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“Invisible Testimonies”: The Feminist Perspective in Holocaust Literature Studies.

Aleksandra Ubertowska

Przeł. Jan Pytalski

Aleksandra UBERTOWSKA

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Holocaust studies, usually perceived as a sub-category of other, more academically established disciplines, such as Jewish studies or history, has always been an interdisciplinary enterprise. By necessity, studies in this field must focus on border areas of different disciplines or varied methodologies.¹ This opening to varied inspirations and influences often assumes an interesting, if sometimes controversial, form. The combination of feminist/gender studies and Holocaust studies is a good example of this duality. These two intertwining research formations have produced results which, in my mind, are of great academic merit and have refreshed the image of literature of the Holocaust. One could even assume (a step that always carries risk) that with the dawn of research on the “feminine experience of the Holocaust,” scholars have embarked on a “revisionist moment” that forced, at least partially, a rethinking of the theoretical foundations underpinning much previous research. In my essay, I intend to present the results of these studies. In other words, I would like to show a self-critical impulse that has come to the foreground, becoming a vital force against certain clichés or conclusions that have been well-established within the history of the Holocaust.

In the field of the Holocaust studies, the question of women’s war experience and its specific character, as well as forms of its expression, has appeared relatively late. Chronologically, it intersects with the so-called “second wave” of interest in the Holocaust (circa the 1980s), even though the most important publications in the field took place in the second half of the 1990s. The conference which established feminist Holocaust studies

¹ This article is a modified version of a lecture given as a part of series of meetings entitled “Learning about the Holocaust: Themes, Methods, and Limits” at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, 28.04.2009. <http://rcin.org.pl>

as a branch of humanities took place in New York City in 1983. Its participants agreed on methodology, along with the scholarly foundations and institutional framework necessary to describe the “female experience of the Holocaust.” According to Joan Ringelheim, initiator and organizer of the conference, these foundations stem from resistance to the universalistic tendencies within Holocaust studies. She claimed this tendency blurs distinctions, which are present in descriptions of war experiences.² Women constituted half of the population of Holocaust victims, and yet – according to New York conference participants – their distinctive fate (although present in some literary accounts) tended to be omitted in historical, or literary analysis. It would often remain unrecognized, hidden in the form of muted, unspoken accounts. Ringelheim claims that we only recently acquired the “conceptual framework” necessary to grasp the feminine perspective of war. That is why most of the approaches and methodologies used, attempted to be “gender neutral,” or tried to ignore it as an analytic category.³ Other factors played a part in this turn as well. Some have been provoked by “third wave” feminism, which highlighted the importance of “difference” and introduced (in relation to the image of a woman) divisions based on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, etc. The process of “decolonizing the subject” (female subject) – a term coined by Sidonie Smith – revealed that the “era of universal, neutral female has ended, even for women who remained traditional essentialists.”⁴

The most influential works which help to orient oneself in the realm of feminist studies of the Holocaust literature, principally written by American authors, focus around questions such as: Can we talk about a specific, gender-defined experience of the Holocaust? What are the criteria we should use for such descriptions? Are there “female narrations” – forms of articulating suffering, with clear gender marking? There is great variety among the publications that I have included here: anthologies which combine testimonies of the survivors; theoretical essays (including the volume *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* edited by Carol Ritter and Johna K. Rotha, or *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitness* edited by Vera Laska); post-conference volumes that have gathered representatives of various disciplines, such as Lawrence Langer, Marion Kaplan, Myrna Goldenberg (for example *Women in the Holocaust* edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenor Weitzman, or *Experience and Expression: Women, Nazis, and the Holocaust* edited by Elisabeth Baer and Myrny Goldenberg); monographs of historians of literature, such as those by Merlene Heinemann, Rachel Feldhay Brenner, S. Lilian Kremer or Judith Tydor Baumel, which are based on the vast resources of comparative materials and the analysis of female autobiographies from

² See Distel, B. “Frauen im Holocaust,” in: *Wir konnten die Kinder doch nicht im Stich lassen. Frauen im Holocaust.*, herausg. von B. Distel, Köln: 2001, 15.

