

# SPOTS OF LIGHT

TO BE A WOMAN IN THE HOLOCAUST





## "Spots of light pressed into this dark matter..."

*Dalia Rabikovitch, The Complete Poems So Far,  
Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1995*

Jewish woman with a wrinkled paper yellow star, marking her as a Jew, photographed by a German soldier, Kutno Ghetto, Poland, 1941  
Getty Images

The Kutno ghetto was established in the muddy outdoor compound of what had once been a sugar factory. The Germans packed some 7,000 Jews into this compound, forcing them to live without shelter in roofless buildings and improvised shacks fabricated from furniture and random objects. The vast majority of the Jews of Kutno were murdered during the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was an historical event of orchestrated acts of brutality and murder by the Nazis and their accomplices against the Jewish people. In this exhibition, we attempt to reveal the human story and create a space for the unique voice of the women among them, and to emphasize the responses and actions of Jewish women to the situations they faced. Before the Second World War, Jewish women - like most of their counterparts - inhabited a society that was largely conservative and patriarchal. Accordingly, most women did not take part in the leadership that was tasked with administering the Jewish community during the Holocaust. Instead, Jewish women assumed the main familial role involving the "affirmation of life" - survival under any circumstance.

During the initial phases of the war, large numbers of Jewish men were mobilized for forced labor or escaped to the east. In the later stages, men tried to flee to the forests and many others were executed. As a result, countless women remained alone with children and the elderly. Overall, they often constituted the greater part of the ghetto population in subsequent stages. Even when the men remained, their inability to continue serving as the breadwinners of the family often left them psychologically shattered and impaired their traditional role as heads of household. As a result, women often assumed the duties of obtaining food for their families, trying to

provide a minimum level of family functioning despite their grim situation.

The identification of women with children, both by the surroundings and by the women themselves, became a motivating force for clinging to life, but also bound them to extermination together.

Women who survived the annihilation campaign and became part of the Nazis' slave-labor force entered the world of the camps. There, usually in women-only camps, they attempted to rehabilitate their psychological identities after having been deprived of their individuality, families and cultural traditions.

Women in the Holocaust applied their minds to a place that deprived them of their minds; and brought strength to a place where they were denied their strength. In a place where the very right to live was wrested from women and their families, faced their deaths with fortitude and invested every additional moment of life with meaning. It is these women's voices that we wish to sound and whose stories we wish to tell.

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**This exhibition is an adaptation of the "Spots of Light" exhibition, curated by Yehudit Inbar and exhibited at Yad Vashem.**

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# SHOAH - THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was an unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people, culture and traditions from the face of the Earth. The primary motivation for the Holocaust was the Nazis' antisemitic racist ideology. Between 1933 and 1941, Nazi Germany pursued a policy of increasing persecution that dispossessed the Jews of their rights and property, and later branded and concentrated the Jewish populations under their rule into designated areas. By the end of 1941, the policy had developed into an overall comprehensive, systematic operation that the Nazis called "The Final Solution to the Jewish Question". These policies gained broad support in Germany and across much of the European continent. Nazi Germany designated the Jews of Europe, and eventually the rest of the world Jewry, for total extermination. Alongside the mass extermination of millions by shooting, millions of Jews from all over Europe were rounded up and deported on freight trains to



A photograph sent from the Eastern front by a German soldier.  
Written on the back of the photo: "Jews in an *Aktion*, Ivangorod, Ukraine, 1942"  
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Washington DC, USA

extermination camps - industrial facilities in which the Jews were gassed to death. During the entire process of registration, rounding-up and boarding the trains, the Germans deceived the victims as to the real purpose of their journey.

By the war's end in 1945, some six million Jews had been murdered.



Yad Vashem was established in 1953 as the World Center for Holocaust commemoration, documentation, research and education. As the Jewish people's living memorial to the Shoah, Yad Vashem safeguards the memory of the past and imparts its meanings for future generations.

# LOVE

Love was a haven and island of comfort in a world of chaos

Couplehood and family form the basis of human society. During the Holocaust, as the whole world came unglued, couplehood and family were almost the only refuge. People did not know what the next hour, let alone the next day, would bring. Accordingly, they endeavored to establish settings that would give them the illusion of stability. People fell in love in the most implausible places; they married even though they did not know whether they would be able to survive individually or together, let alone establish a conjugal nest. They felt the need to make their marriages official, sometimes as protection against deportation to the east and other times due to the wish to be deported together. Concurrently, there were “free” couplehoods - quick, provisional and informal assignments. These occurred as a way of obtaining money, food, life. At other times, they expressed a psychological need for warmth and understanding in the face of the depravity surrounding them. Many were “forbidden loves” that probably would never have occurred in the world that used to be.



