nearly impossible to trust oneself or others ever again.[13] These immovable barriers may be one reason why trauma survivors attempt to rewrite their histories. By denying an event occurred the way it did, a person can lead themselves and others to believe there is nothing to be ashamed of and, therefore, no reason for barriers in relationships to exist. He says, "It's hard enough to face the suffering that has been inflicted by others, but deep down, many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances. They despise themselves for how terrified, dependent, excited, or enraged they felt."[14]

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin, New York, 2014.

14 Ibid.

In her article on forced prostitution in the Warsaw ghetto, Katarzyna Person says that victims were not only ashamed to speak of sexually violent events, but this shame was reinforced by researchers who "could not, or perhaps for various reasons did not want to, ask directly about sexual abuse."[15] Of all the atrocities that occurred in the Holocaust, sexual abuse is sometimes still too difficult even for researchers to address. As a result, a Holocaust survivor – as with any survivor of sexual abuse – receives the message that their sexual abuse stories are "too much" for society to acknowledge, too shameful to attach themselves to, or that their experience was simply insignificant. These perceptions further marginalized and silenced women.

Holocaust researcher Katya Gusarov emphasizes that with sexual barter, the term "voluntary" is problematic since it implies that the woman had a choice that was not greatly or entirely influenced by her circumstances as a prisoner in the war. She goes on to emphasize that women did have agency and "even in the most restricted circumstances, women could make decisions."[16] This concept can be difficult to grasp. After all, it seems sex must have been one or the other. But this is not a binary matter. In the Holocaust setting, a woman could have had sex she did not want, and it still not be considered rape because she chose to do it to stay alive. In such cases, sex should not be viewed from a moralistic standpoint but, rather, as a simple and readily available alternative to death.

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15 Katarzyna Person, "Sexual Violence during the Holocaust – The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Shofar*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2015, pp. 103–121.

16 Katya Gusarov, "Sexual Barter and Jewish Women's Efforts to Save their Lives: Accounts from the Righteous Among the Nations Archives," *German History*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2021, pp. 100–111.

Hájková states in an article on the sexual economy of the Theresienstadt ghetto that sexual barter always contains an element of choice, something rape does not have. Even if the rapist "reward[s]" the victim after the assault, she was not offered a choice and it is therefore not barter."[17] In another article, Hájková defines sexual barter as "an exchange of sex or affection for resources or protection," and that it "was a means by which Holocaust victims sought to ensure their survival as well as an expression of agency."[18] She reiterates that even violent sexual encounters could be considered barter instead of rape if the encounter contained an element of agency.

In the article, Hájková describes some of the more difficult stories of survival that occurred with marginalized prisoners such as homosexuals. Hájková states that sexual barter and queer practices were somehow thought to lessen the integrity and suffering of Holocaust victims. Those survivors endured an additional degree of shame and stigma as their stories were considered "unworthy" of being told, and were overshadowed by those of more "morally pure" individuals.[19] By dismissing stories of sexual barter, history is deprived of important lessons about power hierarchies and alternative means of human survival.

In another article on sex work in the Holocaust, the story of one survivor who sold sex to feed her sick family members raises questions about the shamefulness of sexual barter and the suggestion that her actions

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17 Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2013, pp. 503–533.

18 Anna Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter and the Holocaust," *German History,* Vol. 39, No. 1, 2021, pp. 112–133.

19 Ibid.

require forgiveness. In her efforts to investigate the nature of stigmatization of sexual barter in the Holocaust, Hájková points out that sex work as labor in ordinary circumstances maintains some similarities as far as who has or would have chosen this lifestyle. She also acknowledges that, no matter how much researchers seek out information of that time, two facts remain: sex work viewed as labor inherently differs from sex work in life and death circumstances.[20] The stories that would have given researchers insight into the conditions that necessitated sexual barter will never be heard since many of the storytellers were silenced by stigma and shame and have already died.

