

“After All of it, She is Here”¹: Gender, Identity, and Empowerment in Women’s Ravensbrück Memoirs

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This paper examines how gender and identity function in the personal memoirs of female Holocaust survivors. The memoirs of Nanda Herbermann and Sara Tuvel Bernstein, two survivors of Ravensbrück, the Nazis' concentration camp for women, are explored as case studies of how feminine gender identity influenced female inmates' experiences and recollections of life in Nazi concentration camps. The different backgrounds of these women, as a German Catholic and a Jew, respectively, also affected their lives as inmates, and influenced how they constructed their personal narratives and identities through memoirs. Thus, gender and other aspects of personal identity intertwined both during their time in Ravensbrück and in their writings of their experiences. Their memoirs, moreover, serve as means of personal empowerment as they rewrote themselves into history on their own terms. These memoirs, therefore, enhance our understanding of the gendered and the personal dimensions of the Nazi concentration camp systems and the Holocaust.

In her memoir, *The Blessed Abyss*, Nanda Herbermann, a German Catholic survivor of the Nazis' Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women, recalled meeting several new inmates that would be joining her in the camp.² She spoke of her desire to know about the personal histories and memories of “these newly delivered women.” Herbermann wanted to know who they were before entering Ravensbrück and what they “had already been through and experienced, how they had all been taken from their homes, away from their husbands and children.”³ Essentially, Herbermann took comfort in coming to know her fellow inmates as she noted that they relied upon one another to “help each other bear up” in the horrific environment of the concentration camp as each day as a prisoner provoked such questions as: “Who would no longer lie among us during the next night?”⁴

The above insights from Herbermann remind us of the importance of examining the more personal side of the history of the Third Reich as survivors' recollections of their experiences in concentration camps can help us understand the deeply personal ways in which the Holocaust shaped the lives of those subjected to its horrors. Memoirs are particularly valuable primary sources for exploring these issues as they offer insight into how individuals retrospectively perceive their identities as inmates in the dehumanizing enterprise of the Nazi concentration camps, where prisoners were largely defined by the coloured triangles sewn on their garments.

¹ The quotation in the title is taken from Sara Tuvel Bernstein, with Louise Loots Thornton and Marlene Bernstein Samuels, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival* (New York: Berkley Books, 1999), 307.

² Nanda Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss: Inmate #6582 in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women*, eds. Hester Baer and Elizabeth R. Baer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000).

³ Ibid, 214.

⁴ Ibid, 214-215.

Women's Holocaust memoirs in particular reveal the distinct ways in which female inmates experienced life in concentration camps as gender and their feminine identities played important roles in shaping their experiences and recollections. Both Herbermann's memoir, and *The Seamstress*, the memoir of another Ravensbrück survivor, Sara Tuvel Bernstein, who was a Romanian Jew, provide rich insight into how notions of femininity and the female experience informed women's personal memories of the camp as gendered beings.⁵ The different backgrounds of these women also affected their lives as inmates, and influenced how they constructed their personal narratives and identities through memoirs. Thus, gender and other aspects of personal identity intertwined both during their time in Ravensbrück and in their writings of their experiences. Importantly, Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein's use of memoirs allowed them to assert agency because these stories serve as an affirmation of their individual identities as women despite the patriarchal nature of the Third Reich. Therefore, these women effectively rewrote themselves into history on their own terms and in their own ways. Thus, women's Ravensbrück memoirs are important to consider because they enhance our understanding of the gendered and the personal dimensions of the Nazi concentration camp systems and the Holocaust.

