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Placing Women in the Revolt: Gender and the History and Memory of Resistance at Treblinka

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The Treblinka revolt has received extensive scholarly attention, though little of this work considers the resistance actions of women prisoners. In this article, I use spatial methods to reveal how Jews at Treblinka created three examples of what I term ‘places of resistance’ and how women supported each. Critically, this article demonstrates how studying these locations highlights the roles of women in resistance up to and including the famous uprising. Taking analyses of gender and memory further, I also examine how our scant knowledge of women’s lives at Treblinka prompts consideration of archival silences, masculinity, and oral history practice.

On the afternoon of 2 August 1943, Jewish women and men trapped in the extermination camp Treblinka II rose up against their guards, set the camp ablaze, and made for the fields and towns beyond the fences. In the lead-up to that moment, resistance fighters were to gather stolen weapons from predetermined spaces throughout the camp and be ready for the signal at their assigned spot. Shortly before most were ready, however, one of the most feared and despised SS guards grabbed two prisoners and began marching them to an execution site. Unwilling to allow the murder of these comrades so close to the appointed hour – and in fear that they might give up the plan – prisoners fired on the guard. Those shots, believed by many to be the awaited signal, touched off the revolt at least one hour early.¹ While survivor accounts of the frantic last moments at Treblinka vary greatly, all agree that the result of the early start was chaos. With many prisoners not yet armed or in their attack positions, the all-too-intricate plan collapsed. Still, the camp burned, and many prisoners managed to flee.²

While many people are at least broadly familiar with the events of the Treblinka revolt, the roles of Jewish women in the uprising – and even the basic facts of their very existence at the camp – have received far less attention. Spatial and social network analysis approaches to Treblinka survivor statements, trial investigation testimonies, and oral histories highlight prisoner efforts to create and safeguard ‘places of resistance’ at the camp. Examining social networks in tandem with geographies in a tightly and lethally regulated place such as Treblinka reveals which prisoner relationships – functioning as links in a chain – provided access to materials and locations important to Jewish perseverance and later revolt. Members of the ‘Organizing Committee’, the group of inmates in charge of

¹ Abram Kolski, Interview 49970. Tape 5 of 8, 03:00–13:20. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 29 July 1999. Accessed 17 Sept. 2020; survivor Richard Glazar in: Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 239.

² Samuel Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1984), 182–83; Samuel Willenberg, ‘I Survived Treblinka,’ in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*, ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Waldon Press, 1979), 189–213, 210; Samuel Rajzman, ‘The End of Treblinka,’ in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*, ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Waldon Press, 1979), 231–51, 244; Abraham Kolski, Oral history interview RG-50.030.0113, transcript 11, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive (hereafter HOHA), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter USHMM), 29 Mar. 1990. Accessed 18 Apr. 2015.

resistance planning, carved out and protected these places to expand their combined access to camp geography through efforts to control the perceptions and movements of German SS and Trawniki guards.³ Discerning the importance of these places, in turn, highlights the pivotal roles of Jewish women in resistance at Treblinka. The same sources that demonstrate prisoner efforts to define and control places in Treblinka, meanwhile, provide opportunities to consider the gendered nature of both resistance at the camp and its memory, particularly in the oral history recordings of male survivors.

Attention to three specific places of resistance, below, helps reveal the experiences of Jewish women at Treblinka while underscoring their roles in resistance and their subsequent disappearance from later histories and narratives. The first of these, the official camp infirmary and a storage building, when examined side by side, reveal prisoner plans to save lives and safeguard participants in the eventual revolt. Focusing next on the camp kitchen helps to understand prisoner plans for arms distribution before the uprising and how women played a vital, if seldom discussed, role in this part of the plan. Finally, an unvarnished look at a previously unknown camp brothel, or site of forced sexual exploitation, shows how women co-conspirators used this place to acquire weapons at or before the scheduled time of the fighting. Each of these places demonstrates the roles of women prisoners in resistance and how their actions have (and largely have not) been remembered.

How little we know about Jewish women's roles in each of these locations is a key point of this research. Each of these places – and our knowledge of them in the present – has been profoundly impacted by gender beliefs of those present at the time as well as later survivors and historians. Gender norms not only helped keep these places safe from the suspicion of guards, they also worked to conceal the very existence of women in Treblinka in both the later testimonies of male survivors and succeeding historical texts.

Treblinka Historiography

Secondary literature focused on Treblinka is nearly as old as the camp itself, but to-date very little work specifically addresses space or the lives of Jewish women prisoners. Working with Rachel Auerbach inside the Warsaw Ghetto, escapee Abraham Krzepicki was likely the first Treblinka survivor to complete a chronicle of his experiences at the camp.⁴ Vasily Grossman's *The Hell of Treblinka* (1944) was the first account by an individual not personally present at Treblinka while it operated.⁵

Grossman's work was completed in the immediate aftermath of events, and therefore had the advantage of the freshness of memory for the witnesses he was able to find, though this was a very small selection of Treblinka survivors and local non-Jewish Poles – none of them women. Later works, such as Konnilyn Feig's *Hitler's Death Camps*, Chris Webb and Michael Chocholaty's *The Treblinka Death Camp* (2014), Manfred Burba's *Treblinka: Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der 'Aktion Reinhard'*, and Witold Chrostowski's *Extermination Camp Treblinka* had access to far more survivor witnesses than were available to Grossman as the war still raged across Europe.⁶ Alexander Donat's *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* (1979), Gitta Sereny's *Into That*

³ Organizing Committee is a term of the prisoners' own invention, see: Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 274–77; Richard Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence: Survival in Treblinka* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 110–12.

⁴ Abraham Krzepicki, 'Eighteen Days in Treblinka,' in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*, ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Waldon Press, 1979), 77–145.

⁵ Vasily Grossman, *The Hell of Treblinka*, Reprint Edition (Lexington, KY: Martin Zwinkler, 2015).

⁶ Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*; Konnilyn G. Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness* (New York: Holmes and Meir Publishers, 1981); Chris Webb and Michal Chocholaty, *The Treblinka Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2014); Manfred Burba, *Treblinka: Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der 'Aktion Reinhard'* (Goettingen: Pachnicke, 1995); Witold Chrostowski, *Extermination Camp Treblinka* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004).