³ Ringelheim, J. “The Split between Gender and the Holocaust,” in: *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by D. Ofer, L. Weitzmann, Yale University Press, New Haven: 1998. 244.

⁴ Hyży, E. *Kobieta, ciało, tożsamość. Teorie podmiotu w filozofii feministycznej końca XX wieku*, Universitas, Cracow: 2003. 21.

the time of the Holocaust.⁵ The interdisciplinary character of the subject encourages looking at works from different fields, for example a book by the American sociologist Nechama Tec, entitled *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust*.⁶

Already at the outset, I have to make clear that works by the literary scholars I have mentioned use categories developed and defined within the feminist thought. However, because they are applied in a particular context, these scholars usually do not care about methodological correctness or cohesiveness. Very often, the terms "feminist" and "gender" are used interchangeably. The latter category maintains patronage over publications which are close to rather traditionally understood "women studies," where the constructivist dimension of "gender" is not pronounced strongly enough. Most of the authors propose approaches belonging to historiography, which is usually non-symmetrical and focused less on the present, recording women's experience of the Holocaust (and not, as one might assume based on the employment of the word "gender," on differences between male and female patterns of behavior). They rarely take male experience of the Holocaust into consideration (with the exception of the sociological works of Nechama Tec), which would involve a comparative method operating like a pendulum, but also distorting the research, blurring the status of male testimonies that have established the canon and a blueprint for "normative Holocaust narration."

The aforementioned works tend to display a lack of radical, theoretical ideas, signs of deepened feminist awareness, or references to the feminist theory (these references happen rarely, usually in the articles by Joan Ringelheim and books by Judith Tydor Baumel). Oftentimes, one feels like the lack of meta-theoretical reflection weakens the impact of feminine perspective and female testimonies of the Holocaust. For example, it would be fascinating to learn about the extent to which the self-created image of female Holocaust writers in their memoirs are an effect of internalizing stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity. An important issue with which we are confronted in reading the Holocaust memoirs is the question of female writers having access to a "feminine" discourse, when describing this borderline experience of being "thrown into history." Another interesting issue would be to see when they were forced to choose between male style, which was full of heroic pathos, and a heavily-stylized genre of gossip literature (with a retained possibility of marking one's distance toward such a speech register). This lack of awareness in the works I am discussing is often the result of overly "essentialist" assumptions regarding the understanding of female identity, often finding a legitimate explanation, as I will develop farther in the article.

⁵ In my essay, I focus primarily on Jewish wartime experiences. That is why, only in one of the footnotes, I mention that there are interesting, albeit rare, studies of the war female experience in the literature from the Polish perspective, such as the study of women in concentration camps (by Bożena Karwowska), or gulags (Inga Iwasiów).

⁶ Tec, N. *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven: 2003.

⁷ See Łebkowska, A. "Gender", in: *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*, edited by M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Universitas, Cracow: 2006.

“Methodological pragmatism,” taken with the necessity of protecting Holocaust testimonies from being overshadowed by theory, is the dominant mode of debate. That is why I would like to use the term “feminist perspective” to describe the works in question. It seems to be the fairest, since it pays tribute to philosophical sources, without which female description of the Holocaust experience would not be possible, and highlights the lax approach to methodological and terminological frameworks in the discussed works.

“Cracks” or Controversies

In my opinion, the first object of our immediate consideration should be all the areas of controversy, or questions which ignite debate. These will be areas where Holocaust studies collides with the implications of feminist theory. Although there are dimensions of these fields which overlap – both can be interpreted as minority discourses (with their emancipatory goals and poorly codified, often questionable, methodologies) – already at the very outset of gender studies concerning the Holocaust, there have been mentions of a split between female accounts of the Holocaust and the official version produced by historians researching the destruction of the European Jews. Authors who pointed to that split, principally meant to identify the subjective recollections by female survivors and their astonishment over the fact that their wartime experience was not compatible with the dominant narrations of the Holocaust. The revealed “anomalies” have undermined the ethical and cognitive foundations of the Holocaust witness. Often subject to strong self-censorship, one taboo that must be mentioned was phrased in a question posed by Ringelheim: “To what extent was the sexism of Nazi ideology and the sexism in Jewish communities tragically intertwined or strengthened by one another?”⁸

