

# Sexual Humiliation in Concentration Camps

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Sexual humiliation became a systematic part of the dehumanization of Jewish women during their time at a concentration camp. From the time a woman entered the camp, she experienced multiple forms of humiliation, including shaving of bodily hair, bodily cavity searches, and frequent nudity. Because of malnutrition and conditions in the camps, bodily deformities began, such as lack of menstruation and “empty” hanging breasts. Through survivors’ memoirs and description of their experiences in the concentration camp, historians can only begin to understand and grapple with the hardships that these women struggled with during their tenure in the camps, yet realize the complexities of the Holocaust, choices the women encountered, and the life imposed upon these survivors. Memoirs are a crucial part of exposing sexual humiliation forced on women because of the emotions that are exposed and the thought processes that add to the story of sexual violence during the Holocaust.

## Bodily Shaving

Livia Bitton Jackson writes, “We are lined up and several husky girls in grey cloaks begin shaving our hair--- on our heads, under the arms, and on the pubic area. My long, thick braids remain braided and while the shaving machine shears my scalp, the hair remains hanging, tugging at the roots.”<sup>1</sup> Upon entering a concentration camp, women confronted sexual humiliation through shaving of all bodily hair. Hair resembled a sense of identity and femininity for women.<sup>2</sup> Many women felt an added sense of nudity, as they would attempt to cover their heads instead of hiding their private parts.<sup>3</sup> For Jewish women, an additional element of religiosity influenced the connection to hair. Traditionally, Jewish women kept their hair covered in public after she married, so she endured both physical and spiritual nakedness.<sup>4</sup> On top of gender and religion, Brigitte Halbmayr argued that shaving bodily hair also developed racially charged acts of sexual violence perpetrated on Jewish women. She states, “The shearing of hair was a means of punishment and symbolic stigmatization, and the intention was racist violence.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, bodily shaving was a form of abuse to Jewish women from their initiation into the camps from religious, racial, and gendered standpoints.

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<sup>1</sup> Livia E. Bitton Jackson, *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust* (London: Collins Publishing Group, 1984), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Beverley Chalmers, Dsc(Med); PhD, *Birth, Sex and Abuse* (Guilford: Grosvenor House Publishing Limited, 2015), 196.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-93.

<sup>5</sup> Brigitte Halbmayr, "Sexualized Violence against Women during Nazi 'Racial' Persecution," in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010), 36.

Many testimonies express the humiliation endured during the shaving process in the camps. Halbmayr includes Zipora Nir's memory in her work: "But that they shaved us was a kind of humiliation that haunts me even to this day. For example, that I have long hair, and I really should have gone to a hairdresser a long time ago."<sup>6</sup> The shearing of bodily hair surely left an imprint on many female survivors. Sara Pawłowicz remembers thinking that the newly shaved women created a new sex, neither male or female.<sup>7</sup> Judith Magyar Isaacson recalls this process as well, standing in her own hair, fingering the stubbles of her freshly shaved head, spreading her legs, and feeling the disinfectant scorching her body parts.<sup>8</sup> Sara Nomberg-Przytyk equates the treatment while being shaved to the shearing of sheep. She states, "There was one big difference between us and sheep, however. The sheep bleated as they were being shorn, but we stood there in silence with tears streaming down our cheeks."<sup>9</sup> Livia Bitton Jackson describes the events most eloquently when she states, "The haircut has a startling effect on every woman's appearance. Individuals become a mass of bodies. ... There is no distinguishing factor—it is the absence of hair which transformed individual women into like bodies. ... We become a monolithic mass. Inconsequential."<sup>10</sup> These testimonies prove how crucial survivors' perspectives and stories are when attempting to understand the complexities of a topic such as sexual humiliation in concentration camps. Although bodily shaving may have also occurred repeatedly during a woman's stay at a concentration camp, shaving occurred primarily as women entered camps to start the process of humiliation and dehumanization.