Darkness (1983) and Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah* (1985), contributed analysis and, most importantly, gifted researchers with important new collections of testimony.⁷

Historian Michael S. Bryant also uses Treblinka trial testimonies, though he does so in a quest to analyse the postwar justice process that spawned them, not the camp history they depict.⁸ Likewise, Gitta Sereny's *Into That Darkness* focuses on the mind of Treblinka's longest-serving commandant, Franz Stangl, not a dissection of prisoner resistance or the contributions of Jewish women. Her book does, however, yield excellent interviews with survivor witnesses she consulted to challenge the jailhouse statements of Stangl. Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess's *The Good Old Days* (1991) analyses perpetrator ideology and mindset rather than prisoners and their actions.⁹ To this one can add *The SS of Treblinka* (2010) by Ian Baxter and its focus on the camp's German, and – to a lesser extent – Trawniki perpetrators.¹⁰

The most important work on the camp remains Yitzhak Arad's *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*. Arad conducted detailed research on Treblinka, though his interventions are constrained by the need to give equal space to the history of two other camps in a book focusing on the broad history of *Aktion Reinhard* (Operation Reinhard) as a whole. Feig's *Hitler's Death Camps* is even more wide-ranging as it includes discussion of all Nazi camps with an extermination function, in addition to those of *Aktion Reinhard*.

The Treblinka Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance by Webb and Chocholaty is a strong, survivor testimony-based addition to scholarship. The authors conducted several new interviews with former Treblinka inmates.¹¹ Their work is also useful as a reference for its inclusion of chapters listing victims, survivors, guards, and witnesses with biographical excerpts on those persons for whom the authors could find sufficient source materials.¹² In all of this work, however, Arad still stands alone for his inclusion of a short, five-page chapter on Jewish women in Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka.

Source Scarcity and Parsing the Male Voice

Returning to the day of the 2 August 1943 revolt, sources generally indicate that some 200 Jews managed to flee Treblinka in the midst of the frantic melee following that first fateful shot.¹³ Historians have long believed that only sixty-eight men and women who fled in those moments or escaped earlier managed to avoid recapture by Nazi forces and survive the remainder of the war. This number first emerged in the writing of Holocaust survivor, author, and publisher Alexander Donat. In his 1979 edited volume *The Death Camp Treblinka*, Donat included the names of Treblinka survivors and what information he could find for each. Though he does not imply that his list of survivors is complete, it has remained largely unchanged and unchallenged these past forty-three years.¹⁴ The museum

⁷ Donat, *The Death Camp Treblinka*; Sereny, *Into That Darkness*; Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*, DVD, Documentary (Criterion Collectoin, 1985); Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film*, Second (New York: De Capo Press, 1995).

⁸ Bryant cites extensively the collections of the *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen* [Central Office for the State Investigator of National Socialist Crimes] Ludwigsburg, Germany, B162, Files 3817–3848, see: Michael S. Bryant, *Eyewitness to Genocide: The Operation Reinhard Death Camp Trials, 1955–1966*, Legacies of War – G. Kurt Piehler, Series Editor (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014).

⁹ Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, eds., *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, trans. Deborah Burnstone (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 1991).

¹⁰ Ian Baxter, *The SS of Treblinka* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2010).

¹¹ Interviews with Samuel Willenberg, Eliahu Rosenberg, Kalman Teigman, and Edi Weinstein in: Webb and Chocholaty, *The Treblinka Death Camp*, Chapter 11, 125–68.

¹² See all of Part II in: Webb and Chocholaty, *The Treblinka Death Camp*.

¹³ Survivor Samuel Rajzman estimated that 150–200 escaped in the revolt, while Alexander Donat offered the figure of 200. Other estimates by survivors and historians exist, though none can offer any certainty; see: House Committee on Foreign Affairs and Samuel Rajzman, 'H.J. Resolution 93 – Punishment of War Crimes – 79th Congress, First Session' (United States Government Printing Office, 1945), Doc. Y4.F76/1: W19/5, 125, US Congressional Record; Alexander Donat, 'The Scroll of Treblinka,' in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*, ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Waldon Press, 1979), 9–16, 15.

¹⁴ Donat, *The Death Camp Treblinka*, 284–91.

at the site of Treblinka today uses Donat's work, with the addition of some recent recognitions for a total of eighty-five survivors.¹⁵ In the case of Treblinka – where almost no perpetrator documentation survives or likely ever existed in any depth – finding survivors and the statements they left behind recognises these individual histories and adds their voices to the known archive. My efforts to revise Donat's list, to date, reveal 262 named survivors of the camp. Of these, seventy got out during the revolt, eighty-three escaped prior to that event, a further eighty-eight left via transport to another camp after a very brief time, and twenty-one survived through varying unique experiences. This new accounting expands the available source base in testimonies, oral histories, and other documents left behind by Jews who experienced this camp firsthand.¹⁶

Even as work to find Treblinka survivors continues, it must be stressed that this search can never be conclusive or complete. It is highly unlikely that we will ever know the exact number of people who escaped from Treblinka prior to the revolt or how many fled and evaded recapture after the uprising. It is also possible that many survivors never chose to come forward or record a testimony of any kind, preferring to leave behind this terrible chapter in their lives rather than relive it in writing, postwar court testimonies, or oral history interviews.

Jewish women who survived the camp may have had additional reasons to avoid telling their stories. In a Fortunoff Archive oral history, Treblinka survivor Yaakov E. reveals one reason why women may not have desired to come forward as court witnesses or oral history subjects. He states that when he was preparing to travel to Germany to testify at one of the Treblinka trials, he spoke with a woman who had also survived the camp and feared she would have to admit she 'lived with a German' if she testified.¹⁷ He explains that she did not want this revealed because by then she was married and thought her husband might leave her if it came out in open court. Yaakov E. recalls how he helped this unnamed woman secure letters from two doctors stating that she was too ill to travel for the trial.

Donat's original list of Treblinka survivors includes three women. One, however, is the mistakenly twice listed Sonia Lewkowicz.¹⁸ While it is possible that the woman Yaakov E. recounts is one of the two women identified by Donat, this is not likely. Donat identified most of the survivors he named by searching German trial documents. Both Bronka Sukno and Sonia Lewkowicz did give evidence to prosecutors. Yaakov E.'s oral history indicates this third woman never went to Germany or recorded a pretrial statement.

