Forgotten Female Holocaust Heroes

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After World War II, the recognized heroes were the brave warriors, the men in arms. The medals, the parades, the tributes were bestowed on the men (together with a few exceptional women) who fought on the frontlines or in the resistance. This reality set the stage for what became, in many countries, the collective memory of the war. The victims were shunned, and a small percentage of perpetrators were put on trial or underwent an often-bogus denazification program. As for the resisters, they were cognizant that their behavior helped defeat Hitler, but they were in mourning for many comrades who had been killed. At the same time, there were bystanders who claimed to be resisters, which created suspicion about the genuine resisters. For their part, the rescuers were living in fear of being "ousted" by their anti-Semitic neighbors as having been "Jew-lovers," and most did not want recognition for what, to them, was "the right thing to do." Diplomats who issued thousands of visas for Jews to escape Germany, Austria, Lithuania, and France lost their diplomatic status, their pensions, their honor. Some bystanders fabricated resistance stories or denied knowing that a genocide of Jews had taken place on their soil. Despite the Nazi war-crime trials, French historian Henry Rousso describes how there were "constant calls to forgive, to reconcile, even to forget the past," all of which "halted the mourning process."[1]

During this *zeitgeist* of exalting men in war, it is no surprise that female heroes were not taken seriously; indeed, the very words "female heroes" sounded like an oxymoron. This phenomenon, of denying the attributes of women as fierce, courageous, risk-takers in their altruistic and moral choices, was also noted in psychological research[2] contradicting other scholars.[3] Even forty years after liberation, a compilation of psychological literature[4] found that women were more likely than men to help, unless the situation was unusually dangerous. It was assumed that men had the skills necessary to undertake risky situations. Furthermore, men were considered more likely than women to help strangers because of their chivalry.[5]

Social psychologist Carol Gilligan, author of *In a Different Voice* (1982)[6] differentiated men and women in terms of morality. Gilligan claimed, when facing moral decisions, women do not think about what is right and wrong theoretically. Rather, they base their decision on feelings, compassion and care. On the other hand, Gilligan suggested that men's morality

is conditioned more by an impartial idea of justice than on an empathic response to human feelings.

These distinct differences between men and women were challenged by social psychologist Carol Tavris, who argued: “We can think about the influence of gender without resorting to false polarities.”[7] This idea confirmed that of social psychologist Ervin Staub,[8] who himself was rescued in Budapest by Raoul Wallenberg.[9] Staub went so far as to develop measurements to identify people with altruistic natures. He concluded that both men and women have altruistic proclivities. While women are more socialized in early childhood to be compassionate and caring, men have those feelings as well, and are just as capable of acting on them. A further confirmation of not differentiating men and women when examining characteristics such as altruism and morality came from Freud himself. Freud explained that distinctions between men and women are not so clear cut. He wrote, “as a result of their [women’s] bisexual disposition and of cross-inheritance, they combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics so that pure masculinity and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content.”[10]

In my social-psychological research on rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, I found that rescuing behavior under extreme terror is “infinitely more complex and varied than these stereotypes.”[11] A woman’s sense of right and wrong could be motivated by compassion and caring, which leads to taking responsibility for another life, or it could be motivated by the thought that “it is the right thing to do.” As for men, some were motivated by caring and compassion for a fellow being and felt empathic towards their pain, suffering and imminent death, while others had belief in justice, and this motivated them to risk their lives for a total stranger. The stereotype of women being relegated to the kitchen would have us believe that the actions of women in rescue situations was limited to saving one or a few Jews in their home and that men were engaged in more active rescue missions outside the home. In the first instance, in order to protect a Jew at home, a rescuer had to go out to procure food, medication and other basic necessities for several years. With food ration cards and limited supplies, this was not an easy feat during wartime. In addition, suspicious neighbors, who could turn a rescuer over to the authorities, were often a major risk. Despite the dangers, some non-Jewish women organized networks that saved hundreds and thousands of lives, particularly in the rescue of children. Women in German-occupied countries risked their lives on dangerous missions to transport Jews across borders to neutral countries, and took on life-threatening courier roles to bring information, false identification certificates, or medication to save lives.

This evidence about women’s altruistic behavior in life and death situations debunks the notion that men take on more risky tasks in helping situations. This idea is further confirmed by the courageous acts of women in the resistance, and on sabotage missions carried out by non-Jewish and Jewish women. With the exception of a few, such as Nadezhda Popova and Noor Inayat Khan, women in the Resistance, were not honored. Popova, was the most highly decorated combat pilot of World War II. She was one of 800,000 Soviet military women, of which 300,000 served in combat roles (a little-known fact). Popova served with the 588th Bomb Squadron, which flew at night to bomb German encampments, rear-area bases, and supply depots. Clearly, more women should have been honored along with the men in the same roles. Noor Inayat Khan, a Muslim resister, was a radio operator, and later a secret agent for the British. She was posthumously awarded the George Cross, the highest civilian decoration in the United Kingdom and other commonwealth nations.

