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### Family Hope and Support Through The Holocaust

Families are a needed support system in life that is sometimes taken for granted. There is always someone around who can help make situations and life easier. Families weren't around for each other during The Holocaust when families were separated and the world became dark. Jewish individuals were killed and separated by Nazi leaders wanting a country without Jewish influence. Families were needed to help one another survive and find some hope. Through the short story "The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick, the reader observes a small family that helps and cares for a child within the camps. In a similar way, the movie *La Vita è Bella* depicts a family that is held together by their light-hearted father who keeps faith they will be reunited again. Both instances show how important a family unit is, whether a "normal" family with parents and children or a group of people that come together, especially during The Holocaust.

Families during this time, as well as before, were a strong foundation for Jewish and Christians alike. These families were made of "a nuclear consumer unit whose adult members were partners in production and property" involved in their communities around them (Ofer). They led normal lives with work and time with each other. Parents headed the household with "the woman in charge of domestic life and child-rearing and the man serving as income earner" to create a balanced family together (Ofer). They were no different than any other German family during this time.

Even with so many similarities, the difference of faith caused pain and tragedy for many. Jewish and Christian faith have large differences in relation to holidays and religious practices. Instead of embracing cultural and religious differences within Germany, leaders turned against the Jewish people and forced them into harsh living and working situations as well as concentration camps with mass executions. With these tactics, “Nazis planned the total annihilation of the Jewish people” where they “focused their attacks on the discontinuity of the Jewish family support system” (Bar-On). Without families, the Nazis hoped that Jewish beliefs wouldn’t continue. Without children, there wouldn’t be a next generation and without parents, there wouldn’t be the love and support to help each other live another day.

Families remained strong for one another while facing these challenges. There are many examples of family workings through The Holocaust, both fictional and non-fictional, that show how important these bonds were. “The Shawl”, though only a few pages long, is packed with context and description about a family struggling together in a concentration camp. The two main characters, Rosa and Stella, are shown to be the motherly figure to Magda, a child they care for and hide from the Nazis. Stella, “a thin girl of fourteen, too small, with thin breasts of her own” barely anything to her as she imagines her “knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones” because of the lack of daily needs in the camps (Ozick, 516). Rosa sees beyond her current problems to support Magda, a baby only “fifteen months old” that “could not hold up her fat belly” while walking, her belly filled “with air, full and round” because she, along with others in the camp, didn’t have food to eat (517). Their living situation was gruesome but they did their best to continue to keep Magda hidden in their shawl. This shawl was believed to be magical, with the abilities to “nourish an infant for three days and three nights” and hide her

from the world (517). Magda stayed tucked inside and lived blissfully sucking on the magic shawl for nutrition, safe from enemy eyes all around.

The shawl kept Magda safe until it wasn't with her, and "Rosa saw that today Magda was going to die" without the protection of the shawl (518). In moments of panic and hardship, Rosa tried to find the shawl which had been stolen by Stella. "Rosa tore the shawl free" from Stella's grasp "and flew ... into the arena where Madga was crying and screaming" (519). She was too late, as she watched Madge "moving more and more into the smoky distance. Above the shoulder a helmet glinted", a helmet which belonged to a soldier leading Magda to her demise (519). Rosa watched in horror as her child, possibly her only good within the camps, was thrown against the fence and burst into pieces. She couldn't do anything to protect Magda anymore, so she had to stand watching the horror, trying not to scream. She knew that "if she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda's body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf's screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot" (520). She was forced to stand and watch, knowing there was nothing else she could do at that point in time to save that piece of her family.

This story shows the real horrors, the fear and hurt, that every Jewish individual faced during this time of hatred and persecution. Children were executed to meet the goal of breaking families apart and parents were forced to watch in pain. They were treated as animals, less than human beings. Instead of learning about the individuality of both Stella and Rosa, they are only seen as flesh and bone, nothing more to the soldiers or world around them. The Holocaust focused on destroying any intersectionality Jewish individuals had. Rather than look at their gender, socioeconomic standings, or even their upbringings, these individuals were placed in a category all their own and stripped of their humanity to become nothing.

Individuals found semblance of life and reality with one another while feeling like nothing. Jewish individuals came together with their similarities in life to help one another find hope in this dark time. Those that were alone found solace together while families tried to stay and work together. In an article through the Jewish Women's Archive, author Dalia Ofer describes how families faced these struggles in the camps and ghettos together, whether with their real families or people that were close to them. The majority of families were split down the middle when women and men were sent different ways. Marriages were broken, siblings were sent in different directions, and families disappeared within a matter of minutes. There is some evidence from this research showing that "there were fragments of family that remained intact, such as siblings and cousins who tried to maintain contact" doing whatever they could to stay together (Ofer). These little interactions kept some families together, but not all had this opportunity to reach out to one another.