¹⁵ Edwarda Kopówka and Aliny Skibińska, 'Resistance and Uprising – Muzeum Treblinka,' accessed 28 Sept. 2019, <https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/resistance-and-uprising/>. Michał Wójcik's 2018 *Treblinka '43* and its 2020 German translation *Der Aufstand von Treblinka: Revolte im Vernichtungslager* use Donat's work in addition to the museum update to arrive at a total of 90 survivors in the later German edition. This number is in error, however, as it repeats all of Donat's mistakes, see: Michał Wójcik, *Der Aufstand von Treblinka Revolte im Vernichtungslager*, trans. Paulina Schulz-Gruner (München: Piper Verlag, 2020); Michał Wójcik, *Treblinka '43: Bunt w Fabryce Śmierci* (Kraków: Znak litera nova, 2018), 397–400.

¹⁶ In the course of this research I have had support from several archives and organisations that have allowed me to challenge this number of survivors and expand the recognised list of witnesses. As 2020–2021 Breslauer, Rutman, and Anderson Research Fellow at the USC Shoah Foundation Center for Advanced Genocide Research, I benefitted from the opportunity to survey testimonies tagged in the VHA collection as individuals who experienced Treblinka and confirmed 42 survivors who do not currently appear on the museum's updated list or Donat's original. My work to expand this list further benefits from my tenure as the inaugural Dori Laub Fellow at the Yale University Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, a fellowship at the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, extensive support from the George L. Mosse Program in History, as well as research at Yad Vashem, the Zentrale Stelle Ludwigsburg, and further collections in Germany and elsewhere.

¹⁷ Yaakov E. Mssa.hvt.3371. Part 2, Segment 17, 00:24:51. Yale University Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. 19 June 1992. Accessed 17 Mar. 2019. This interview is in Yiddish.

¹⁸ Alexander Donat's list of Treblinka survivors includes three women. Bronka Sukno, Sonia Lewkowicz, and Sonia Grabinski. Grabinski, however, is the unmarried name of Sonia Lewkowicz. Other than this error, Donat makes only two other known mistakes on his list. He includes Zygmunt Gostynski and Tobias Mieczyslaw, though research now indicates that these two men were non-Jewish Poles who survived the nearby Treblinka I labor camp, not the Treblinka II extermination camp. For the original list, see: Alexander Donat, ed., *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* (New York: Waldon Press, 1979), 284–91.

As things stand, Sukno and Lewkowicz remain the only two women survivors specifically known to have been at Treblinka at the time of the revolt. Though seven more women are known to have survived the camp, none of them were in Treblinka at the time of the uprising or for a long enough period to experience life inside.¹⁹ This makes researching the lives of Jewish women inside Treblinka something that must be done, for the most part, in sources left behind by men. With the increasing distance of this past, the story of women inside Treblinka, such as it is told, is mediated by the voice of male survivor recollections and then further filtered by the topic choices of male historians. This source problem, in turn, places even greater importance on how we interpret male survivor voices.

Yaakov E. highlights two of the reasons we know so little about the history of women prisoners at Treblinka. The first is their own understandable reluctance to relive these events, and the second is their later erasure by many of the male survivors they lived and fought alongside. In the same oral history interview recounting the story of this woman who was in the camp but did not want to testify, Yaakov E. also, quite stunningly, states that there were no women prisoners in Treblinka – *after* he described the circumstances of the woman survivor he knew in postwar life.²⁰ His own unwillingness to talk about what happened to women at the camp explains his silence here and what looks like an attempt on his part (consciously or not) to erase their history in the camp. We return to the matter of their erasure, or male silences in regard to the experiences of women at Treblinka resistance after analysis of the locations that allow reconstruction of their many contributions in resistance.

The Pferdestall and Barracks Infirmary as a Place of Resistance

Treblinka prisoners wrested back a degree of control over life and death by finding means to limit German entrance into a structure called the Pferdestall (German for horse barn), also called Storage Barracks B. The Pferdestall never actually functioned as a horse barn or living accommodation; the name comes from its design and normal use in other camps. At Treblinka, the official use of this structure was to store clothing taken from victims. Control of this place and the infirmary enabled conspirators to both safeguard their sick and remove distrusted informants. Due to the interconnected ways in which Jewish prisoners used them, these two locations combine to form a single place of resistance.

The infirmary and Pferdestall took on positions as a place of resistance through inmates' ability to control their uses and meanings. The Jewish prisoner *Lagerälteste*, or Camp Elder, Alfred Galewski – the highest-ranking prisoner in the German-assigned hierarchy and a leader of the resistance conspiracy – secured SS permission to create an infirmary in the main housing barracks with allowance for fifteen inmates to recuperate there at any one time.²¹ Galewski used his position as an intermediary,

¹⁹ The seven other women survivors are: Minia Berman, Vivian Chakin (formerly Sidranska), Zelda Gordon, Riva Kremr, Linda Penn (formerly Luba Kremr, daughter of Riva Kremr), Helen Schwartz, and Feny Zycherman. Minia Berman is included on the updated Treblinka Muzeum list. I do not know how she survived, see: Edwarda Kopówka and Aliny Skibińska, 'Resistance and Uprising – Muzeum Treblinka,' accessed 28 Sept. 2019, <https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/resistance-and-uprising/>. For the other six women, see: Vivian Chakin, Interview 7457. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 21 Nov. 1995. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020; Zelda Gordon, Interview 15. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 15 July 1994. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020; Linda Penn, Interview 38042. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 11 Jan. 1998. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020; Linda Penn, Interview 55144. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 24 Jan. 1992. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020; Helen Schwartz, Interview 2889. Tape 3 of 6. 07:20–15:00 and archival PIQ Report, 5. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 29 May 1995. Accessed 7 Sept. 2020. Helen Schwartz also gave a prior, shorter, less-detailed interview to the Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre of Greater Toronto, a USC Shoah Foundation partner institution. She does not mention Treblinka in this interview. Helen Schwartz, Interview 54305. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 4 May 1988. Accessed 7 Sept. 2020; Feny Zycherman, Interview 1228. Tape 2 of 3. 02:30. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 27 Feb. 1995. Accessed 8 Sept. 2020.

²⁰ Yaakov E. Part 4, Segment 31, 00:00:36. Fortunoff Video Archive.

²¹ Sources disagree on *Lagerälteste* Galewski's first name. Samuel Willenberg's memoir *Revolt in Treblinka* consistently uses the name Alfred and includes recollections of many personal interactions with Galewski. Given Willenberg's closeness to

which afforded some level of trust to convince the Germans that a system of recuperation rather than the killing of sick prisoners would lessen turnover in key roles and increase the efficiency of the camp.²² It seems, however, that neither side of this bargain intended to use the official infirmary as a true place of healing.