Before we examine Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein's memoirs in more detail, it is necessary to address the larger historiographical debates surrounding the daily lives of women in Ravensbrück, and the issues concerning gender, the Holocaust and women's Holocaust memoirs. Various scholars have investigated Ravensbrück in terms of the complex social dynamics of the camp, the experiences of both Jewish and non-Jewish inmates, and the overall significance of this camp to the Holocaust. Historian Jack G. Morrison provides an extensive examination of the everyday lives of Ravensbrück inmates from the camp's opening in May of 1939 to its liberation by the Red Army in 1945, and focuses upon the various types of female prisoners who were present in the camp, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Communists, and women who were classified by the Nazis as "Asocials," including prostitutes and lesbians. He states, for example, that the camp was structured hierarchically according to prisoner categories; while the political prisoners received better food than most others, and were given opportunities to become part of the camp power structure through roles as prisoner officials, Jewish prisoners faced the harshest living conditions and "were rarely given desirable work assignments."⁶ In contrast to Morrison's more general overview of the camp, historian Rochelle G. Saidel explores how Jewish women specifically experienced life in Ravensbrück. She explains that while Jewish women were a minority group in the camp, "there was always a Jewish presence" in the six years of its operations.⁷ According to Saidel, Jewish women's lives as inmates were particularly complex as they "had to confront certain questions both as Jews and as women" as anti-Semitism comprised an important part of Nazi ideology and policy.⁸

⁵ Sara Tuvel Bernstein, with Louise Loots Thornton and Marlene Bernstein Samuels, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival* (New York: Berkley Books, 1999).

⁶ Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp, 1939-45* (Princeton: Markus Weiner, 2000), 80-81; 72-73.

⁷ Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 40.

⁸ Ibid, 22; for an extensive study of how Jewish women and families navigated life in Nazi Germany, see Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

While Morrison and Saidel focus upon Ravensbrück specifically, other historians have looked at the Holocaust as a whole through the lens of gender. Within the historiography of the Holocaust, there has been some debate concerning the implications and the legitimacy of approaching this event from a gender perspective. Historian Myrna Goldberg writes that examining how gender functioned in the Holocaust “is fraught with risks, not the least of which is the fear that such an approach trivializes the Holocaust or politicizes it or even eclipses historical, philosophical, sociological, and theological interpretations.” Even so, she defends the gender approach to Holocaust Studies, and argues that scholarly attention should be given to the similar and the different ways in which women and men experienced the Holocaust in the same way that attention is given to the experiences of Jews and non-Jews.⁹ Additionally, the scholar John K. Roth notes that gender and women’s experiences received little attention within Holocaust scholarship “until the 1990s were well along” as previous historiographical debates had continued as though “victims and witnesses... were genderless.”¹⁰ He argues, however, that studying women and the Holocaust “is legitimate and necessary” because considering women’s experiences can add to our understanding of the “particularities” of the event.¹¹ Along similar lines, historian Pascale Rachel Bos posits that “because of gender, men and women experience the same treatment in different ways,” and thus, gender played an important role in how survivors experienced, remembered, and wrote about the Holocaust in personal narratives.¹²

While Goldberg, Roth, and Bos examine the values of studying women and gender in relation to the Holocaust, other scholars have explored how female survivors’ autobiographical writing adds to our knowledge of the event. The scholar S. Lillian Kramer explains the ways in which women’s Holocaust memoirs differ from those of their male counterparts. She states, for example, that “among the topics absent in male writing are the ways female sexuality and motherhood added burdens to the normative Holocaust ordeal.” She continues to note that women’s recollections tend to include descriptions of “the cooperative networks women prisoners developed, and the manner in which female cooperation and interdependence contributed to survival.”¹³ Historian Andreas Lixl-Purcell approaches women’s Holocaust writing in a slightly different way, and argues that memoirs enable women to become “mediators of historical knowledge,” and to take on “new roles of political behaviour.”¹⁴ He concludes that while memoirs may contain historical inaccuracies when it comes to specific details, these sources are still extremely valuable for “humanising” the memory of the Holocaust.¹⁵ Women’s

⁹ Myrna Goldberg, “Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust,” in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 152.

¹⁰ John K. Roth, “Equality, Neutrality, Particularity: Perspectives on Women and the Holocaust,” in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, eds. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 10.

¹¹ Ibid, 6.

¹² Pascale Rachel Bos, “Women and the Holocaust: Analyzing Gender Difference,” in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, eds. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 31, 33.

¹³ S. Lillian Kremer, *Women’s Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 4.

¹⁴ Andreas Lixl-Purcell, “Memoirs as History,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 39, 1994: 228.