Many sociologists, literary critics and writers have singled out certain reservations, which have not necessarily undermined the validity of gender-oriented studies, but rather thematized epistemological and ethical conflicts emerging at the meeting points of disciplines and discourses. Editors of the volume *Women in the Holocaust*, Dalia Ofer and Lenor Weitzmann, have pointed to the most commonly expressed reservations. I believe we can distinguish three categories between them.⁹

Firstly, both in autobiographical commentaries of survivors, as well as in scholarly publications, one can spot an accusation (probably the most serious) that by focusing on the gendered aspects of the Holocaust, the ethnic character (Jewish) of the victims has been overshadowed. In other words, it weakens the cultural context of the Holocaust, which refers us back to historical forms of anti-Semitism. One identity starts to overshadow another, which creates an ambiguous rivalry between two identities and two forms of oppression.

Focusing on the female war experience yields another serious consequence – it questions all national divisions (and signs of ethnic value attached to those divisions). Within the research interested in this issue, particularly from the German academia,

⁸ Ringelheim, J. *The Split...*, 345.

⁹ Ofer, D., L. Weitzmann “Introduction” in: *Women in the Holocaust*.

we can find studies on stories from Holocaust survivors, as well as regular citizens of the Third Reich, or even female guards in concentration camps (that was the focus of the last year's Berlin session *Scham und Schuld. Geschlechter(sub)texte der Shoah*).¹⁰ It is also a focus of many anthologies, including *Wir konnten die Kinder doch nicht im Stich lassen!. Frauen im Holocaust*.¹¹ However, the profile of such studies directly impacts the foundations of classical Holocaust studies, so-called "Hilberg's triangle" (perpetrator – victim – bystander).¹² From a certain orthodox (but understandable and legitimate) point of view, one could claim that the feminist approach breaks up the community of victims, introduces divisions and hierarchy, creating a dangerous precedent for historical relativism.

However – when looked at from a different perspective – this method unquestionably brings certain benefits: it opposes the one-sided "victimization" of women, by revealing their varied social and historical roles.

Secondly, we often hear an accusation of presentism and ahistoricity. Feminist projects in relation to Holocaust are met with criticism, because they are seen as an attempt to impose a contemporary philosophical perspective onto events from the past, as well as (which seems to be far more serious accusation) imposing this particular mentality on the female authors of diaries and journals written during the Holocaust. From the perspective of literary scholars and readers, who specialize in these writings, such accusations seem senseless, to a point where they feel tempted to reverse the order of thinking that constitutes its foundations. That is because – according to Judith Baumelel,¹³ who is perhaps most explicit on the subject – most of the female accounts display an extremely high level of "gender awareness," which seems to be worthy of our attention, since the authors were not professionally trained writers. They reveal an entire spectrum of self-knowledge, in a way anticipating all the achievements of future feminist thought: from the diaries of Zivia Lubetkin (one of the commanders of the Jewish Combat Organization), to Anne Frank and Mary Berg's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Lubetkin is fully aware of being in the matrix of social roles connected to gender, its limitations, as well as of the privilege to cross over these historical gender limitations that became part of her experience. Frank and Berg thematize women's conditions and turn it into a subject of reflection, often including elements of emancipatory criticism, which one might be tempted to describe as "pre-feminist."

Thirdly, it has been claimed – and these accusations have been expressed by well-respected authors, such as Lawrence Langer and Cynthia Ozick – that gender studies of

¹⁰ The meeting was organized by The Department of History and Sociology at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 11/14-15/2008.

¹¹ See also Krauss, M. *Sie waren dabei. Mitläuferinnen, Nutzniesserinnen, Taeterinnen im Nationalsozialismus*, Verlag, Göttingen: 2008.

¹² See Hilberg, R. *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945*, New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992.