From its creation, SS guard August Miete began sweeping the barracks infirmary for prisoners he considered too ill to work. Miete routinely marched those he selected from the infirmary bunks to a place of execution. The predictability of his actions made it possible for prisoners to not only protect those they hoped to save, but also to use him against their internal enemies. Individuals whose resistance members wanted gone could simply be left in the infirmary – some of them incapacitated due to injections given by inmate doctors – while sick members of the prisoners' conspiracy were instead hidden under the sorted clothing in the *Pferdestall* and allowed to recuperate there during the workday.²³ Survivor Samuel Willenberg also points out how prisoners could even speed up the removal of an individual from the sick bay by telling the SS of their condition to bring about one of Miete's rounds on their own schedule.²⁴ Dr. Irena 'Irka' Lewkowski was one of four prisoner doctors who may have helped drug informants so that they would appear ill enough for Miete to select them on one of his rounds.²⁵

Prisoners controlled the safety of the *Pferdestall* as an actual place of recuperation by playing on German SS fears of lice and typhus – a preoccupation owed in no small part to Nazi propaganda labeling Jews as carriers of lice and vectors of the disease. *Lagerälteste* Galewski strengthened protection of this place by constantly reminding guards that the clothing stored in the *Pferdestall* was infested, giving them a reason to avoid the building rather than patrol it as normal.²⁶ Several survivors speak of the *Pferdestall* and its use as a hiding place for the sick as well as for resistance planning and covert communication during the daytime hours. In a statement given in 1962, Bronka Sukno explained that her job in the tailor's shop gave her the ability to move freely between the shop and *Pferdestall*, among other areas.²⁷ Moyshe Klaynman, the supervisor of the tailor's shop, confirms this and tells of his own ability to move back and forth between these spaces at will.²⁸

Tailors like Sukno and Klaynman needed access to the clothes stored in the *Pferdestall* to gather materials for items they were forced to make for German guards. SS exploitation of the goods stolen from those killed in the gas chambers by guards was normal practice at all three Aktion Reinhard camps. Terrible as that is, it provided Jewish prisoners with opportunities for resistance and survival. Treblinka survivor Eddie Weinstein successfully hid in the *Pferdestall* for as many as seventeen days with a bullet wound to his arm inflicted by a Trawniki guard on the way to Treblinka. Despite a conspicuous inability to lift his right arm, Weinstein survived in this place of resistance until he was able to escape from the camp with the help of others.²⁹ His survival in the *Pferdestall* was early in the existence of the camp – long before the establishment of the official infirmary on the suggestion of Galewski. This timing indicates that the creation of the infirmary as a location for healing was never Galewski's intent because prisoners already had an area to recover in the *Pferdestall*.

Galewski, I believe he is most likely correct about his first name, see: Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*; Willenberg, 'I Survived Treblinka'; Alan Tomlinson, *Treblinka's Last Witness*, DVD, Documentary (Miami Beach, FL: Tomlinson De Onis Productions LLC, 2014).

²² Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 84–85; Israel Cymlich and Oskar Strawczynski, *Escaping Hell in Treblinka* (New York: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2007), 161–62.

²³ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 84–85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 92–94.

²⁵ Cymlich and Strawczynski, *Escaping Hell in Treblinka*, 161–64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 161–62.

²⁷ Statement of Bronka Sukno, 14 June 1962, in B162/3825 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg (hereafter BL), 1875.

²⁸ Unpublished memoir of Moyshe Klaynman (in Yiddish), written between 1944–1947, in M.49, File 118, Item 3547904 Yad Vashem Archive (hereafter YVA), 44.

²⁹ Edward Weinstein, Interview 2694. Tape 3 of 7. 00:20–19:00. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 17 May 1995. Accessed 4 Sept. 2020; for a more detailed description, see: Eddie Weinstein, *17 Days in Treblinka: Daring to Resist, and Refusing to Die*, 4th ed. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2009).

At this place, women helped remove informants and carried information to the Pferdestall that could have warned of impending visits by the guards or other changes during the daytime hours. While some scholarship on Treblinka already points out that Dr. Lewkowski took part in resistance, Bronka Sukno's role as a courier between the Pferdestall and the prisoner workshops on the other side of the camp has not been profiled previously.³⁰ Klaynman's early memoir and other sources further confirm that women working in the tailors' shop could enter the SS barracks at will to collect or drop off clothing.³¹ The importance of their abilities to watch this place and report on the comings and goings of the guards could hardly be overstated, though it is rarely mentioned by male survivors – especially in later oral histories.

The Camp Kitchen as a Place of Resistance

Beyond the Pferdestall/infirmary place, what women did for resistance is more directly stated in sources covering the provision and concealment of arms for the uprising. Exploration of the next place of resistance, the camp kitchens, comes back to the day of the revolt and plans for the distribution of stolen weapons just before the appointed start of the fighting. Considering this place further compels confrontation with the erasure of women from both the history of Treblinka and the planning of resistance in male survivor oral histories.

In one such source, survivor Abram Kolski stated that he was to collect a weapon from the camp kitchen a couple of hours before the revolt. He explains that arms intended for his work detail were stored there after other prisoners had stolen them from the SS armoury with the use of a secretly acquired key.³² What Kolski does not say – at this or any other time in his interview – is that Jewish women staffed this kitchen. In fact, Kolski never mentions women prisoners in his oral history at all. Other sources, however, confirm that work details in the kitchen, laundry and tailors' shop in the main section of the camp consisted either entirely or partly of Jewish women. During a pair of interviews, Sam Goldberg explains that from the earliest days at Treblinka, he supervised between twenty-four and thirty-three women in the three laundry facilities – one each for German, Trawniki, and Jewish clothing that was not to mix under any circumstance.³³ Sonia Lewkowicz worked in the German laundry.³⁴ Each was quite near or inside the barracks, with laundry for the German SS adjoining the kitchen. Bronka Sukno's tailor's shop was in the same building near both of these work areas. In total, as many as forty Jewish women worked in this section of the camp with a further thirteen to twenty working and housed near the gas chambers and burial pits. We return to the contributions of this second group below.

Abram Kolski is not alone in his silence on the daily lives and contributions of women prisoners. Unlike Yaakov E.'s interview from the Fortunoff Archive, however, he does not deny the existence of

³⁰ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 206; Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, 273; Cymlich and Strawczynski, *Escaping Hell in Treblinka*, 154, 161.

³¹ Statement of Bronka Sukno, 14 June 1962, in B162/3825 (BL), 1875; Unpublished memoir of Moyshe Klaynman, written between 1944–1947, in M.49, File 118, Item 3547904 (YVA), 60; former Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl also told Gitta Sereny that Jewish women were allowed in the SS barracks to clean it, see: Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 166.