¹⁵ Ibid, 238.

writing in particular, he contends, allows us to gain insight into “gender-specific issues” as patriarchy and sexual discrimination comprised additional layers to women’s experiences.¹⁶ Historian Sara R. Horowitz, moreover, underscores the importance of studying “gender-wounding” in texts produced by male and female Holocaust survivors as “the Nazi genocide destabilized the boundaries of the self,” which resulted in the “unmaking [of] the gendered self.”¹⁷ She states that women’s memoirs provide valuable insights into “experiences unique to women” which are not often found in memoirs penned by male survivors. These experiences include: “menarche, menstruation, and pregnancy in the concentration camps; the strategies some women devised to endure and survive... and the way women reconstruct shattered paradigms of meaning in the face of cultural and personal displacement.”¹⁸

“Lost in the Sea of Women”¹⁹: Gendered Experience in Ravensbrück

It is within this historiographical context that we can begin to examine how gender and identity function in Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein’s memoirs, and how their recollections reflect the specific ways in which women experienced life in concentration camps as gendered beings. Gender factored into both women’s experiences even during their first days in the camp as they reflected upon how inmates were processed into the camp system; this procedure included the shaving of most women’s heads as a means of lice prevention. While her own head was not shaved, Herbermann recalled feeling “deep sympathy for the women who were robbed of their often beautiful hair.”²⁰ She elaborated upon the distress felt by the women surrounding her as their heads were shaved, and noted that “some began to scream like wild animals.” Herbermann continued to state that she was “never able to get used to these shorn women,” and that through the loss of their hair, these women had lost a part of their feminine selves.²¹

Tuvel Bernstein also recalled the process of head shaving on her first day in Ravensbrück. Unlike Herbermann, her hair was shaved off, and this proved to be a traumatizing experience. She described how “a hot burning stung [her] eyelids” as “tears gather[ed]” while a camp guard shaved her head.²² She proceeded to note that after she and the other prisoners around her had their heads shaved, they “were no longer the strong women who had been able to endure hard labor, wartime conditions, and separation from our families and friends. The shearing of our heads... the stealing of our clothes and everything we had owned, took us from the last traces of who we had been.”²³ She continued to explain that she mourned the loss of her hair even more than the loss of her clothes and other personal belongings, and asked herself: “Who was I without my hair?”²⁴ Thus, hair is presented as being intrinsically connected to feminine identity

¹⁶ Ibid, 227, 235.

¹⁷ Sara R. Horowitz, “Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 366, 376.

¹⁸ Ibid, 366.

¹⁹ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 174.

²⁰ Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 178.

²¹ Ibid, 111.

²² Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 197.

²³ Ibid, 198-199.

²⁴ Ibid, 199, 204.

in both Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein's accounts. A sense of the feminine self was lost with the shaving of prisoners' hair, and this process had deep psychological impacts upon these women. The effects of having their heads shaved sometimes had tragic consequences as Morrison notes that some women were so distraught after losing their hair, they "committed suicide by throwing themselves on the electrically charged barbed wire...because they had just had their heads shaved."²⁵

These themes of femininity and its connection to women's physical bodies are also seen in Herbermann's and Tuvel Bernstein's descriptions of pregnancy and the fates of pregnant women. While she did not report on how pregnant women were treated in Ravensbrück, Tuvel Bernstein recalled how prior to her time in the concentration camp, she and her younger sister, Zipporah, spent approximately three months in a work camp after they were captured by soldiers in a "Gentile" neighbourhood in Budapest as Jews were not allowed in that particular area of the city.²⁶ Zipporah was pregnant during this time, and met tragic ends in the camp as she was shot and killed by a guard who justified this murder by stating that "she shouldn't have gotten herself pregnant, the whore!"²⁷ Thus, Zipporah was targeted and killed both as a Jew and as a woman as racism and sexism combined and culminated in her heartrending death.

Unlike Tuvel Bernstein, Herbermann did provide descriptions of the situations of pregnant women in Ravensbrück in her memoir. She expressed her horror at how "newly born children of young mothers, who had been taken into custody during their pregnancy, were killed, or the fetuses were aborted before birth." She continued to state that some of the pregnant women she encountered at Ravensbrück sought comfort and support from her as they "confessed... that they were pregnant and hoped they would be released in time." These women, unfortunately, "were not released, nor did they bear a child."²⁸ Therefore, as we can see, pregnancy complicated women's lives as prisoners. Herbermann's recollections show us that pregnancy proved to be an additional layer of emotional and physical stress as these female inmates did not have control over their own bodies while imprisoned in the concentration camp.