¹³ Baumelel, J.T. *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.

the Holocaust open the possibility of trivialization. The feminist perspective, the authors mentioned above claim, almost becomes an argument on the behalf of the “universalists”¹⁴ (or even “negationists”). It neutralizes the uniqueness of the Holocaust by integrating it in the history of patriarchal oppression over women.

Lawrence L. Langer, a historian of the Holocaust whose voice cannot be ignored, appreciates the role of new impulses in the Holocaust studies, while warning against the dogmatic use of a gender criterion,¹⁵ particularly against ascribing them with value judgments. According to Langer, gender divisions overlap and influence relations of other kinds (parents – children, different positions in camps or in ghettos), which substantially complicate (or even partially undermine) the foundations of feminist theory within Holocaust studies.

Controversies created around the project of gender studies of the literature of the Holocaust do not weaken its legitimacy. They should be understood as a part of late modern epistemology, where different disciplines or academic projects are subject to permanent pressure from processes attempting to destabilize their assumptions, forcing the redefinition of their subject of study and the rethinking of their ethical and political implications. They can also perform the function of “negative methodology,” which points to dangers, shows “dead ends” of feminist discourse, which become visible precisely when confronted with the categories of testimony, guarded by numerous ethical limitations.

“Exemplary and Normative Narration about the Holocaust”?

We talked about a characteristic profile of historico-literary profile of monographs, which focus on descriptions of particularly female experience of the Holocaust. Comparative perspectives, which place female experience within the network of gender relations, emerge for very specific reasons. These perspectives are treated as a method for revealing the position of female autobiographies against the dominant model of Holocaust relations. Joan Ringelheim, responsible for delineating the borders of the field and rightly problematizing the starting point of feminist studies on the Holocaust as an issue of integrating personal narrations of women-survivors with “exemplary, normative narration about the Holocaust,” speaks of effacement of the female perspective from the history of the Holocaust. She points to talking about the Holocaust from the “universal perspective of Evil”¹⁶ Even if among those statements one can observe an “ideological over-abundance,” or particular emphasis, it is hard to ignore certain suggestions that are being made. Especially when they help to reveal the superficiality of the category of

¹⁴ See Muchowski, J. *Historyka Shoah. Problematyka przedstawiania katastrof historycznych*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2006. 32.

¹⁵ Langer, L. “Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies,” in: *Women and the Holocaust...*, 362.

¹⁶ Ringelheim, J. “The Unethical and the Unspeakable. Women and the Holocaust,” *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, vol. 1, 1984: 74–76.

"canon" from Holocaust testimonies. The frequency of references made to "exemplary, normative narration about the Holocaust," which became a *leitmotif* of most of the works dedicated to the female experience of the Holocaust, reveals hierarchies embedded in the canon. Attention is being brought to the fact that within the canon of Holocaust literature, seemingly "neutral" testimonies of the Holocaust, which secretly used the category of "gender," dominated and remained carriers of male experience. The core of the canon was constituted by the memoirs of Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi, and not by Charlotte Delbo or Seweryna Szmaglewska; by Marek Edelman and Adam Czerniakow, and not by Zivia Lubetkin or Vladki Meed.

S. Lilian Kremer characterizes the starting point of her deliberations similarly and writes that both Holocaust historiography and literary criticism have a male-centered character and privilege male experience of the Holocaust, assuming it is a universal and gender neutral blueprint of such experience. As a result, scholars representing different fields "pushed female Holocaust relations to the peripheries of the discourse, or made them altogether invisible."¹⁷ Kremer confronts dominating male narrations, in which women played secondary, "supporting" roles, of victims passively allowing to be obliterated, with stories focused around female experience. Women in these narrations are well-defined and multi-dimensional subjects, strong protagonists. They experience war in all of its forms and individually create and shape their auto-biographical accounts (e.g., auto-biographical novels by Ilona Karmel, Elzbieta Ettinger and others).