³² Abram Kolski, Interview 49970. Tape 5 of 8, 03:00–13:20. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 29 July 1999. Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.

³³ Sam Goldberg, Interview 30760. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 13 July 1997. Accessed 8 Sept. 2020; Sam Goldberg, Family interview with his son, Dr. Shlomo Goldberg. 1991. In possession of the author courtesy of Karen Treiger, daughter-in-law of Sam Goldberg. See also: Karen I. Treiger, *My Soul Is Filled with Joy: A Holocaust Story*, 1st ed. (Seattle, WA: Stare Lipki Press, 2018); Shmuel 'Samuel' Goldberg, 'Between Stok and Treblinka [Tsvishn stok un treblinka],' in *The Chronicle of Stok (Near Wengrow): An Eternal Memorial [Pinkes stok (bay vengrow): matseyve netsekh]*, ed. Y. Tsudiker (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Organization of Stokers in Israel; Stok Community Group 'Society' of North America; Stok Community Group of Argentina; Stoker Group of Canada, 1974), 429–34.

³⁴ Statement of Sonia Lewkowicz, 8 Nov. 1959, in B162/3818 (BL), 179; Statement of Sonia Lewkowicz, 23 June 1960, in B162/3824 (BL), 1658.

women in Treblinka, he just never brings them up and he is not asked. Kolski's fellow survivor Abraham Bomba's interview in the VHA is more like that of Yaakov E. Bomba escaped Treblinka prior to the revolt, though not until he had endured months inside the camp. Asked about the presence of women in Treblinka, Bomba told his Shoah Foundation interviewer the following. (Note that by 'my camp' he means the specific section of Treblinka to which he was assigned.)

Interviewer: Were there any women assigned in your camp?

Abraham Bomba: In my camp there was no women.

Interviewer: It was all men?

Abraham Bomba: There was two women, which I find out about it. They were over there. They were working over there. After the war, I know – I know what one of them, Sonia, I knew her very well. I met her. We were together in Israel. A lovely woman. [In the following sentence, Mr. Bomba's tone becomes much more resolute, placing emphasis on individual syllables as he speaks.] But besides these two women, I don't know any other women was there. It could be, but I do not know.³⁵

Bomba's statement here is notable for several reasons. First, because he is in error and – whether or not he had blocked out this truth by the time he gave his interview – he had to know this was not the case while he was in the camp.

One of the few Treblinka survivors to achieve some recognition, Bomba's later notoriety came from the difficult and emotional interviews he gave to Claude Lanzmann for the documentary *Shoah*. In these, Bomba recalls his forced labour as a barber cutting the hair of women sent to their deaths in the gas chamber.³⁶ He and other men who evade or discount the existence of women prisoners never deny that the Nazis murdered thousands of women at the camp. They just will not talk about the more personal fates of women who lived in the camp as fellow prisoners. Kolski, too, recounts resistance by women as they arrived – including a woman who killed one man and wounded another with a razor blade as she got off the train – but all the while he says nothing about women prisoners.

Other testimonies and attention to camp geography can help us arrive at conclusions despite the contradictions of witnesses like Bomba, Yaakov E., and Kolski. Treblinka survivor Jonas Kornhendler's oral history interview provides a starting point. Kornhendler arrived at Treblinka from Czystochowa, Poland in September 1943.³⁷ Bomba was also in the Czystochowa Ghetto and was deported to Treblinka at about the same time.³⁸ Neither man is exact about the date, so it is even possible they arrived on the same transport. Where Kornhendler differs from Bomba is in his frankness about the existence of women prisoners in Treblinka. He not only says that they worked in the kitchen, he also states that you could see them and the kitchen from the barracks in which he slept – the same barracks as Bomba. Kornhendler also possessed almost identical access to geography, or areas in which he was allowed without drawing the attention of guards, from which he could observe the camp. Is it plausible to believe that Yaakov E., Abram Kolski, and Abraham Bomba did not see and even likely speak to these women? Beyond Kornhendler's statement that you could see their workplace from the barracks, the fact that Jewish women prisoners slept in a partitioned area of the same building in which men were housed is also well-documented.³⁹

³⁵ Abraham Bomba, Interview 18062. Tape 3 of 7, 21:27. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 14 Aug. 1996. Accessed 15 Sept. 2020.

³⁶ Lanzmann, *Shoah* (film); Lanzmann, *Shoah* (book), 102–8.

³⁷ Jonas Kornhendler was deported to Treblinka from the Czystochowa Ghetto around Yom Kippur (20–21 Sept.) 1942. He escaped with one other man from Czystochowa over the fences after two weeks in the camp; see: Jonas Kornhendler, Interview 30369. Tape 1 of 4, 20:00–26:00 and Tape 2 of 4, 00:15–13:30. See also PIQ Report, 3, 5, 7, and 14. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 30 June 1997. Accessed 10 Sept. 2020.

³⁸ Lanzmann, *Shoah* (book), 17.

³⁹ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 58; Richard Glazar, Interview 8552. Transcript 60 of 86. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 5 Feb. 1996. Accessed 11 Sept. 2020.

It is possible that Sonia Lewkowicz, the woman Bomba names in his interview, was not transferred to the other side of the camp until after Bomba had escaped.⁴⁰ At or about the time that Bomba, Yaakov E., Kolski, and Kornhendler were in Treblinka, Sonia Lewkowicz was one of the very women he says he never saw.⁴¹ It would be surprising if where she worked did not come up when they met in postwar life. The descendants of Sam Goldberg – laundry detail supervisor – recorded a prisoner reunion in the year 2000 that both Sonia Lewkowicz and Bronka Sukno attended along with four male survivors and their families. At this gathering, the survivors all talked of the camp and what they went through there.⁴² Bomba's earlier meetings with Lewkowicz would have likely gone the same way. Meeting women survivors in Israel, however, did not change Bomba's recollections of women's work details in the camp. What he says in the interview shows that making the acquaintance of Sukno and Lewkowicz only led him to state that there were two women in the camp – nothing more. He did not add any context for their lives, discuss their larger work details, or comment on what they were doing in Treblinka. Contemporary witnesses, however, are not the only individuals to erase women from Treblinka and its story of resistance.

