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There are pieces of Holocaust and post-Holocaust art that portray the Jewish woman as a symbol of victimhood and suffering, but do these depictions allow the narratives of Jewish women to be heard, or do they stifle them? Instead of focusing on the Jewish women as symbols of objectified self-sacrifice, there should be more focus on the art created by Jewish women who witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust through their creations. By examining the art and experiences of Jewish women in concentration camps, space is made for their voices, and they are no longer representational, but intrinsically human.

History often overlooks the experiences and narratives of women, with some exceptions when a woman falls victim to martyrdom. In the journal article "Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory," James E. Young claims, "Feelings of helplessness, vulnerability, and physical torment are often masked by the icons of resistance, heroism, or martyrdom…" In the post-Holocaust world, the narrative misrepresented the most is that of Jewish women, because they are often twisted into symbols of abstract ideals. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, the image of Jewish women was quite different due to the spread of Nazi propaganda films and literature. In the 1940 Nazi propaganda film *Jud Suss*, a Jewish woman was portrayed wearing only a shawl and a slip dress as she was told to "put something on, Rebecca." Though it was a brief moment in the film, it reinforced prejudice against Jewish women by reducing them to an oversexual stereotype. Saul Friedlander, author of *Nazi Germany*

and the Jews, explains that Nazi's viewed Jewish nakedness as a sexual threat, which was an allusion to the perceived impudent behavior of Jewish women (37). The portrayal of Jewish women as subjects in art, literature, and film varies from resilient martyrs to devious seductresses. When Jewish women recorded their own observances through art, it is clear that their stories are not tales of sexual impudence or overcoming oppression, but a way to immortalize the memory and the horrors of genocide and survival.

For many Jewish artists, both men and women, art was a means of survival. This statement seems contradictory considering the treatment of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, but in *The Living Witness: Art in the Concentration Camps and Ghettos*, Mary S. Costanza says, "Artists were used to do anything in which their expertise was needed, from the making of actual works of art– portraits or landscapes– to graphic and technical works and the most mundane work that could hardly be called art, such as writing numbers on uniforms," (14). The need for artists to create propaganda sometimes led to an artist's survival, though the conditions were far from merciful. According to Costanza, Israeli painter Halina Olomucki survived the brutalities of Auschwitz when the SS needed artists to paint slogans and signs for the barracks. She was provided with watercolors and other art supplies, and guards would occasionally bring her extra bread in exchange for sketches. When interviewed by Costanza, she said, "I can draw from memory all the people, the suffering young girls…I still feel the terror, the fear…" (39). Olomucki was motivated to create art not just for extra slices of bread, but to eternalize the pain and horror of the Holocaust.

Similarly to Halina Olomucki, other artists used their art as a way to preserve the memory of what they witnessed while living in Nazi concentration camps. Though these artists can certainly be viewed as icons of heroism, the atrocities that they documented cannot be

overlooked or erased. Another female artist who survived the horrific conditions of the Holocaust was Dina Gottliebova Babbitt. In the New York Times article, “Dina Babbitt, Artist at Auschwitz, Is Dead at 86,” journalist Bruce Weber writes that Babbitt was sent to Auschwitz in 1943 and caught the attention of Nazi physician Josef Mengele, who assigned her to draw sketches of the Roma prisoners he used in his experiments. Not long after she finished the sketches, all of the prisoners were sent to gas chambers or the crematoria (Costanza 47). Dina Babbitt’s sketches of Roma women were not made to objectify women’s suffering or create symbols of martyrdom, but as a necessity of her survival. Now, these portraits serve as a memorial for lost humanity. History professor Marjorie Lamberti says, “The Nazis' humiliating and brutal treatment constituted an assault on the body and the psyche with the intent of dehumanizing the prisoners, robbing each individual of his or her identity as a human being,” (“Making Art in the Terezin Concentration Camp”). Creating art, even if it was painting propaganda posters or drawing prisoners before they were sent to their deaths, was a reason for survival, but more importantly, a way to cling to humanity.

For some Jewish women, art became a form of subtle resistance. The artists with assigned projects often created sketches and paintings that revealed the grotesque truth of Nazi concentration camps. Halina Olomucki was among those who risked their lives to document Nazi crimes, motivated by the suffering of women and children. She said, “My intention was to leave documents about the destruction of my people…My fellow prisoners wanted me to draw but for a different reason: ‘If you live to leave this hell make your drawings tell the world about us, we want to be among the living at least on paper,’” (Costanza 61). There was a great amount of risk for artists who created clandestine art, because it exposed the crimes of the Nazi and commemorated the lives of prisoners. Esther Lurie was held in the Stutthof concentration camp,

and was liberated in 1945. According to art historian Pnina Rosenberg, Lurie's art served as evidence in the Eichmann trial and gained official Supreme Court approval for the documentary value of her sketches ("Art During the Holocaust"). Secret art was morbid and devastating, but it was a way for imprisoned artists to resist against the Nazis and hold on to the remains of their own humanity.

The Holocaust was the most catastrophic event of the 20th century, which ended with the loss of millions of human lives. The paintings and sketches created about and by Jewish women during the Holocaust reveals the narrative of Jewish women that is historically overlooked and provides a space for their voices. Despite the pain and suffering inflicted on Jewish men, women, and children, shreds of humanity were preserved in the form of deeply moving and gruesome art.

Annotated Bibliography

Costanza, Mary S. *The Living Witness*. The Free Press, 1982, Print.

Costanza's book offers a history of the Holocaust through the lens of Jewish and non-Jewish artists in concentration camps. Taking an honest approach to the treatment of prisoners in concentration and death camps, she shows how artists interpreted their experiences through creative means. In the process, Costanza includes images of the artists' sketches and some commentary from the artists that survived.

Friedländer, Saul. *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. Phoenix, 2008, Print.

Friedlander's book focuses on the dark reality of oppression during World War II, and restores the lost voices of Jewish people. He provides testimonies from survivors, and perspectives from German citizens who were silent during the extremities of the Nazi party.

Lamberti, Marjorie. "Making Art in the Terezin Concentration Camp." *New England Review (1990-)*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1995, pp. 104–11. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40243120. Accessed 22 Mar. 2024.

Lamberti's journal article broadly illuminates the lives of Jewish artists in the Terezin concentration camp. She provides a history of the Terezin concentration camp, and explains how the Nazis used artists for creating pieces of propaganda. In the process, she brings to light the suffering, humiliation, and abuse inflicted on Jewish prisoners by Nazis.

Young, James E. “Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory.” *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 5, 2009, pp. 1778–86. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25614402. Accessed 22 Mar. 2024.

In Young’s article, he explores the relation of hardened idealizations of Jewish women, and how these women are formed to be perfect symbols of victimization. He criticizes how people uphold the pain of women, but often find spectacle in it as well. By doing so, he offers his opinion on how women should not be perceived as symbols but people should listen to the stories women might have to tell.

Rosenberg, Pnina. “Art during the Holocaust.” *Jewish Women’s Archive*, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/art-during-holocaust#pid-18094. Accessed 22 Mar. 2024.

Rosenberg highlights the art and lives of Jewish women during the Holocaust, showing how these women survived the brutal conditions of concentration camps. In the process, she provides a spotlight for the women who clandestinely created art in order to reveal the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Weber, Bruce. “Dina Babbitt, Artist at Auschwitz, Is Dead at 86.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 2 Aug. 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/arts/02babbitt.html.

Weber tells the story of Dina Babbitt, a Jewish woman who survived the Holocaust and drew sketches of Roma women. In the process, he explains that she never owned her art after liberation because of the insistence of the Auschwitz museum directors that the art was essential to the museum.