Stigma was not only handed out by readers of narratives after the war, but by survivors themselves while still in the camps. In *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, authors Carol Rittner and John K. Roth include a story by Giselle Perl, a Hungarian gynecologist and prisoner working in Auschwitz. Perl tells of being shocked by the practice of sex work in the camps – sexual encounters usually taking place in the "fetid atmosphere of the latrine." Perl says her "pride, [her] integrity as a woman revolted against the very idea" until she herself was struck by a sexually transmitted infection. In her position as a doctor, she saw that the items bartered for – food, clothing, shoes – were items that kept women alive. Keeping women alive was her job and she realized that through sex work, these women were doing their part in keeping themselves out of the crematorium. Perl says, "I began to understand – to forgive."[21] Forgiveness implies wrongdoing, and one might ask if

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20 Anna Hájková, "Why we need a history of prostitution in the Holocaust," *European Review of History*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2022, pp. 194–222.

21 Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Paragon House, New York, 1993.

Perl broke through both stigma toward others and personal shame by experiencing conditions that forced her to acknowledge the necessity of sexual barter for survival.

Esther Dror and Ruth Linn write about how shame has caused some women to tell their stories of sexual abuse by claiming the events they discuss happened to someone else, but never them. They write of a young woman named "Leah" who arrived in Auschwitz in 1944 and was then transferred to Bergen-Belsen and a German armament factory before being liberated in April 1945. She and her friends were then sent to a displaced persons camp, and Leah eventually wrote a book about her experiences with sexual abuse in the Holocaust. The book contains interviews by her co-author and recounts her friends' experiences with "sex as a survival resource."[22] She tells of a friend who was sick but taken in and cared for by a wealthy man. The friend had sex with the man as well as his son in return for the care she received. Leah goes on to explain how she was offered a similar proposal by the factory manager but declined and found an "alternate way of obtaining medicine" for her sick mother.[23]

Leah recounts another instance when a man offered her a spoon which she initially understood was a gift. But when the man asked, "'When will we meet?' I then comprehended what it was about and I throw the spoon at him and run off." In another account, American soldiers would look to liberated women for companionship and sex, and the women

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22 Esther Dror and Ruth Linn, "The Shame is Always There," in Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.) *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 275–291.

23 Ibid.

would oblige in exchange for chocolate and silk stockings. She then mentions a Polish song about a woman getting a pat of margarine for giving kisses. "That's what I heard. Anything more about sex – I haven't a clue."[24]

In some cases, sex workers did more than sexually please men or attain goods. In *Ravensbrück*, author Sarah Helm describes how, in 1942, Himmler charged Doctor Sigmund Rascher with finding a way to "revive sailors and airmen pulled out of freezing seas." In an experiment, Rascher arranged to have eight men submerged in freezing water, then each one put into a bed unconscious with one female "prostitute" on each side of him. Blankets covered the three and, when the man eventually warmed up and regained consciousness, he found himself in bed with two naked women. In some cases, the men had sex with the women, which raised their body temperature quicker than if they were alone, but in no case was the experiment more effective than thick blankets and a hot bath.[25] These women were forced to have intimate relations with half-frozen strange men to satisfy the curiosity of sadistic Nazis.

A documentary titled *Love It Was Not* is about a Jewish woman in Auschwitz named Helena Citron. During her time as a prisoner, an Austrian SS officer named Franz Wunsch claimed to have been in love with Helena, treating her with obsessive care. Wunsch was very kind to Helena, her sister Roza, and the other women in her barracks. He gave Helena food, clothes, shoes, sheets – saved her life in many ways. The other women relate the stories: "You could see his love for her. I don't know what she was giving him in return." Another survivor states, "I don't

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24 Ibid.