Wedding celebration in the Lodz ghetto



*The Last Farewell*  
Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1945  
Zinovii Tolkathev

# LOVE

## MARTA BYK



Marta, Vienna, Austria, 1938

November 1941  
To: Trude Byk  
Brooklyn, NY

*...Above all, do not worry; ...and something else: I got married; in fact, already in March. I am very happy and you will be very satisfied with your son-in-law.  
Name: Marjan Furstenberg, in Sabac, Jewish Emigration Camp, Serbia; 24 years old; Profession: auto mechanic, electrician and radio technician. At the moment he cannot write, as he has been working in the surroundings for a few weeks.*

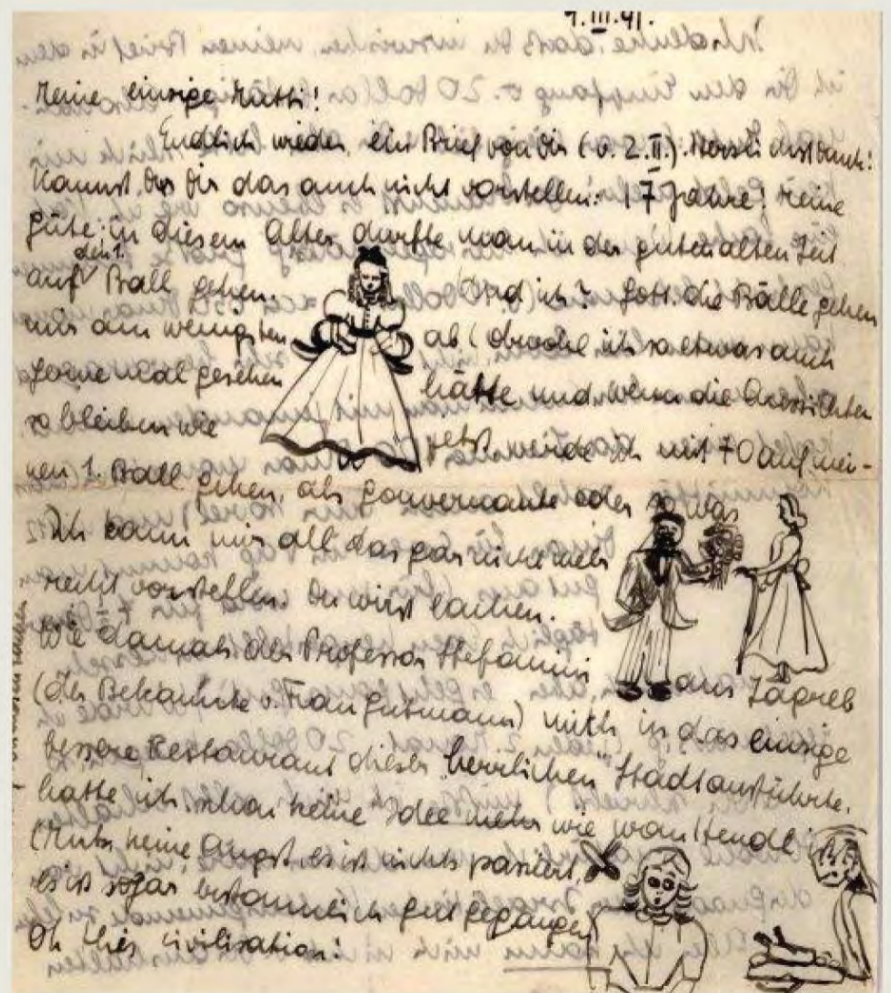
*Many greetings and kisses  
From Marta and Marjan*

In 1939, Gertrude Byk managed to obtain US immigration permits for herself and her two children, Marta and Herbert. Sixteen-year-old Marta, an ardent Zionist, refused to come along. In November, she set out for the Land of Israel, joining a group of 1,300 Jewish refugees who sailed down the Danube. They got as far as Serbia, but when they could go no further they decided to stay in Sabac.

Marta began to write letters to her mother in January 1941. After the German occupation of Serbia, the group was placed behind barbed wire and subjected to abuse and murders. In October 1941, the men in the camp were taken away, ostensibly for labor, and were murdered. One month later, unaware of the men's fate, Marta told her mother in a letter that in March she had married a man from the camp named Marjan Furstenberg.

On November 1941, Marta communicated with her mother for the last time.

By January 1942, the entire group, including Marta, had been murdered.



Letter written by Marta to her mother and brother

# LOVE

## MIRIAM LITMAN



Miriam, Italy, 1945

Miriam, born in 1923, was away from her home in Pustelnik when the Jewish inhabitants of the village were deported to Treblinka and murdered. She moved to Warsaw, and subsequently joined the partisans.

After Miriam was captured, she was deported to Auschwitz, where she encountered Leon Libak Krycberg.

Leon, a prisoner in the *Sonderkommando* unit (prisoners selected by the Nazis to work in the extermination facilities), gave Miriam clothes, shoes and food that he managed to smuggle for her, as well as a ring he had made especially for her.