As for Jewish women in the resistance, in the ghettos and forests, they too, did not have as much recognition as that of their male counterparts. In the post-Holocaust generation in Israel, a society that prides itself on the resistance of the Jews during the Holocaust, many Israelis knew of Abba Kovner’s leadership in the uprising of the Vilna Ghetto, and of his post-war activities: and of Mordecai Anielewicz’s role in the Warsaw ghetto; and of Bielski brothers who were Partisans in Byelorus

forests. Such collective memory ignores the role of courageous Jewish women who risked life and limb, and had leadership roles in combat operations and sabotage.

One exception is Hannah Senesh, a national hero in Israel. Known as "the Jewish Joan of Arc," she risked her life as a wireless operator, then as a paratrooper with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. She parachuted into wartime Hungary on a mission to save Hungarian Jews from being deported to their death. In Israel, youngsters grow up singing her poems. When Hannah Senesh's diary was published in 1972 in English[12], Abba Eban wrote, "All the definitions of giant courage come together in Hannah's life."[13] Senesh wrote in her diary, "One needs to feel that one's life has meaning, that one is needed in this world."[14] Were it not for her poems and diary, Senesh, too, would have been forgotten, as was the case with other women.

On the other hand, Vitka Kempner was less known in Israeli society because she rarely spoke about her resistance during the Holocaust. She deferred to her husband Abba Kovner as the spokesperson for the Partisans. When she joined the Partisans in Vilna, Vitka blew up trains, and navigated six hundred Jews out of the Vilna ghetto. She maintained contact with other resistance groups, and obtained medications and other essentials. After liberation, Kempner assisted in smuggling Jews into Palestine, and later returned to Europe to carry out a revenge mission against the Germans. Thereafter, she devoted her life to living in a kibbutz in Israel, raising a family, and working as a psychologist to give hope to parents and children who were emotionally damaged. Kempner became known for her courage during and after the Holocaust, but she has not become a national symbol of heroism to the degree that her husband has become.

The same goes for Zivia Lubetkin who, in August of 1939, was one of the only women sent to a Zionist Congress in Geneva. She returned to Warsaw when Hitler and Stalin declared the Molotov Pact. Lubetkin was considered the mother and sister of the Zionist movement: she provided food, organized activities for the children, and negotiated for supplies. After the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto on July 28, 1942, she dedicated her actions towards armed combat against the Germans. In January 1943, she was a leader in the Ghetto's underground, organizing for the uprising. She crawled through sewers, reaching the Aryan side, while 120 comrades (including Anielewicz) were killed. Lubetkin immigrated to Palestine in June 1946, where she established Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot in Northern Israel, the Ghetto-Fighters Kibbutz.

FIG. 14. Stein at work in her Tribeca studio, 2015.

It is often thought that to be a resistor, one must use weapons. However, Holocaust scholars, such as Yitzchak Mais,[15] assert that definitions of resistance varied with the changing conditions to which Jews were subjected in the evolving genocide. The celebration of some Jewish holidays while in hiding, to take one example, could also be seen as a form of resistance.

Another example was the diary that Anne Frank kept in order not to succumb to total despondency in hiding. It was the voice of this young girl, in *The Diary of Anne Frank*,[16] that introduced every youngster to what it was like under the German occupation during World War II. Despite the fact that the gory details of Anne's final months in Bergen-Belsen would be written by other witnesses many years later, her life in

FIG. 15. Installation detail of *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* at Flomenhaft Gallery, New York, 2016.

the Amsterdam attic continues to give millions of youngsters the inspiration that writing can be a form of resistance, helping people not to give up in the face of adversity.

In her diary, Anne Frank was the first one to acknowledge the courageous deeds of the unsung heroes, the rescuers – particularly of Miep Gies, who found and hid Anne's diary after the family was taken away. Frank wrote, "It is amazing how much noble, unselfish work these people are doing, risking their own lives to help save others." She continued, "Our helpers are a very good example . . . Never had we heard one word of the burden which we certainly must be to them, never had one of them complained of all the trouble we give."[17]

The words of Anne Frank and Hannah Senesh are truly powerful, but we also know that pictures often do speak louder than words. Sometimes a critical event transforms a bystander into action. In 1947, Ruth Gruber, a young American journalist who, in 1944, had already brought 1,000 Jewish orphans to Oswego, New York, heard about the British attack on the *Exodus* carrying 4,500 remnants of European Jewry to Palestine. She made her way to Cyprus and photographed the men, women and children as they were shepherded onto three prison ships. The worldwide distribution of her photographs told the story of the British treatment of the refugees. It is not a stretch of the imagination to say that these photos had influence in eliciting an empathic response from political decision-makers to the plight of the Jews.