For many that didn't have any family connections, they "created a kind of alternative family" with others around them (Ofer). Women especially bonded with other women whose "memories of family life were a source of strength even while they also aroused fear of loss and hope" (Ofer). These similarities pulled people together, finding solidarity with others who needed the same support and care. These new family structures of women and friends held onto one another in the hardest times and showed them they were not alone. In these situations where pain, loneliness, and suffering surrounded everyone, some glimmer of hope helped people believe change was on the horizon.

The two characters found in "The Shawl" needed one another to get through the agony of daily life. Rosa and Stella, who may be sisters, a daughter and mother, or friends, struggled together during the story. They didn't have anything else in life to hold onto as their livelihoods

were ripped away from them. Their bond together could help them through the pain day by day. While the reader doesn't see what happens after the death of Magda, one hopes Rosa and Stella would continue to support one another while facing the daily struggles in the camps.

The film *La Vita è Bella* shows a different, more upbeat family structure within the camps. Guido, the main character, is a comedic father that brings happiness to his family. Their life turns around when they are loaded into train cars and sent to a camp. Giosué, his young son, becomes curious asking questions about where they're going and what will happen to them. Instead of telling him the truth, Guido crafts a story about a secret vacation they're going on. Once at the camps, he morphs the story into a game they play to score points to win a prize (*La Vita è Bella*). As the movie progresses, German authorities go into a panic with the war coming to an end. Guido makes the decision for Giosué and himself to escape and hide before something else happens. While he hides Giosué, Guido goes off to find his wife Dora where he is caught by the guards and killed. He fought for his family up until his death, knowing the consequences he could face each time. But no matter what, he always found a ray of light in the world to show his family that there was still the chance to laugh in the darkest times.

Overall, the viewer sees how much Guido cares for his family and what he does to save them. Instead of being realistic with his son, the imaginative game prevents him from knowing the dark reality around him and keeps his hopes up that they will be back home soon. The same is true for Dora, as she also holds onto hope that family life will return. This family structure, though fictional, shows how relying on one another helped Giosué and Dora find a life together again. With the happy ending of the story, the viewer may question how realistic this family is within The Holocaust. Some may have had the opportunity to look out for one another like Guido's family, but not everyone had the ability to joke about their situation and survive.

To really know what families faced, researchers have used various letters and stories from real families to see how they depended on each other. In the ghettos, families faced “a constant state of tension between disintegration, on the one hand, and the preservation of solidarity by way of an enormous effort to maintain what might be termed “normality,” at a time of total absence of normality” (Ofer). There was nothing normal about this new life where they were in an unknown area, constantly watched by the enemy. Creating a normal life, or even the idea of something normal, was more difficult than ever. An article surrounding the idea of family and survival by Dan Bar-On looked specifically at real life stories from families during this time. One woman named Anat retells her time in a ghetto with her mother who worked to get children out of the ghettos secretly (Bar-On). When she would leave to help children escape, her mother assured Anat “she would come back and then she would leave” Anat alone, always promising that she would return (Bar-On). Anat quietly waited in their ghetto house for her mom to come back, knowing that she needed to hide to be safe from the world outside her window.

She did not know the true horrors as her mother protected and shielded her from the world outside. Her mother knew that she needed to help get Anat through the pain to have a safe and healthy life after things had passed. In the end of her story, Anat escaped with a teenager in a coal sack to be reunited with her mother who had been injured. She recalls the boy telling her that coal “doesn’t talk, doesn’t cry, doesn’t make a sound ... It simply lies there” as she was placed in the bag and carried to safety (Bar-On). As they traveled out of the ghetto, Anat found that her “mother was really injured. She had helped a group of children escape and they,” Nazi soldiers, had “shot at them” (Bar-On). As Anat was back with her mother and away from the ghetto, both of them felt at peace. Her mother had her daughter as well as other children that were saved. This family unit wasn’t just the mother and daughter, but the children that “were

alone” and had no other family (Bar-On). Anat’s mother was a caregiver to anyone that needed some protection and hope, even if it meant putting herself at risk. She created a family to help everyone get away safely and support those who were lost and alone.

Family units, both fictional and real, helped each other through their darkest moments during The Holocaust. In “The Shawl”, there is no telling what comes next for the main characters after Magda is gone, but one hopes that they will stay together and survive. In *La Vita è Bella*, Giosué and his mother are able to reunite after they leave the camps. Both fictional depictions relate to real life families looking out for one another knowing that they couldn’t get through this alone. Children relied on their parents to help them through the pain; parents and adults relied on one another to keep each other moving and working for the end goal of freedom and peace again. Decades later, Jewish families still face the pain of the camps and destruction their people faced during The Holocaust. Suffering alone may only lead to more heartbreak and sorrow, but having others to help and lean on ensures that no one is truly alone. Families are needed to keep one another together, and Jewish families worked tirelessly to ensure that everyone they loved would get through the pain and live to see another day together.

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