The Camp 2 Brothel as a Place of Resistance

Designers of the Treblinka II extermination camp – as at Belzec and Sobibor – divided the facility into two strictly separated parts. These are often referred to in the sources as Camp 1 and Camp 2. Camp 1 was also called the Living Camp – where prisoners worked on sorting the clothing and goods of those killed in the gas chambers in addition to skilled trades positions, while Camp 2 was sometimes referred to as the Death Camp, or the area that held the gas chambers, burial pits, and later pyres for the incineration of the bodies. Each camp inside Treblinka II had its own Jewish prisoner population. Treblinka's SS and Ukrainian guards ensured that any prisoner who entered Camp 2 never went back to Camp 1. This segregation for the purposes of secrecy was brutally enforced despite the realities of Camp 2 being common knowledge to all held in any part of Treblinka.

The barracks infirmary, Pferdestall, and kitchens were all in Camp 1. The final Place of Resistance was in Camp 2 – inside the prisoner barracks building. In his 1987 book *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* and its 2018 updated edition, the late historian Yitzhak Arad titles a five-page chapter 'Women Prisoners'.⁴³ In this, he quotes the Camp 2 survivor Eliahu Rosenberg on the formation of women's work details in the Death Camp portion of Treblinka in about February of 1943. The punctuation Arad uses in this quotation is highly important:

⁴⁰ Sonia Lewkowicz told an American court that she was not transferred to Camp 2 until 5 Mar. 1943. Her citation of this quite specific date indicates that this was a particularly strong memory for her; see: Testimony of Sonia Lewkowicz, United States v. Fedorenko, 597 F. 2d 946 (Court of Appeals, 5th Circuit 1979).

⁴¹ Abraham Bomba escaped from Treblinka in either Dec. 1942 or Jan. 1943. Bronka Sukno arrived at Treblinka on 18 Jan. 1943, so it is possible that they were also in the camp at the same time, though this cannot be stated with certainty. Lewkowicz arrived at Treblinka 14 Dec. 1942, so she and Bomba were likely in the camp at the same time; see: Statement of Sonia Lewkowicz, 23 June 1960, in B162/3824 (BL), 1658; Statement of Bronka Sukno, 14 June 1962, in B162/3825 (BL), 1874. For Bomba's escape date, see 'Oral History Interview with Avraham [sic] Bomba,' Video, 18 Sept. 1990, RG-50.030.0033, USHMM – The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive (JTHOHA), at 1:47:00 and 1:57:00; 'Abraham Bomba – Prisoner T2,' Muzeum Treblinka, n.d., <https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/bomba-abraham/>.

⁴² Goldberg/Treiger Family Treblinka Survivor Reunion Video (in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English). Feb. 2000. In possession of the author courtesy of Karen Treiger.

⁴³ Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, Chapter 15, 'Women Prisoners,' 114–18; Yitzhak Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, Revised and expanded edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018), Chapter 16, 'women prisoners,' 150–54. The 2018 edition of Arad's book repositions his work in the historiography and revises his statements on the place of the Operation Reinhard camps in the wider context of the Holocaust. His work on the camps themselves is unchanged. As there are no differences between Arad's original and his updated rerelease in their core primary source research, I will cite only the original.

At that time thirteen girls were brought to the camp: six were employed in the laundry, three in the kitchen, one by the camp doctor as an aide, and the others were allotted to the various [k]apos...⁴⁴

Arad stops here with an ellipsis and makes little further comment on what became of these women. The quote used by Arad above and that below are both from Rosenberg's written testimony provided to prosecutors in Vienna in 1947. The punctuation below is reproduced faithfully from the original:

At this time, thirteen women were brought to the camp, of whom six were assigned to the laundry, three to the kitchen, where until then only a boy had worked, one was taken by the camp doctor as his 'assistant', and three others were assigned to the various [k]apos for their 'private use.' Beyond these three [k]apos [specifically] the Germans allowed every [k]apo to visit these women between 6:00 – 10:00 pm in the evenings.⁴⁵

This re-excerpted selection of Rosenberg's writing carries far greater implications than the selection used by Arad. Omission of the quotation marks around aide/assistant changes Rosenberg's meaning as night and day. Rosenberg also employs these scare quotes around the term 'private use' in the section of the quote cut off by Arad. He is trying to point at something more.

If Rosenberg's statement is placed alongside the 1961 Eichmann Trial investigation testimony of Camp 2 survivor Szlomo Helman, they reveal a site of forced sexual exploitation, or what is often termed a camp brothel.⁴⁶ While oral histories and existing Treblinka literature do not mention such a space, these early written testimonies show its presence. Helman further describes how the women forced to endure this place provided the lion's share of arms available to Camp 2 prisoners on the day of the revolt. Explaining the day of the uprising, he stated (in Yiddish), 'Our girls, meanwhile, distracted the Ukrainians who had put down their rifles back in the waiting room.'⁴⁷ He then states that Moyshe Shnyder ran into this waiting room and attempted to flee with eight rifles these women secured. He was shot, but the weapons seem to have ended up in the hands of other Jewish prisoners. This 'waiting room' does not appear on any existing map of Treblinka; however, a women's barracks room, kapos' rooms, and a doctor's room adjoin in the same section of the building.

Szlomo Helman also recounts how Zelo Bloch ambushed and overpowered a Ukrainian guard near the well. Bloch, a recognized leader of resistance in Camp 2, and his accomplices threw this guard – or two guards – down the well and took his rifle. Without Helman's testimony, this is the only known source of weapons for the revolt in Camp 2. Helman and Rosenberg's combined revelation of sexual exploitation at Treblinka not only returns long ignored women to the historical record, it also shows their crucial participation in the revolt. These survivors indicate that there was a camp brothel at Treblinka, and on 2 August 1943 it became a place of resistance for the provision of arms.

⁴⁴ Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, 116.

⁴⁵ For the quote in his book, Arad cites 'YVA O-3/4039, 11, testimony of Eli Rozenberg (in German) (hereafter Rosenberg). Rosenberg was from Warsaw and worked in the extermination area.' A statement by Rosenberg under this archival file number exists; however, it is not the correct document. Yad Vashem has reorganised their collections since the time of Arad's original research. For the original citation, see: Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, 8, 412; Arad's quotation of Rosenberg appears on 116. Rosenberg's statement in German with this quote on a page with the original numbering '11' can now be found in: Statement of Elias Rosenberg, 24 Dec. 1947, in O.3, File 4548, Item 3558557 (YVA), 11. Translation from the German of this longer excerpt is my own.