## Nudity

Forced nudity occurred during most processes in the concentration camp. First, it happened during the initiation process when women experienced bodily shaving. Many children never saw their mothers naked prior to their initiation in the camps. Nudity helped S.S. officers shave all the body hair of new prisoners of a concentration camp. Also, nudity allowed S.S. officers to search women's bodily cavities for any valuables that may have been hidden.<sup>11</sup>

Forced nakedness continued as a theme of humiliation during selection and *Zähl appell*.<sup>12</sup> Females were forced to stand for long hours in the nude in front of male officers.<sup>13</sup> They were subjected to medical examinations, whippings, and other humiliating tasks while naked.<sup>14</sup> Women also had to use the latrines naked in front of men.<sup>15</sup> These experiences dehumanized the Jewish women prisoners through the humiliation of nudity that the women encountered.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Chalmers, *Birth, Sex and Abuse*, 193.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Magyar Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 66-7.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, trans. Roslyn Hirsch, ed. Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Bitton Jackson, *Elli: Coming*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> Chalmers, *Birth, Sex and Abuse*, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Seeds of Sarah 114

<sup>13</sup> Chalmers 197

<sup>14</sup> Chalmers 197

<sup>15</sup> Chalmers 202

As testimonies strongly recall the experience of being sheared of their hair, women survivors also vividly remember the feelings of nudity in concentration camps. Judith Magyar Isaacson states, "And we marched in a gigantic curve around and around, naked. I was nauseated by all the nudity, the breasts, the buttocks, the pathetic pubic slits, so visible on the shaven parts."<sup>16</sup> Women tend to remember very detailed descriptions of their worst humiliating experiences in the camps, especially relating to the times when they were forced to expose themselves. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk remembers the older women's sagging breasts, being naked in front of S.S. men, and feeling less than human.<sup>17</sup> Forced nudity helped enforce Nazi ideology of Jews being treated as less than human. This process of humiliation developed a hierarchy, which immediately instilled the abasement of Jews were in society and the camps and remained ever present. Again, these testimonies show the incredible feelings and loss of agency of women in concentration camps, as they critically analyzed their situation in relation to their gender, religion, and race and how this affected them as a human being.

### **Menstruation**

Lastly, women commonly attested to the presence or lack of presence of their menstruation and how that caused additional humiliation.<sup>18</sup> When a woman would menstruate in a concentration camp, said woman would not have access to proper sanitary supplies to be able to care for herself. The concentration camp facility was not the ideal place to menstruate, especially when there were no sanitary napkins to stop the blood flow during roll call. Women feared standing at roll call for five hours with blood running down their leg. Judith Magyar Isaacson recalls, "She was smeared with thick blood, some of it still flowing, most of it caked. The messy paste covered her shaven crotch, trickling along the inner thighs. She must have been flowing for days. Her bunched-up skirt was soaking it up---a loathsome bandage."<sup>19</sup> Again, the vivid detail of this girl Judith Magyar Isaacson witnessed instilled a fear of when her next period would be. Fania Fenelon explains in detail menstruation in camps: "For those who did have their periods, the situation was extremely awkward: nothing to wash themselves with; nothing to wear. The blood ran down their thighs and dripped from between their legs. Always sticklers for cleanliness, the *blockowas* struck them, forced them to wipe up the stains."<sup>20</sup> The humiliation that occurred when menstruating is ingrained in survivors' memories.

As their time in the concentration camp continued and resources to maintain a healthy lifestyle were lacking, many women experienced loss of menstruation in the concentration camps due to lack of proper nutrients. Halbmayr argues, "Loss of the ability to menstruate, which almost all women experienced, also caused humiliation. At first many of them worried and were afraid they would be infertile as a result. That is why I consider the inability to menstruate as a form of sexualized violence."<sup>21</sup> In Livia Bitton Jackson's memoir, she wrote about when her

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<sup>16</sup> Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Halbmayr, "Sexualized Violence," 34.

<sup>19</sup> Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah*, 71-2.