Hence, summarizing statements by the authors presented above, one can conclude that the canon of Holocaust literature functions oppressively toward women's war narrations. In the first place, it does so by talking about women indirectly, through a male narrator, who decides about the choice and assessment of the described events. The prose of Borowski and Levi are perfect examples of such work, where certain kinds of violence against women are marginalized (rape, sexual abuse, etc.). A similar effect, blurring the differences, is achieved by presenting women as a unified social group, homogenous in terms of education, politics, psychology or personality. Finally, Kremer and Ringelheim recognize the usage of a strongly autonomous division between roles and features as an oppressive marker of the Holocaust literary canon. This division forces representations of men as strong and brave, while women remain fearful, subdued, incapable of their own, distinctive (referring to the female model of social behavior) survival strategies.

It is precisely the way we understand the subject and subjectivity in relation to the borderline experience that constitutes an axis, around which all the efforts to separate the specificity of the female experience of the Holocaust are focused. It is also a focal point, at least in part, for the reformulation (or expansion) of the Holocaust literary canon. Scholars like Myrna Goldenberg and S. Lilian Kremer point our attention to the dominant, among male accounts, themes of individualism, the power of the individual and resilience – features which are the key to survival. The subject of these accounts is a subject based on strong ontological foundations. It is a foundation which is allowed

¹⁷ Kremer, S.L. *Women's Holocaust Writing. Memory and Imagination*, Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. 5.

to confront the apocalypse of the known world, languages, systems of signs; to face life in a concentration camp, Gulag, or ghetto. The most painfully felt oppression is the moment of losing autonomy and the right to self-determination. In case of female authors, a different rule of structuring the concentration camp and Holocaust experience dominates the discourse. The aspect of autonomy, individual strength, loses its significance for the sake of saving the family or loosing those closest. The female subject involved with testimony (the autobiographical “I”) is also constructed differently. It manifests itself in attempts to depersonalize the narrative, as well as through efforts to accentuate the saving role of community ties, created within the circle of “foster families,” “sister” relations, and friendships.

However, one cannot talk about a specific subjectivity in relation to the “gender” history of Holocaust literature as an area of permanently defined and established issues. Sarah Horovitz writes: “genocide (borderline experience) destabilizes the boundaries of ‘I’ and undermines the gender identity.”¹⁸ One should understand this statement as an indication that, within Holocaust testimonies, traditional dichotomies and classifications (active/passive, individualism/submission, and strong/weak subject) undergo reevaluation and are reconfigured into new, more complex pairings.

Searching for the Formula for a Female Testimony

The late emergence of a scholarly perspective attuned to the description of the female experience of the Holocaust brought with itself important, methodological consequences. Grounding the studies of the Holocaust in a certain “historical reality” suggests, almost intuitively in this context, “thematic interpretations,” which focus on characteristics of so-called “specifically female themes.”¹⁹ These will be themes of maternity, pregnancy, sexual violence, mother-daughter relations, woman-parental relations, or specific, gender-conditioned socializing patterns and transgression in a state of extreme danger. According to the ethical demand of marking the referentiality of relations, women in Holocaust autobiographies are always grounded in a specific historical reality. She provides testimony of how profoundly her social role and physicality determines her life and survival strategies (even if she herself radically transgresses these determinations). One could assume, that this strategy will account for complete “transparency” of the autobiographical texts, drawing attention away from their formal and linguistic set-up. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, authors of the essays in question (S. Lilian Kremer, Sara R. Horovitz, Rachel Brenner) manage to outline the continuity between “female themes” (which, in feminist theory, would inevitably lead to naively essentialist assumptions) and a particular kind of narration, in which “female themes” are articulated and create an organic connection, a unique formula for autobiographical writing, which one could call generically charged.

¹⁸ Horovitz, S. *Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory*, w: *Women in the Holocaust...*, 375.

¹⁹ Kremer, S.L. “Introduction,” in *Women’s Holocaust...*, 11.

According to Pascal Rachel Bos, "there is something disarming in the experience of the Holocaust, which makes the more refined (poststructuralist) methods of research seem inappropriate towards such well-defined research subject."²⁰ This "condition of appropriateness" does not seem to have been questioned, or weakened, in the past. However, it was certainly modified (and cognitively enriched) by the "linguistic" and "narrational" turns. They have revealed the rhetorical dimension of Holocaust testimony and its status of as ontologically "folded" and a representation dependent on many factors. The end of the 1980s was a period in which the poststructuralist theory of history became far more pervasive. It made it much easier for the representatives of emerging, feminist current of studies in Holocaust literature, already at the outset, to include complexities involved in the ontology of testimony and the nature of autobiographical writing.