25 Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück*, Doubleday, New York, 2014.

know what kind of relationship they had." As with many other stories of sexual barter, the reporting of relationships such as these tends to leave out the sexual aspects, with the reason behind the preferential treatment seemingly a mystery.[26]

In the same documentary, Wunsch himself is interviewed in 2003 in what appears to be a garden-like backyard. Wunsch tells his stories, calling Helena his "friend" and "girlfriend," and stating that his boss Kreitzer knew of the relationship and condoned it, saying she was beautiful and "she must have some Aryan blood." Even Josef Mengele knew of the relationship and, uncharacteristically, punished neither of them.[27]

Of Wunsch, one female survivor featured in the documentary says, "He never did anything bad to us. Towards the men, the male prisoners, he was a real sadist." Later, in 1972, Helena was asked to testify at Wunsch's trial. She was asked about her relationship and testified truthfully that Wunsch had been kind and saved her and her sister's life. As a result, Wunsch was found not guilty. Toward the end of the documentary, the other female interviewees state that, after the trial, Helena no longer talked about Wunsch. She was married with kids and had moved on with her life. Helena called her relationship with Wunsch a "little fling," and a "passing infatuation." Love it was not.[28]

Details of their affair beyond a kiss or two were not disclosed in the documentary. What is mentioned by another survivor, though, is that Wunsch was Helena's first love. She was young and had an opportunity

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26 *Love It Was Not*, directed by Maya Sarfaty, performed by Helena Citron, Roza Citron, and Franz Wunsch, Greenwich Entertainment, 2020.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

for preferential treatment for herself, her family, and her friends. In any circumstance, if a young woman is given attention and adoration by an attractive man, she will likely come to feel she is special and deduce that she may even be loved. Whether Helena actually loved Wunsch in the 1940s, the 1970s, or on the day of her death in 2005, or if it was all a ruse to merely stay alive, is irrelevant. Aspects of her relationship with him undoubtedly kept her alive in body, spirit, or both.

Of course, we have no way of knowing what really occurred between Helena and Wunsch beyond what their testimonies tell us. It would be unethical to speculate that their relationship was anything more than what we are told, or that Helena or the other female survivors participated in any other sexual barter (for instance, with Kreitzer or Mengele) to warrant favor for the group. What we do know is that survivors must not only survive in the moment, but in the aftermath as well, and it is possible that one or all of the women agreed on an "acceptable" version and took other details to their graves.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van der Kolk tells of the "speechless horror" of trauma and how crafting a coherent narrative is "almost impossible to articulate." He says, "sooner or later most survivors [of trauma] ...come up with what many of them call their 'cover story' that offers some explanation for their symptoms and behavior for public consumption. These stories, however, rarely capture the inner truth of the experience."[29] Perhaps stories of sexual barter are not cleaned up out of shame but rather out of the mind's inability to fully process and communicate what occurred.

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29 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin, New York, 2014.

Thanks to the testimony of countless Holocaust survivors, almost a century later, researchers have become increasingly familiar with the depravity and horrors endured in concentration camps. Of course, no one has a right to judge the actions any prisoner took to stay alive under those conditions, but when sexual matters arise, so do the walls of shame and stigma. As we have seen in the literature, sexual barter is an area obscured by the judgement of oneself and others, and this judgement caused many survivors to withhold those details to avoid further traumatization of rejection, punishment, or perhaps even death meted out by their own community.

By analyzing nuances in survivor narratives, researchers can uncover data crucial to understanding the connections between extreme trauma and survival. Through modern trauma research, we have a better understanding of how bodies and minds react to sexually violent experiences than we did 80 years ago. As therapy and discussions about sexual assault have become more commonplace, researchers must remember that Holocaust testimonies were written at a time when these traumas were not discussed at all. This means there may be information written indirectly that researchers have yet to discover. If the use of sexual barter were viewed as resourceful rather than shameful, survivors who employed sexual barter strategies – in the Holocaust and any survival situation – would no longer need to hide but could instead be as proud of their wit and courage as any other survivor is encouraged to be.

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