Other instances in Herbermann's memoir also illuminate upon this issue of Ravensbrück inmates not having autonomy over their own bodies; these instances include her descriptions of some women being subjected to sexual violence and forced prostitution. While Tuvel Bernstein did not report on similar matters, Herbermann had a unique vantage point with which to witness these occurrences. Her status as a "Gentile" prisoner allowed her to obtain a position as a block elder of Block II, otherwise known as the "prostitutes' block." She recalled how some of the prostitutes she supervised were sent to bordellos in various concentration camps for men in order to "service" the male inmates. She noted that: "approximately every three months, eight to ten inmates, primarily from my block, were requisitioned for the bordello of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp for men, as well as for other camps for men."²⁹ Herbermann elicited her disgust and anger at how these women were treated and used, and stated, for example: "it is a horrible fact that people who had been imprisoned for their depravity, and for 'endangering

²⁵ Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life*, 33.

²⁶ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 158-159.

²⁷ Ibid, 162.

²⁸ Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 170.

²⁹ Ibid, 131.

human society,' were now commanded by the state, which held them for this precise reason, to be depraved again." She continued to explain how after their return from another camp, some of the prostitutes revealed to Herbermann "gruesome" descriptions of their experiences in the bordellos of Mauthausen and other camps.³⁰ She further described how some women did not survive the bordellos; she focused upon one young woman in particular, her "beautiful little Frieda," whom Herbermann had attempted to help and support during her time in Block II. Frieda, unfortunately, was sent to the bordello in Mauthausen, and Herbermann noted that she "never came back," and that she had died while in the bordello.³¹ These insights from Herbermann connect to arguments made by historian Judith Tydor Baumel, who notes that women's first-person Holocaust accounts can provide exceptional insight into the "victimization, [and] humiliation" experienced by women specifically in concentration camps.³² She also states that women experienced "unique victimization" that was strongly connected to their gendered bodies.³³ Herbermann's descriptions of the sexual violence faced by women who were forced into prostitution in men's camps demonstrate the ways in which Ravensbrück inmates experienced life both as prisoners and as women. Her recollections also underscore how themes of gender, sexuality, and the physical body combined to affect women's lives as inmates.

While Ravensbrück inmates faced horrific conditions and experiences that were directly related to notions of femininity and its connection to women's bodies, these inmates also found strength and survival tactics that can be linked to gender. Both Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann noted how they found comfort, solace, and sympathy in their fellow inmates, and relied upon the women surrounding them for the will to survive. Importantly, the language used in their descriptions reveals a certain gendered understanding of the significance of these close bonds. For example, Tuvel Bernstein recalled how she felt a mixture of motherly and sisterly love for the women with whom she shared her experiences at Ravensbrück; these women included her younger sister Esther, and their two close friends, Ellen and Lily. She specifically noted that as she was the oldest out of the four women, she "felt completely responsible for these three young girls," and that to her, they "were all sisters." She resolved that because of this, she "had to do everything in [her] power" to ensure their survival.³⁴ She noted that they found sisterly strength in each other, and that this strength was integral in keeping them alive.³⁵ These close relationships between women, she observed, gave inmates a reason to live, and that "having a sister, a cousin, or a friend in the camp with you was sometimes the only thing that gave you the courage to go on; each lived solely for the other."³⁶

Herbermann made similar remarks in her memoir about the importance of personal ties with her fellow inmates. While she recalled having initial ambivalence toward the prostitutes she

³⁰ Ibid, 132.

³¹ Ibid, 131.

³² Judith Tydor Baumel, "'You Said the Words You Wanted Me to Hear But I Heard the Words You Couldn't Bring Yourself to Say': Women's First Person Accounts of the Holocaust," *Oral History Review* 27, no. 1 (2000): 32.

³³ Ibid, 17.