Bos distinguishes between three levels of Holocaust testimony: experience, memory, and narrational structure. She claims that each of those levels can be equally shaped by the category of gender.²¹ This particular gesture of denaturalizing autobiographical texts seems to be common to many female scholars focused on literature of the Holocaust. Among the monographs containing female wartime accounts, one can spot interpretational tropes, which are the heritage of currents of thought in the humanities (White and Ankersmit's tradition, alongside rhetorical analysis of autobiographical discourse inspired by writings of Paul de Man and Phillipe Lejeune). Oftentimes, they take a form of concretizing metaphors, describing the situation of women found in the literature of the Holocaust. That is what happens with the metaphor of a "muted female voice," which Carol Ritter and John K. Roth illustrate in the introduction to the anthology *Different Voices* with a phrase from Gertrud Kolmar, the German-Jewish poet. In the poem we hear a call to the reader: "hear my voice."²² Lawrence Langer looks for examples of internalizing this figure, treating it as a descriptive category, which points to a characteristic feature of "female writings about the Holocaust." Referring to rich comparative material, a large number of written and audio-visual testimonies, used during the writing of *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, he states that female accounts are far more "elliptical," and female authors much more often use omissions – indirect, implied information – which compose a "knot of paradoxes, which is difficult to untangle."²³ This conclusion allows us to explain why these were the memories of a female author, Charlotte Delbo, that illustrated Langer's deliberations over the dual self of Holocaust accounts – a category which assumes the existence of experiences impossible to convey, calcified in the subconscious. Female writers, according to Langer, reveal greater aware-

²⁰ Bos, P.R. "Women and the Holocaust. Analyzing Gender Difference," in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, edited by E. Baer, M. Goldenberg, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003. 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²² Rittner, C. J. K. Roth "Prologue: Women and the Holocaust," in *Different Voices. Women and the Holocaust*, 3.

²³ Langer, L. "Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies," in *Women and the Holocaust...*, 351-364.

ness of the traumatic consequences of the war and point to the incredible inventiveness in describing them. It can be observed through the creation of particular terms, which force speculative, or medical language out (e.g., “speaking body,” effect of “stonefication” in narrations by Mado and Arina B. – protagonists of Ch. Delbo’s book), becoming almost a rule for constructing these individual stories.

A similar approach is employed by Myrna Goldenberg, who points to a different model of narration appearing in a concentration camp prose and referring to the “typically female” activity of preparing food – the so-called “cooking memoirs.” These are stories which, due to their repetitiveness, become almost topical and are built around meals, recipes (often very elaborate) and perform a function of compensating, or easing the consequences of camp’s hunger and starvation. However, in those female “narrations about narrations” they acquire much deeper meaning. According to Goldenberg, they play the function of “life-giving” stories and become the camp’s “anti-discourse,” or an emancipatory discourse and a part of surviving strategy in a much wider sense than merely physical salvation. Stakes in this “discursive game” are questions of identity, memory and moral order. According to the scholar, “culinary stories...not only established a continuity between the past and the future, but also reminded women about their role as care givers and mothers. They constituted a form of affirmation of female community and a therapy, sublimation of hunger.”²⁴

A separate current of studies within feminist studies on Holocaust writing is a tendency to define wartime autobiography as a genre heavily corresponding with female social roles of assuming responsibility for others, as well as female protectiveness. Thinking about autobiography (or other autobiographical forms) as female genres, or forms of expression characteristic to women, is heavily rooted in feminist theory.²⁵ They situate the history of female identity in a literary history order, but the scholars of the Holocaust literature give it a distinct character. Marlene Heinemann in her *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust*²⁶ takes up and develops the topic of feminist confessional genres. The author assumes that, according to the bourgeois, Western European cultural models, autobiography as published work, was not among the means of expression for women. It was banned, because it involved exposing oneself or “I,”

²⁴ Goldenberg, M. “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, 335. See also different article by the same author: “Food Talk: Gendered Responses to Hunger in the Concentration Camp,” in *Experience and Expression...*, 161-180.

