

Victims and Heroes

Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females, Tapestries and Sculptures by Linda Stein

Edited by Linda Stein, foreword by Gloria Steinem, essays by Eva Fogelman et al.

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Reviewed by Catherine Dossin



As Gloria Steinem explains in her opening text, Linda Stein's *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* is part of a recent trend aimed at restoring the reality of women's lives and actions during the Holocaust, both as victims and as heroes. A widely praised collection of essays edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (2010), called attention to the rapes, forced prostitution, and other forms of sexual abuses suffered by Jewish women, thereby recovering the facts of their gruesome ordeal. Stein's project, on the other hand, uncovers the experiences of the women who blew up trains, parachuted behind enemy lines, led rescue missions, or hid fugitives. By weaving stories of female soldiers, resisters, or rescuers into her work, Stein intends to provide role models of fierce females who, in Steinem's words, turned their "capacity for empathy into action." Steinem describes empathy as "our need to help another human in trouble"—a biological response that explains "why the human race survives." But empathy alone does not spark action—examples do.

The themes of empathy and empowerment are further developed in Stein's essay, which opens with a series of questions that dramatically present to her readers the life and death situations and moral dilemmas that people were confronted with at the time. This is not only a powerful way to empathize with both victims and potential rescuers, but also to plunge into the artist's state of mind as she developed her project. Stein's Spoon to Shell series, for example, resulted from reading the story of a woman who was offered a spoon in exchange for sexual favors. In a concentration camp, an ordi-

nary household item like a spoon became a most precious object for which one could lose oneself. Stein found in the shell a counter-image to the spoon—a metaphor for the protective shell one would need to wear to resist such attacks on the self, but also a symbol of the protection an empathic bystander could bestow on a victim.

I could not get images of the spoon and shell from my mind. They haunted me. I finally had to physically gather as many of them as I could obtain, in order to express my visual and visceral response to the heinous and grotesque crimes committed during the time of the Holocaust.

Amidst all the horrific stories, there were some bright moments: stories of courage and generosity, such as that of Nancy Wake, whom the Germans dubbed the "White Mouse." Wake's story is even more empowering since the pretty socialite was not an obvious candidate for becoming a highly decorated resistance fighter. Having witnessed the rise of the Nazis in Germany, she resolved to "do anything, however big or small, stupid or dangerous, to try and make things more difficult for their rotten party," and she did. Along with Wake, Stein researched other brave women who had used their power to fight, resist, and rescue, and selected ten as exemplars.

The next essay, by Eva Fogelman, author of *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (1994), examines what motivated some people to stand up. Fogelman first challenges the notion that men and women are different when it comes to empathy and courage. She explains how beliefs about male and female psychology have led

to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of women's actions during the War:

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 missions outside the home.

Based on the ten figures Stein selected, depicted together in the tapestry pictured on the front cover, Fogelman shows how, on the contrary, women acted fearlessly outside their homes. She concludes by stressing the importance of learning about the actions of these courageous females because, as Albert Schweitzer once explained, "example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing."

And so follow ten essays on ten fierce females: Anne Frank, Ruth Gruber, Vitka Kempner, Noor Inayat Khan, Zivia Lubetkin, Gertrud Luckner, Nadezhda Popova, Hadassah Bimko Rosensaft, Hannah Senesh, and Nancy Wake. Though written from different perspectives and with different voices (son, friend, activist, scholar, etc.), these short texts follow a similar structure, providing a biography of each woman spanning her entire life—not just the time of the Holocaust—along with a welcome list for further readings. What makes these stories particularly effective is that the authors do not present them as extraordinary women, but rather as normal women who, under extraordinary circumstances, made heroic choices.


The essays are illustrated with the individual tapestries Stein created for each woman. For these, Stein combined archival photographs, documents,

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and texts with multiple fabrics and her pantheon of (female) Exemplars—Wonder Woman, Princess Mononoke, Storm, Nausicaa, Kannon, and Lady Gaga—that she had developed in previous projects, as described in an essay by Gail Levin. The iconography and materiality of the tapestries are so rich that I wish more space had been devoted to the works themselves—their imagery, composition, and technique, all the more since the reproductions, even the close-ups, do not do them justice.

The website *Encounter with Stein's Holocaust*

Heroes: Fierce Females <http://h2f2encounters.cyberhouse.emitto.net/> allows for interactive exploration of the tapestries. This site is part of an educational initiative which is the subject of a last essay. It describes how the series is used not only to trigger participants' empathy but to prompt them to become what Stein calls a "Brave Upstander" in their everyday life. As Steinem explains in her essay, "[C]hange is like a tree that grows from the bottom. The smallest act of kindness may have unpredictable results."

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