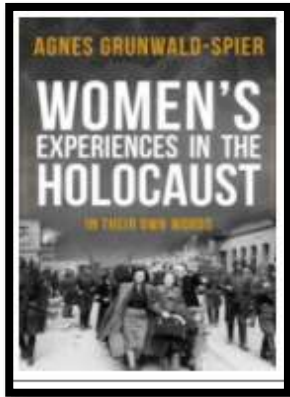


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*Book Review on Agnes G Spier's **Women's Experiences In The Holocaust In Their Own Words***
Words by Mehak Burza



The domain of the Holocaust accounts has (as an unspoken rule) remained a male impacted and a male overwhelmed one. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed numerous Holocaust accounts, with authors like Primo Levi, Eliezer Wiesel, Edward Lewis Wallant and Benjamin Jacobs (among several others), expounding widely on their encounters of the different death camps and their endurance techniques in their journals. Regardless of whether it is the repetitive figure of the muselmann, the standards inside the death camps, for example, the law of the larder, portraying the expelling scene in the inhumane imprisonments or the endurance methodologies embraced, the conversation and depiction surrounds the male gender.

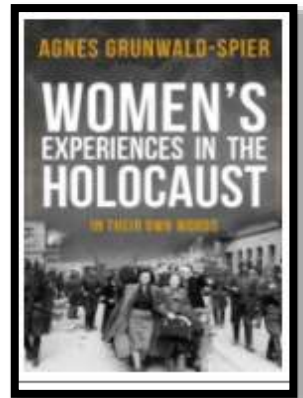
Notwithstanding Joan Ringelblum's acknowledgment of women, the study surrounding the Holocaust Literature did not experience any critical change until the later years of the twentieth century. Since the Holocaust narratives to a great extent overlooked the differentiations of sexual orientation, the cataclysmic occurrence was viewed as a homogenous one, which influenced the Jewish populace the same, independent of the gender. Further, the stance of the Holocaust trauma just comprised of the sufferings, encounters and dreadful recollections of the male gender. The feminist scholarship of the Holocaust started in the later years of the twentieth century as there felt a need to acknowledge and archive the sufferings and encounters of the female gender independently.

The conference on "Women Surviving: The Holocaust" held at Stern College on March 28, 1983, denoted the first significant advance in this direction. This was followed by several publications on women and Holocaust as well as memoirs by women survivors of the Holocaust. The upsurge of the Holocaust accounts surrounding women sheds a focus on the darker side, which is useful in giving a developing and extension of information on the authentic events, such as the Holocaust. Utilizing gender as a structure for investigation is just to turn out to be progressively mindful to the potential outcomes of one of the significant hub of all social associations—together with age, class, race and religion. It is simply an expository methodology executed so as to accomplish the most intensive getting conceivable. The ability to adjust, ad lib

and continue makes women the genuine legends as well as lights up a dull zone of the Holocaust that needs investigation.

Agnes Grunwald Spier's book, *Women's Experiences In The Holocaust In Their Own Words*, marks a significant leap in the arena of feminist scholarship in the twenty first century. Emmanuel Ringelblum in his *Notes on Warsaw Ghetto* first published in 1952, asserting the need for acknowledgement of female gender in the Holocaust stated, "the future historian would have to dedicate a proper page to the Jewish women during this war. She will capture an important part in this Jewish history for her courage and ability to survive" (380). Agnes Grunwald Spier's book carries forward the legacy of this statement. Entirely dedicated to the role of women in the Holocaust, the book is an encyclopedia of facts in itself, foraying into the unknown terrains of the unsung heroines of the Holocaust, an event that is defined by death.

With more than a dozen chapters, each extensively covering a particular theme, the book elucidates in detail, the varied roles that women undertook during the Holocaust, many of which were hitherto unknown. Agnes substantiates her argument of gendered approach, in the introductory chapter of her book, based on the existing



scholarship of Mary Felstiner, Emmanuel Ringelblum, Dalia Ofer and Leonore Weitzman and Ruth Bondy. Whereas Mary Felstiner explored the gendered selections at the concentration camps, Ringelblum talked about the role reversals of the Jewish populace with women becoming the new breadwinners for the family. Ofer and Weitzman, who discuss the pre war gender specific worlds of the Jews, further elaborate this idea. Ruth Bondy, a Holocaust survivor, endured the inhumane treatments of the three concentration camps of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen. Initially skeptical about the gender differences, Ruth later took up the task herself and wrote extensively on gender differences in Theresienstadt and Birkenau.