<sup>20</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, "Sexual Abuse in Holocaust Literature: Memoir and Fiction," in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010), 181.

<sup>21</sup> Halbmayr, "Sexualized Violence," 34.

menstruation ceased.<sup>22</sup> Overall, the ability or inability to menstruate was seen as a form of sexual humiliation to the females living in the concentration camp.

## Analysis

Sexual humiliation occurred commonly throughout a woman's time in a concentration camp, and she experienced humiliation in a multitude of tactics, such as bodily shaving, forced nudity, and menstruation. However, the variations in testimonies and opinions presented in memoirs illuminates the complexity of the Holocaust and how women felt during their time in the concentration camps.

It is important to analyze a survivor's tone when describing her experiences or the events she witnessed. Also, it is crucial to note what survivors include in their memoirs when discussing sexual humiliation. For example, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk dwells on the specific details that occurred and the feelings of dehumanization as it relates to the loss of her identity as a female. She does not focus on the pain; rather, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk emphasizes the humiliation as an underlying theme in her work. Judith Magyar Isaacson reacts differently as she conveys the extreme brutality and oppressiveness used by the commander in the camp. Livia Bitton Jackson mentions how she has become complicit in the crime when she wears late Jews' clothing.<sup>23</sup> All three of the women combined their internal thoughts and feelings with the actions that were perpetrated against them to develop their personal experience of sexual humiliation.

As survivors allude to in their memoirs, sexual humiliation perpetrated against these women during the Holocaust was a major form of dehumanization. As dehumanization lurks in all stages of genocide, dehumanization is a clear step in the genocidal process. Forms of humiliation occurred at every step along the way. In these survivor's memoirs, dehumanization and humiliation are an underlying theme throughout their entire ordeal, and early forms of humiliation continue in varied ways in the concentration camp. The survivors make clear that humiliation did not just happen in the concentration camps. These women were humiliated ever since the rise of Nazism and the surge of anti-Semitism in their communities. Livia Bitton Jackson notes how she was taunted by school boys. This idea of taunts carried over into the humiliation during the camps, as many women note the horrible names the women were called by the Nazis in the camp. Humiliation continues by the classification and symbolization by the yellow star that was forced to be worn in public. This form of humiliation through classification in the concentration camp in their identification through the colored badges on clothing, or in the case of Auschwitz, a tattooed number. These tactics of humiliation led to more severe forms of dehumanization in the camp. The prisoners were dehumanized through the initiation process into the camps by the shearing of their hair and their loss of identity. S.S. guards brutalized the Jewish women during bodily searches of their orifices. Doctors and selection officers degraded women by forcing them to stand naked for hours during roll call or selection. These forms of humiliation led to dehumanization and the feeling of being less than human. The Nazi's goals of ridicule and shame came to fruition. They felt like animals, sexless beings with no meaning to identify themselves otherwise.

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<sup>22</sup> Bitton Jackson, *Elli: Coming*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Bitton Jackson, *Elli: Coming*, 159.

The more important moral of this story is to enlighten the multitude of variances individuals experienced, witnessed, and felt during their time, long or short, in the concentration camp. As it is easy to look at a step by step process and compare the similarities of the stories to form a cohesive idea of what sexual humiliation looked like in concentration camps, the difficulty lies in addressing and understanding the nuances and complexities that arise in each story, which gives light to how arguably unorganized the Holocaust may have been. But more importantly, these memoirs and the stories of sexual humiliation from survivors inform the readers on the actual emotions and thought processes that individuals had while living the experience. Although it is crucial to consider the validity of these stories for memory fallacy, the emotions described by these women show how intense these processes were and the feelings that resulted because of them. These memoirs that expose the realities of the concentration camp take education about the Holocaust a step further than the information delivered by Holocaust survivors. The stories that the survivors tell allow Holocaust scholars to take their understanding of sexual humiliation a step further by grappling with the emotions felt when women experienced bodily shaving, bodily searches, forced nudity, public menstruation, or loss of menstruation.

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