⁴⁶ Though I find the term 'brothel' distasteful, I recognise that its use does appear to be in keeping with the field more broadly and that a suitable replacement is elusive. For work on camp sites of forced sexual exploitation and use of the term brothel, see: Robert Sommer, *Das KZ-Bordell: Sexuelle Zwangsarbeit in Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009); Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, eds., *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, HBI Series on Jewish Women (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2010).

⁴⁷ Statement of Szlomo Helman (in Yiddish), 7 June 1961, in O.3, File 2267, Item 35555994 (YVA), 14. Translation from the Yiddish here is my own.

Silence, Erasure, and the Absence of Women in Treblinka Literature and Oral History

Yitzhak Arad's decision to stop short of quoting Rosenberg in ways that would clearly reference sexual exploitation seems in keeping with the time in which he wrote. His book *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* also barely mentions the fact that Sukno and Rosenberg insist that the deputy commandant was homosexual and maintained a forced Jewish sexual partner in the camp.⁴⁸ Discussions of sex, sexuality, sexual exploitation, rape, gender, masculinity, and related topics began to appear regularly in studies of the Holocaust only years later. Arad might have also feared that continuing the Rosenberg quote would harm living survivors. Recall the unnamed woman, above, who was worried her husband and family might discover what she had gone through and judge her for it if she testified against the guards. An extensive exploration of these topics while most survivors were still alive might have made her fears a reality.

The same sort of logic – among other factors – is at play in the silences and erasures of later oral history interviews given by male survivors. Few oral history interviews given by men who survived Treblinka mention sex, sexual violence, or the lives of women inside the camp. This tendency to avoid the topic in recorded interviews at times runs contrary to the recollections of the same men in other formats – this is particularly true for statements written in the years just after the war. Eddie Weinstein, the survivor shot in the arm and hidden in the Pferdestall discussed above, says nothing of women at Treblinka in his oral history.⁴⁹ In his memoir written in 1947 and published by Yad Vashem in 2008, however, Weinstein provides more. He states:

We also heard that the Germans spared pretty women, whom they kept around for gang rape by German officers and Ukrainians, and murdered them. Only men were employed in the parts of Treblinka where I worked. Once someone called my attention to a young woman dressed as a teenage boy, who was sorting clothes with us. I don't know how long she survived.⁵⁰

In this passage, Weinstein, as others, is more forthcoming about the fate of women that circumstances did not force him to consider personally. Here again the male survivor recalls what happened to anonymous women raped and murdered at the hands of the Nazis – albeit after the distancing words 'we also heard'. In keeping with the statements of other male survivors, the women of whom he speaks in this passage were not long-term prisoners of the camp.

Weinstein follows the example of Bomba, Kolski, and Yaakov E. in denying the presence of women we can prove that he saw by examining the geography of his life in the camp. He lived in the same area as Bomba and must have been fed at the same kitchen as all the other Camp 1 prisoners. Therefore, the selections, rapes, and murders he says he 'heard' about – and thus insinuates that he did not actually see – took place in areas he would have been able to view from his routine place of work in the camp. The most important difference between his oral history and that of the others mentioned in this research is that the interviewer never directly asked about the presence of women, so he was never put in the position to make a denial.

Male survivors may have their own troubling reasons to avoid discussion of women in the camp. To be certain, the survivors mentioned here – weighing their oral histories, the other sources they left behind, and conclusions about their lives in the camp supported by further evidence – do not appear to have any individual culpability in the sexual victimisation of Jewish women at Treblinka. This is not at all to say that acts of sexual violence or relationships of a grossly unequal and exploitative nature did not happen between Jews in this camp or during the Holocaust writ large. Sources show that Jewish men and women did enter into relationships that can be described as 'sex for barter' or 'instrumental

⁴⁸ Statement of Elias Rosenberg (in German), 17 Apr. 1961, in B162/3826 (BL), 1919; Statement of Bronka Sukno (in German), 14 June 1962, in B162/3825 (BL), 1876.

⁴⁹ Edward J. 'Eddie' Weinstein, Interview 2694. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 17 May 1995. Accessed 14 Sept. 2020.

⁵⁰ Weinstein, *17 Days in Treblinka*, 56.

sex', in the terms of historians Anna Hájková and Waitman Beorn, respectively.⁵¹ Rather, for these interviewees, silence in this historical source format in particular results from certain issues inherent to the oral history interview process and something of which historians using these important and powerful sources may want to bear in mind more generally.

Male survivor oral histories that avoid the topics of women prisoners, sex, and sexual violence urge consideration of what causes many male interviewees to be evasive. Their silences are best explained by what the historian Mary Louise Roberts terms 'gender damage', or injury to their masculine self-conception brought on by discussion of violence against women.⁵² These men, Holocaust victims themselves, could do little or nothing to protect Jewish women from the sexual violence of guards and some prisoners in positions of power. The prospect of telling such stories years later should be understood as a traumatic bridge too far. Retelling the full picture of sexual violence against women at Treblinka could cause a revisitation of the male survivor's inability to protect women as their traditional gender roles required. The result in testimonies is sometimes – conscious or not – an avoidance of certain topics and a complete silence on others.

Most men who survived Treblinka and gave oral history interviews recorded their contributions in their own homes. Interviewers for the Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive did their best to make sure these survivors were recorded in private – that is, in the presence of only the interviewer and videographer and away from family members – though several interviews show that this was not always possible. Archival interview notes for Treblinka revolt survivor Leon Diskin's oral history, for example, contain a remark by his interviewer that states the 'survivor's wife arrives unexpectedly [at this point] and fuddles in the kitchen (even the best laid plans can go awry)'.⁵³ Those best laid plans were the hope that Mr. Diskin could be recorded alone, as is the preference and standard operating procedure of the USC Shoah Foundation.⁵⁴ Similarly, family members and other individuals can be heard moving about in the background of several interviews. Sam Goldberg's interview includes the voice of his wife Esther calling out to him from another room on a couple of occasions.⁵⁵

Escape survivor Adek Stein's oral history best demonstrates the relevance of audience and interviewer/interviewee interactions. As he approached the topic of sexual violence while describing what he saw during the Holocaust, Stein became deeply uneasy when he realized he would have to tell these stories in front of women.

Adek Stein: They take some girls [*long pause*] they take some girls to make fun, for fun. They take it out on the street. Not on the street, on the part where we have been [*long pause*] I don't want to say this to – it's too drastic to say what they do. The young girls are here [*looking around the room*].

Interviewer DA: In front of you?

Adek Stein: And this, this, the girls. I mean, these girls. These girls here.