²⁵ See also Smith, S. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993; Iwasiów, I. “Gatunki i konfesje w badaniach „gender”, in *Genologia dzisiaj*, edited by W. Bolecki, I. Opacki, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2000; Ritz, G. “Gatunek literacki a „gender”. Zarys problematyki”, in *Genologia dzisiaj*; Lejeune, Ph. *Dziewczęce „ja”*. *O dziennikach panien z XIX wieku*, translated by M. i P. Rodakowie, “Teksty Drugie” 2003, issue: 2/3.

²⁶ Heinemann, S. *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

a peculiar form of exhibitionism. It was war and the imperative of giving testimony that created conditions necessary to overcome the cultural ban. The wartime formula for autobiography moved the egocentrism of autobiographical writing to the background and pronounced the tendency, embedded within a female social role, to "treat needs of others with greater attention than the needs of oneself"²⁷ According to Heinemann, this is how we should explain the relatively large number of female personal writings, which have been published during the war, as well as after.²⁸

The privileged position occupied by the autobiography within female literature of the Holocaust could be related to the fact that the confessional genres are perfect carriers for a different (because of gender) character of the traumatic wounding. As Sara R. Horovitz has put it, "a wound based on gender, distortion, tremor, related to something deeply intimate and important for the very essence of femininity."²⁹ That is precisely how Rachel Feldhay Brenner understands the sense of female intimism in her study of the three autobiographical projects from the times of war: works by Anne Frank, Etta Hillesum, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil.³⁰ For the author of the book, autobiography which includes descriptions of wartime is not only a form of self-presentation, a recording of changes in self-perception, but also a form of resistance in a situation of being exiled and sentenced to death, which is directly connected to the "obligation [of writers] toward the world." That is why the journals and letters of Weil, Hillesum, and Stein are marked by strong (strengthened by a female sensitivity) sense of moral decline, worldly "sickness," that they are trying to face with the "ethics of responsibility" and a tradition of dialogue, listening closely to the voices of others. Brenner attempts to reconstruct forms of "resistance" against the cruelties of history, using gender categories against dogmatic and accepted standards. She seeks signs of spiritual and intellectual freedom common to the four authors, which are realized through a particular perception of suffering and pain (according to Weil "suffering is the essence of human existence"), through the affirmation of sacrifice of oneself for the sake of the others (voluntary work for others by Etty Hillesum in Westbrok camp), through the attempt to create a "philosophy of suffering." The journal as a form of autobiographical writing turns out to be an important criterion for the ethno-gender identity. On this point, credit is due to the influence and popularity of Jewish author's journals from the times of *Haskalah* (Glueckel of Hamel and Pauline Wengeroff, whom Stein calls upon). Not always, however, the journal plays the role of a carrier of content affirming femininity. In *The Spiritual Autobiography*, Simone Weil seems to be rejecting her femininity, her female emotional and sexual needs, which in her mind constituted a condition for sanctity or genius. It was an attitude against that of Stein, who was convinced that it is a woman who can save the world, particularly when

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ Horovitz, S.R. *Women...* 366.

³⁰ Brenner, R.F. *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

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confronted by the kind of unimaginable cruelty witnessed by the writer herself. It was moral responsibility toward the world that Stein made into an attribute and female skill; one that brings hope for re-establishing the order of values.

From the discussed currents of feminist studies in Holocaust literature, we can draw the conclusion that they are internally diverse and rooted in many different traditions of thought. They are also open to new ideas and impulses from the humanities (such as: category of experience, philosophy of Agamben, extremely popular opposition between private and public). This diversity, as well as attempts to escape ideological and research fundamentalism, constitutes a good recommendation for the further development of feminist studies in Holocaust literature. Hopefully, they will retain their revisionist and critical approach toward established, research frameworks.

Translation: Jan Pytalski