³⁴ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 210.

³⁵ Ibid, 206.

³⁶ Ibid, 243.

supervised as block elder, and denounced them as “morally ruined,”³⁷ over time, she grew to sympathize with and even feel maternal love toward these women. She affectionately referred to them as “her prostitutes,” and noted her sadness at leaving these women when she was transferred to a different block. She recalled, for example, that “I... could not hold back tears while taking leave of my prostitutes, to whom I had become so close, to whom I clung with sincere, solicitous love.” Herbermann continued to describe how “her prostitutes” had referred to her as their mother, and she concluded that they would always be in her heart.³⁸ These sisterly and motherly relationships between female inmates, moreover, are important to consider as Kremer explains that such recollections of close bonds are often unique to women’s Holocaust memoirs. She notes that while women tend to emphasize the love and support they received from their fellow inmates and its connection to “sustain[ing] them,” and “assur[ing] them of their worth,” men’s narratives, in contrast, focus more upon “the theme of individuality, of one’s own resourcefulness,” which “predominates over the theme of communal cooperation.”³⁹ Thus, as we can see, the relationships formed between female inmates and the language used to describe these bonds directly connected to their understanding of themselves and those surrounding them as gendered, feminine beings.

These relationships, moreover, also provided these women with means of resistance against the oppressive and dehumanizing concentration camp experience as both Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann recalled how the maternal instincts they felt for their fellow inmates drove them to commit acts of defiance in their endeavours to take care of the women surrounding them. Tuvel Bernstein explained that because of the motherly responsibility she felt for Ellen, Esther, and Lily, she risked severe punishment by stealing vegetables and trading them with other inmates for bread. She recalled how she often volunteered to go to the kitchen in the mornings to obtain the coffee served to her barracks, and how she took the opportunity while doing so to also “sneak radishes or carrots,” in order to exchange these items with the nearby Polish prisoners who “received real bread.”⁴⁰ She stated that she would not allow the others to attempt such a task due to the fact that she was the oldest, and thus she felt compelled to take on a maternal role and claim responsibility for ensuring the survival of her camp family.⁴¹

Herbermann’s maternal instincts also led her to risk punishment. She explained that she “dared to make... forbidden visit[s] to the sick in the sick bay” in order to watch over a “lovely little Gypsy girl” with whom she felt an intense connection. She noted that she felt a maternal need to look out for and to care for this young girl, and that even just a few moments with her brought Herbermann great comfort.⁴² When this girl died, Herbermann stated that she again risked punishment in order to bring the girl “a little wreath of forget-me-nots... as a last salutation,” as she had been “very attached” to her and wanted to honour the “black-haired little bird” that had given her strength.⁴³ Herbermann also recognized the importance of mother-daughter relationships when she recalled another instance of defiance as she endeavoured to reunite a

³⁷ Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 136.

³⁸ Ibid, 193.

³⁹ Kremer, *Women’s Holocaust Writing*, 8.

⁴⁰ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 219.

⁴¹ Ibid, 220.

⁴² Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 216.

⁴³ Ibid, 216-217.

mother and daughter before the mother was sent to her death. The daughter had approached Herbermann for help in the matter, and Herbermann viewed it as her “duty” to see the two women, who were housed in different blocks, reunited.⁴⁴ She was successful in this endeavour as she described the tearful reunion between the two women, and continued to note its lasting impact on her as “through these last commonly experienced minutes with her mother and me, [the daughter] had become... a piece of me.” Herbermann explained that following the mother’s death, she continued to look out for the daughter, who “clung” to Herbermann “with childlike love.”⁴⁵ Motherly instincts, therefore, impacted how both Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann navigated their lives in Ravensbrück. Their acts of defiance can thus be seen as forms of gendered resistance as each of these women placed a large amount of value upon their maternal relationships with others, which in turn, influenced their behaviour and their actions while in the concentration camp.