Another journalist who was transformed from passive bystander to brave upstander was Nancy Wake, a non-Jewish journalist living in Paris when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. When she saw what was going on in Germany at the time – Jewish men being whipped by the SA, Brown Shirts harassing customers going into Jewish-owned stores – Wake resolved at that moment, "If I ever had a chance, I would do anything, however big or small, stupid or dangerous, to try to make things more difficult for their rotten party."[18] She became a courier for the French Resistance and played a role in the rescue of Allied soldiers trapped in France.

Unlike resisters, rescuers of Jews were focused on saving lives by hiding Jews: giving them information, false identification papers, food-ration cards, hiding places, transporting them to save havens, medical supplies and food. After interviewing approximately three hundred rescuers from all walks of life, I found that their reasons to risk their lives and that of their families varied. Some were motivated by their morality, "I couldn't live with myself if I let these people die." Others had relationships with Jews; and it was this relationship that was at the forefront of their desire to help. Some upstanders were anti-Nazi, and it was their rage against the German occupiers that was the impetus to help Jews survive in the face of imminent death. There were rescuers who were in helping professions, and they used their roles assisting in the survival of Jews. Diplomats were a separate category of rescuers who risked their careers to save lives. Finally, children were engaged by their parents to assist in rescue activities.

Once again, women rescuers are less known than their male counterparts. In the early 1960s, when Yad Vashem, Israel's National Authority for the Remembrance of the Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust, began honoring non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews – without any

financial or other rewards – Oskar Schindler was one of the early recipients of recognition. By contrast, his wife Emilie, a nurse, who was working at his side to rescue more than 1,000 Jews, was not honored along with him. This omission is congruent with the invisibility of female heroism It took more than 30 years, in 1994, before Emilie Schindler was finally recognized for her own courageous deeds.

Another such rescuer who was honored is Gertrud Luckner who was a German Catholic Caritas social worker active in the peace movement. From the early days of the Third Reich, she traveled around the country, giving assistance to Jewish families. She worked with Rabbi Leo Baeck in Berlin getting Jews extra food and enabling them to leave Germany. When Luckner was caught on one of her missions and asked who told her to do what she was doing, she replied, "My Christian conscience."[19] She survived the Holocaust and continued to do interfaith work throughout her life.

It is unfortunate that Yad Vashem does not give awards to Jews who saved Jews. If that were the case, Hadassah Bimko Rosensaft would be at the top of the list. Rosensaft was a Polish Jew who studied dentistry in France before World War II. Her six-year-old son, her husband, and her parents were murdered upon arrival to Auschwitz in August 1943. Rosensaft used her position in the infirmary to provide meager medicine and care for as many inmates as she could. When she was sent to Bergen-Belsen as part of a medical team, she risked her life to keep more than one hundred children alive. After the war, she worked with the British medical team to help victims transition from a starvation diet to normalcy, and to care for the sick. She also took orphaned children to Palestine for refuge. At the World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in 1981 in Jerusalem, I was standing near Rosensaft when a woman came up to her and said, "You saved my life." I was in tears.

Implications for the Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females Exhibition

If we take Albert Schweitzer's thinking seriously about the importance of role models – "Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing."[20] – we must ask:
What messages are being sent to the next generation when today's youngsters are bombarded by the media with the assumption that unless one is a superstar in sports, movies, television, music – and rich – their lives are unworthy.

In contrast, Linda Stein's *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* exhibition and educational initiatives, countering bullying and bigotry, and addressing female sexual abuse during the Holocaust, has the potential of making a difference on many fronts. Stein portrays, in an innovative style for the twenty-first century, those still-quieted voices of women during and immediately after the destruction of European Jewry. The exhibition takes this group of women from oblivion to visibility.

In the historiography of the study of the Holocaust a new category of people will be studied – upstanders – along with persecutors, victims, bystanders, resisters, and rescuers. The very concept of *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* provides girls, young women – and, yes, men – with much-needed role-models to inspire them with the courage to act humanely in day to day situations that require stepping out of one's comfort zone. Obviously, in extreme situations, being a rescuer or resister is life-threatening. Being altruistic or moral on a daily basis is not a life-and-death choice, though speaking out against bullying and bigotry could be potentially dangerous.

The ten women chosen for the *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* exhibition are but a limited number of this population. As this female-inclusive concept becomes the norm in the nomenclature of Holocaust historiography, more women will gain recognition. These ten women and thousands of others like them, deserve a place in the collective memory of the destruction of European history. In the words of Hannah Senesh:

There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth though they have long been extinct. There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world though they are no longer among the living. These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark. They light the way for [Human] kind.[21] ■