Interviewer DA: Don't worry about them.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Anna Hájková, 'Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto,' *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 503–33; Waitman Wade Beorn, 'Bodily Conquest: Sexual Violence in the Nazi East,' in *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, eds. Alex J. Kay and David Stahel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 195–216.

⁵² Mary Louise Roberts, 'Beyond "Crisis" in Understanding Gender Transformation,' *Gender & History* 28, no. 2 (Aug. 2016): 358–66.

⁵³ Leon Diskin, Interview 17082. Archival Pre-Interview Questionnaire (PIQ) Report, 'Spelling Verification Form' insert, 2 of 6. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 14 July 1996. Accessed 3 Sept. 2020.

⁵⁴ I would like to thank USC Shoah Foundation Collections Curator Crispin Brooks for conversations on this topic and others. For USC Shoah Foundation interviewer training on the topic of sexual assault and the practice of interviewing subjects alone (that is, with only the interviewee, interviewer, and videographer in the room), see: 'Interviewer Guidelines.' USC Shoah Foundation, The Institute for Visual History and Education, Oct. 2020, 13, 43.

⁵⁵ Sam Goldberg, Interview 30760. Transcript, 32 and 33. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 13 July 1997. Accessed 8 Sept. 2020. This interview is in Yiddish.

⁵⁶ Adek Stein, Interview 3169. Tape 2 of 12, 06:45–11:00. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 13 June 1995. Accessed 18 Sept. 2020.

Stein demonstrates the difficulty that many older, traditional men had with the prospect of discussing sex and sexual violence in front of family and/or women generally. While he means it is 'too drastic' to tell these stories in front of young women to protect them from injury in hearing this history, he is also protecting himself from the pain of reliving these events in the company of people who remind him of the victims he had no power to protect. As he discusses these topics he halts frequently and looks around the room uncomfortably at his audience.

For Stein, it was not just the act of telling that was difficult, it was also the sex and age of those that would hear his stories. How often was this an issue in the oral history format? The single largest collection of Holocaust oral histories – the USC Shoah Foundation VHA – contains ninety-five interviews tagged as individuals who experienced Treblinka. Out of these oral histories, 75 per cent of male Treblinka survivors were interviewed by women. Considering only men who endured a period in the camp longer than one day, this number rises to 89 per cent. Statistics on how many of these interviews were conducted near or in the direct presence of family members are impossible to calculate.⁵⁷ The percentage of male Treblinka survivors interviewed by women is actually a bit higher than the statistics for all Holocaust survivor interviews in the VHA. Of 53,231 Holocaust oral histories, 68 per cent of all interviewers are women, while 67 per cent of male survivors and 73 per cent of female survivors were interviewed by women.⁵⁸

The avoidances, silences, or distortions in the oral histories of some male survivors cannot be attributed exclusively to the sex of their interviewer, but this is a factor that historians and oral history collection groups should consider. Male interviewees are often more forthcoming in other formats or with male interviewers,⁵⁹ from Eddie Weinstein's book mentioning sexual violence while his interview does not, to the inaccuracies and inconsistencies of several other men cited here. Though this research almost always makes necessary the reconstruction of women's lives through the voices of men, historians should also be aware what may emerge regarding the oral history recollections of women survivors speaking to male interviewers.

Conclusions

The history of resistance at Treblinka and its memory are in multiple ways impacted by gender norms. Inside the camp, women's work details and the spatial access of individual women like Bronka Sukno reflected the gender conventions of German guards – often to the benefit of resistance. The SS did not view Jewish women as a threat to their control of the camp in the same way they thought of men. As Sukno said herself, she had the ability to enter the normally forbidden personal quarters of SS guards as a woman tailor.⁶⁰ Moyshe Klaynman, a male tailor, did not enter SS quarters. Of course, the violent sexual exploitation that other women endured in the Camp 2 brothel is the most terrible example of

⁵⁷ Whether or not family members or others are nearby during the interview process is not routinely recorded in archival metadata and only becomes apparent if the individuals in the background or adjacent rooms of the home make themselves known. While it is not policy to allow an audience, research shows it was often unavoidable. Since many may have listened silently, statistics on how many interviews had an audience beyond the interviewer and videographer would be impossible to compile with any accuracy.

⁵⁸ I compiled these statistics with the help of spreadsheets provided by Martha Stroud of the USC Shoah Foundation Center for Advanced Genocide Research. I first set aside some 1,722 interviews for which the identity of the interviewer is not recorded and then chose the sex of each identified interviewer based on their first names. The sex of interviewees is recorded in USC Shoah Foundation metadata, though the sex of interviewers is not. Therefore, some level of inaccuracy may exist if, for example, an interviewer named Alexandra recorded her name as Alex, though this should not be so significant as to profoundly affect the outcome of this statistical work. Similar statistical work for the Fortunoff collection is not possible given the large number of interviews conducted by multiple interviewers and the manner in which archival metadata is recorded for this collection.

⁵⁹ In his oral history interview with a male interviewer, survivor Richard Glazar discusses instances of rape during the Holocaust; see: Richard Glazar, Interview 8552. Transcript 39 of 86. *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. USC Shoah Foundation. 5 Feb. 1996. Accessed 11 Sept. 2020.

⁶⁰ Statement of Bronka Sukno, 14 June 1962, in B162/3825 (BL), 1875.

this same thinking – though women here transformed this place into a powerful source of material support for the resistance. Significantly, there was no other place where guards would set down their rifles in the presence of Jews. The sexual violence guards perpetrated in this location, and their beliefs about women's supposed inability to threaten their power, played a role in the laxity of their actions and the ability of prisoners to rise up against them.

Knowledge of these events and others inside Treblinka, and during the Holocaust more broadly, is often a product of gendered thinking at the time and in the years following. As Yaakov E.'s interview shows us, women had greater – or at the very least different – fears about coming forward as trial witnesses and later oral history subjects. It is likely no coincidence that Bronka Sukno and Sonia Lewkowicz sought the community of their fellow survivors, though they never wrote memoirs and did not avidly seek out opportunities to tell their stories as did some of their male peers. Nevertheless, attention to the networks and places of resistance at Treblinka allows us to read against the surface-level distortions and evasions of male testimony to recover the contributions of women in resistance. Jewish women on both sides of the wire at Treblinka took part in the organization of the revolt while those in the Camp 2 brothel endured the eye of hell to arm an insurrection all knew might mean their deaths. This research will hopefully draw greater attention to their actions in resistance, lives inside the camp, and the reasons why we have long known so little about the history of women at Treblinka.