Using the analyses of Ruth Bondy as her standpoint, Agnes Grunwald Spier begins her first chapter wherein she mentions relevant excerpts from Bondy's work *Whole Fragments* and discusses the gender differences highlighting the fact how the genders responded to their detainment differently. In the chapters that follow, Agnes Spier classifies women under various categories and narrates their experience in verbatim. For instance she mentions how miraculously the entire Erbrich family manage to survive the ordeal of the concentration camps, the case of Jerzyk, considered to be the only child suicide of the Holocaust so far and the experience of camp sisters underlining the notions of "connectedness, nurturance and care-giving" (58). Post the familial classification, Agnes explores the career domains and recounts the

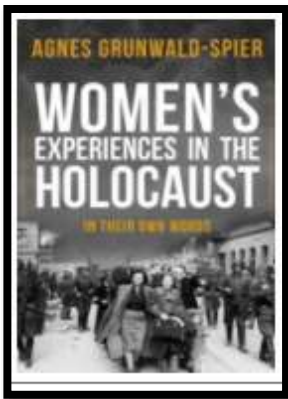
experiences of Margaret Bergman Lambert and Rita Levi Montalcini. The athletic career of the former and the medical career of the latter was disrupted and shattered by the Nazis.

Kristallnacht, commonly known as the 'Night of Broken Glass' became a watershed event as the German Nazis assaulted the European Jewry and their property and the need for documentation became an immeasurably significant issue. Agnes mentions daring, dauntless women like Mally Dienemann, Eva Riechmann and Hilde Auerbach, who mustered up the strength to overcome gender typecasts and arrange the necessary papers, destinations and visas so as to get their spouses and fathers discharged from the camps. Among her descriptions of resourceful women, she mentions Ruth Abraham of the Abraham family. Referring to her as a courageous woman she describes Ruth's escapades, whether it was wearing her coat inside out to hide the Jewish star symbol or her daring nature by which she helped her date Walter leave his furniture store after it was completely destroyed by the Nazis. Among the community leaders, Agnes describes Gisela Fleischmann unwavering efforts who, despite being arrested twice, risked her own life in order to provide the eyewitness reports and the arranged the rescue of the Polish Jews. The women doctors and nurses in the camp had an equally tough task. Agnes narrates the experience of Gisella Perl, an Auschwitz doctor chosen by Dr. Mengele. Perl, in order to save the conceived mothers, performed

the gruesome task of delivering their babies before the due date and strangling them so that the mothers would be sent back to work.

Resistance during the stay in the concentration camps especially of the female prisoners is seldom talked about. Agnes Grunwald Spier discusses the acts of resistance by the Jewish women both inside and outside the death camps. The former category includes Haviva Reik's journey from a woman parachutist to a Zionist hero along with others such as Surika Braverman, Hannah Szenes and Sara Ginaite who fought vehemently against the anti-Semitism. The latter category involves the brave acts by the female prisoners of attacking the SS guards while entering the gas chambers, throwing shoes at their faces when asked to undress completely and smuggling gunpowder from the weapons factory to the camp by the young Jewish women, that ultimately culminated in the explosion of the camp. Even trivial acts of the female prisoners like writing diaries, keeping themselves clean, smuggling food and discussing recipes were considered acts of resistance. Among the many women diarists that Agnes mentions, Helga Weiss deserves a special reference. Weiss, a survivor of four death camps, narrates in her diary the omnipresent fear of being caught hiding vegetables in her underclothing. At 92, Helga still proudly imparts the lessons of the Holocaust in her interviews.