“I Would Have Liked to Have Been Somebody”⁴⁶: Memoirs as a Form of Empowerment

While the gendered nature of their experiences in Ravensbrück is important to examine, it is also imperative to consider the significance of the memoir itself as the telling of their personal stories served to empower both Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann. Gender, along with other aspects of their identities and backgrounds, played important roles in these women’s reasons for constructing their memoirs. As Horowitz contends, while gender is important as “survivors’ recollections are inevitably gendered... gender does not constitute the totality of one’s experience.”⁴⁷ In the final pages of her memoir, Herbermann asked: “Why am I now publishing this book, which is truly written with my lifeblood?”⁴⁸ She explained that a major factor in her purposes for compiling her personal story had to do with her identity as a German.⁴⁹ She wanted her memoir, which was originally published in German shortly after the end of World War Two,⁵⁰ to serve both moral and didactic purposes as she explained that: “the entire German people is now being held responsible by many parties for the horrible and abominable things that occurred in concentration camps.” She continued to state that this blame was “not right,” and posited that not all Germans were involved with the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Herbermann concluded that German survivors of the concentration camps had an “obligation” to help others understand that the whole of “the German people may not and cannot be simply equated with these Nazi criminals.”⁵¹

Just as Herbermann’s German identity was an integral component in her reasons for writing her memoir, Tuvel Bernstein’s identity as a Jew factored into the reasons behind telling her story. In her preface to *The Seamstress*, Tuvel Bernstein’s daughter-in-law, Louise Loots Thornton,

⁴⁴ Ibid, 207.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 208.

⁴⁶ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, xxiv.

⁴⁷ Horowitz, “Women in Holocaust Literature,” 370-371.

⁴⁸ Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 244.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 245.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth R. Baer, “Holocaust Politics: Nanda Herbermann as a Test Case,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1, no. 2 (2008), 95.

⁵¹ Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 245.

described how Tuvel Bernstein became inspired and compelled to recount her experiences in Ravensbrück. She explained that Tuvel Bernstein had attended a lecture about the Holocaust in the mid-1960s, and had been extremely offended when the lecturer “claimed that the Holocaust wasn’t nearly as bad as Jewish people made it out to be,” while he also declared that “Jews took what happened and embellished it... so people would feel sorry for them.” Loots Thornton concluded that Tuvel Bernstein’s anger at these claims resulted in her resolve to tell her own story as a Jewish survivor of a Nazi concentration camp.⁵² Additionally, Tuvel Bernstein herself explained that while her experiences in the camp were painful to recall, and that “for many years [she] could not think about the war” as it resulted in traumatizing flashbacks and nightmares, she still felt that her story as a Jew was important, and that it needed to be told as she was fortunate enough to have survived.⁵³ As we can see, both Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein felt the need to recount their personal memories of Ravensbrück even if this meant reliving painful experiences. Their narratives thus serve as an affirmation of the self while they simultaneously allow each of these women to assert personal agency. Furthermore, these themes of asserting one’s personal identity through the medium of memoir connect to the insights of historian Jerry Samet, who notes that “through memory and testimony [Holocaust survivors] are redeemed,” and “repersonalized.”⁵⁴ Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein’s memoirs can therefore be viewed as their efforts toward claiming ownership over their identities not just as women, but also as a German and as a Jew, respectively.

Although these aspects of Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann’s identities served as significant reasons behind their memoirs, gender was also a factor. While they were not actively writing against patriarchy, or necessarily with a feminist agenda, both women acknowledged the patriarchal nature of society at the time and how their status as women affected their daily lives. For example, early in her memoir, Tuvel Bernstein recalled an instance during her childhood when her father discouraged her educational pursuits by stating that “An education is wasted on a girl. Let a boy take her place. She can stay at home and learn what she really needs to know-how to make a decent meal.”⁵⁵ Herbermann also noted how as a woman, she was viewed as being subordinate to her male counterparts. She explained that prior to her time at Ravensbrück, she was arrested and questioned by the Gestapo for her alleged involvement in a Catholic anti-Nazi resistance movement. Herbermann described how her gender factored into the questioning, and recalled how she was viewed by these Gestapo officers as being weak simply because she was a woman.⁵⁶ Thus, the gender of a memoir’s author is important to consider; while patriarchy was not explicitly examined or directly challenged in either Tuvel Bernstein or Herbermann’s memoirs, it still had an implicit effect on how they recounted their personal memories. The memoir itself, moreover, allowed both of these writers to assert their voices as women. This is especially key when we consider women’s writing in relation to the larger discourse surrounding

⁵² Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, x.

⁵³ Ibid, 331-332.

⁵⁴ Jerry Samet, “The Holocaust and the Imperative to Remember,” in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 426-427.

⁵⁵ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 31.

⁵⁶ Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 78.

the Holocaust as studies of this event tend to privilege men's accounts over women's,⁵⁷ and as Bos notes, "a supposedly 'neutral' (but really 'male') emphasis is reinforced within the scholarship."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, by realizing the importance of their experiences as women and subsequently penning their personal stories, Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann's memoirs allow their voices to have a place in the public sphere, and thus add to our overall knowledge of women's lives during the Holocaust. As Baumel argues, "by letting the survivor speak for herself she becomes a subject- and not only an object- of history."⁵⁹

This agency, moreover, extended beyond Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein as individual women. Their focus was not only on recounting their own experiences, but also those of the women who surrounded them in Ravensbrück. This works to also empower their "camp sisters" and "camp daughters." Near the end of her memoir, Tuvel Bernstein described her pride in Esther, Ellen, Lily, and herself for surviving the horrific conditions of the concentration camp, and noted her happiness in the fact that they "did not let [them]selves be dragged either into selfishness or into despair."⁶⁰ She continued to explain that they had been lucky to have survived the camp, and lucky to have had each other, and therefore, her own personal story would be incomplete without these three other women.⁶¹ Similarly, Herbermann dedicated her memoir to her "fellow prisoners,"⁶² while she also posited that "we inmates are people, too."⁶³ Furthermore, at one point in her memoir, she spoke on behalf of "her prostitutes," and noted that: "this must be a task of the new state and also the Church in the future, to give these children who are outcasts from human society a chance to refine and better themselves in an environment not ruled by whips and rubber truncheons, but rather by goodness, understanding, and patience."⁶⁴ In doing this, Herbermann effectively gave a voice to those often marginalized, and asserted their importance as individuals. Her interactions with "her prostitutes" in Block II left a lasting impact on her as she later penned a novel, *Was Liebe erträgt* (*What Love Endures*), which was devoted to examining the harsh conditions faced by prostitutes.⁶⁵ By telling their own experiences intermingled with how their "camp families" traversed life as inmates, Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann preserved the memories of these other women along with their own, and therefore, they empowered these women while they simultaneously empowered themselves.

Conclusions

Thus, as we have seen, gender and personal identity played important roles in the lives of these Ravensbrück survivors both during their time in the camp, and in the writing of their memoirs.

⁵⁷ Bos, "Women and the Holocaust," 38-39; see also Karin Doerr, "Memories of History: Women and the Holocaust in Autobiographical and Fictional Memoirs," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 18, no. 3 (2000), 50, 60.

⁵⁸ Bos, "Women and the Holocaust," 38.

⁵⁹ Baumel, "You Said the Words You Wanted Me to Hear," 17.

⁶⁰ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 331.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁶² Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 57.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁵ Baer, "Holocaust Politics," 98.

Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein's memoirs provide rich insight into how femininity and the female experience influenced women's personal memories of the camp as gendered beings as seen with issues concerning women's physical bodies, which included the shaving of inmates' hair and the conditions faced by pregnant women in the camp. Tuvel Bernstein and Herbermann's different backgrounds, as a German and a Jew, respectively, also influenced how they constructed their personal narratives and identities through memoirs which reminds us of the importance of considering other aspects of one's personal identity alongside gender in order to gain a more complete understanding of individuals' lives in Nazi concentration camps. Gender, however, still comprised an important component in the compiling of Herbermann and Tuvel Bernstein's personal narratives as their stories serve as a form of empowerment for their voices as individual women, while their memoirs simultaneously assert the importance of their fellow female inmates. These memoirs, moreover, keep the memories and experiences of individual women alive, which can only enrich our knowledge of the gendered and the personal dimensions of the Holocaust and of women's lives in the Third Reich. As Tuvel Bernstein proudly declared: "I was not forgotten. Oh, I was not forgotten!"⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 183.

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