Along the thread of these acts of resistance, the author also mentions another important involvement of the young Jewish women as courier girls or *Kashariyot*. These young ladies utilized bogus papers to cover their Jewish identities and carried reports, cash and clinical supplies all through Poland, Lithuania and parts of Russia. Risking their lives and being in constant danger everyday, the heroic young ladies like Chajke, Frumka, Ziva Lubetkin and Bronka Klibanski, served as lifesavers for data and information. Apart from this, Agnes surveys yet another profession of the female artists and musicians. The painter, Tova Berlinksi, the pianists, Alice Sommer and



Zuzana Ruzickova and the potter, Grete Marks found sustenance in their respective professions that made their camp life easy and continued to aid their survival after the Holocaust.

The women mentioned until here share only the accident of being born into Jewish households and consequently being Jewish by birth.

The author however has transcended the scope of describing only the Jewish women. In her penultimate chapter, she cites a few names of non-Jewish women and recounts their Holocaust experiences. Although the non-Jewish women were in slightly better conditions than the Jewish women, but nevertheless, food shortages, fear of parting with loved ones, the agony of leaving the

household, forging papers for escape and the post traumatic stress were common to both Jewish and non-Jewish women. In the final chapter, dedicated to witnessing the post-war trials, Agnes discusses three women, Patsy Crampton, Norma Falk and Alma Soller who were not the victims of the catastrophic event but shared the common fate of witnessing the proof of the Nazi wrongdoings. While former two had a short nursing career, the latter was the last enduring member of the Nuremberg Trials.

The "Afterword" of the book serves as a sort of miniature biography of Leona Grunwald, Agnes's mother and highlights her mother's dauntless resolution to keep both of them safe and alive. It details Leona's experiences from her birth to the Budapest Ghetto deportation with Agnes and concludes with the liberation of Budapest Ghetto by the Russians. Agnes does not mention any further details as she has kept the reserved for her family memoir that is yet to be composed. The "Afterword" is followed by a "Glossary" section that catalogs the meanings of some major/important words (majorly German) used in the book.

As a Holocaust researcher, I can assert that Agnes Grunwald Spier's book is distinctive in many ways. Her book can be viewed as a pageant of micro memoirs, told by the Holocaust survivors in their own words, thus giving the book the required titular justification. In exploring both the traditional and non-traditional roles that the

Jewish as well as non-Jewish women undertook, Spier's book compasses a much wider scope. A microcosm of gendered holocaust experiences, it is by far the most expository work compiled on women experiences of the Holocaust, as each varied experience can be relived through the first hand accounts of the Holocaust survivors which Spier provides.

Title: Women's Experiences in the Holocaust: In Their Own Words

Author: Agnes Grunwald Spier

Publisher: Amberley Publishing

Available: [Amazon](#)

Works Cited

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About the Author



Agnes Grunwald Spier

A child survivor of Holocaust, Agnes Grunwald Spier post graduated in Holocaust Studies, which led her to research into Holocaust Rescuers 1999-2009 and the publication of *The Other Schindlers* in 2010, which has been translated into Danish and Brazilian-Portuguese. Her second book 'Who Betrayed The Jews?' published in 2016 was about betrayal. With many roles to her credit between 1967-2012, Agnes was honoured as an 'inspirational woman' by HMDT on International Women's Day 2012 and for 2019 was featured by the BOD in a series of tweeted messages. In 2016, she was honoured with an MBE by the Queen for her work as a founder Trustee of HMDT, services to the Jewish community and Holocaust awareness. In 2018, she received two Honorary Doctorates from Sheffield and Oxford Brookes Universities for her work on the Holocaust. Her interests are; theatre, ballet, paintings and galleries, porcelain and good food.

About the Reviewer



Mehak Burza

Mehak Burza is a Doctoral Research Scholar in the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia (New Delhi, India) and an Assistant Professor of English, University of Delhi. Her primary interests include Holocaust/Genocide Studies, Jewish Studies, Gender, Identity, Trauma Studies and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). She presented papers at national and international conferences. Her translations have been published in *Purple Ink,* the online journal of Brown University, Los Angeles. On the creative front, her short story and several poems have been published.

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