Towards the end of the war, Miriam was taken on a death march, and was liberated at the Lenzing concentration camp in Austria.

Miriam and Leon met again in a DP camp, where she turned down his marriage proposal.

In 1945, Miriam met Noah Nevo, a member of the Jewish Brigade, the couple got married and in 1946, immigrated to the Land of Israel.

**Miriam and Leon never met again.**

*He came to visit me, Leon Libak, my boyfriend from Auschwitz, and a few days later he asked me to marry him... but I turned him down. I felt that I wasn't mature enough to get married just then. Leon spent the whole night sitting next to me, waiting for me to say "Yes"... Finally, [he] told me in Russian, "Now I'm parting from you; we won't see each other again." Then he left. I haven't seen him since. At the time, I received another five marriage proposals, but I turned them all down.*



A ring with a red heart in the center, embellished with their prisoner's numbers a gift from Leon to his beloved, Miriam, in Auschwitz

# MOTHERHOOD

The need to save their children placed mothers in the face of terrible dilemmas

One of the initial dilemmas that families faced was how to find hiding places, especially for the children, while this was still possible. Knowing that there was a high chance that they would never see their child again, many parents could not marshal the psychological will to take such a step, unless they sensed that the alternative was certain death. Since such an insight was difficult to internalize, many parents did not surrender their children to others even when they could have done so. In the ghettos, mothers were preoccupied with daily survival, mainly in providing food and maintaining hygiene in order to stave off illness. Pregnant mothers wished to abort in most cases, knowing that they could not feed and care for the newborn with the rest of the family barely hanging on. Even so, here and there the very ubiquity of death infused women with the wish to create new life.

Mothers of children in selection queues may have been the only ones to whom the murderers offered a choice - that of going to death with their children. Even there, however, at moments of difficulty unparalleled in human history, children were sometimes torn from the arms of the few women who were selected for a life of slavery, and were handed to grandmothers or those nearby, who went with them to their deaths.

Amidst all of this violent terror, some mothers, impelled by the survival instinct, made decisions or took actions that clashed with the accepted social norms that govern the mother-child relationship. Other mothers, however, elected to die with their children even though they could have chosen differently - and this, too, was a "choice" not always comprehensible in ordinary times.



Women and children during deportation of the Jews of Szydlowiec and the vicinity, Poland, to the Treblinka extermination camp, September 23, 1942

# MOTHERHOOD

## GENIA JUDZKI



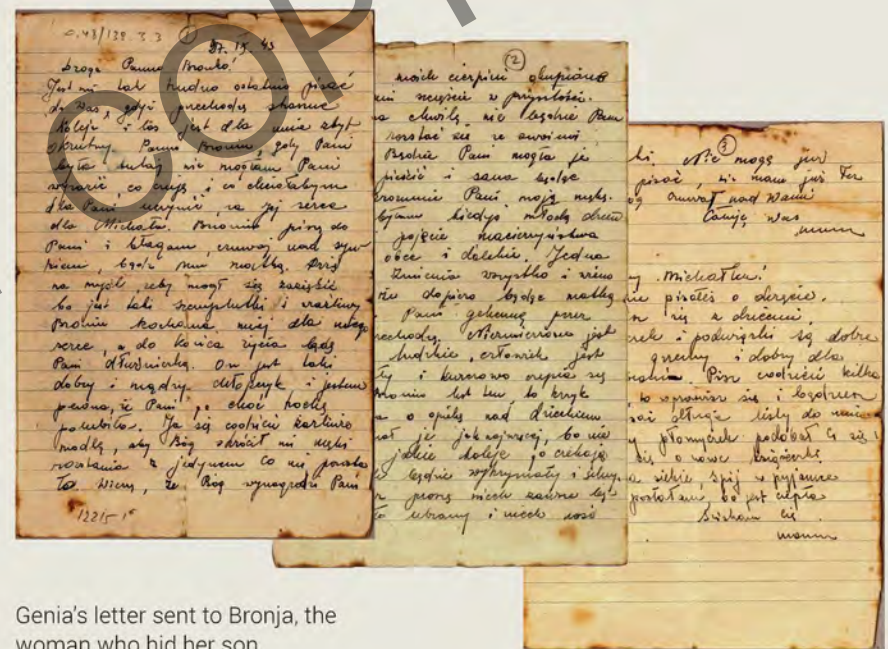
Genia, Sosnowiec, Poland, before the war

In August 1943, the Sosnowiec ghetto was liquidated and Genia's husband, Ber (Bronek), was murdered. Genia and their son Michál fled to the "Aryan" side, where Genia managed to obtain false ID cards for them both. She handed Michál into the care of a Polish woman named Bronja. Genia found a job running the household of a German physician. After the doctor received instruction to relocate to Vienna, he took Genia and her son with him. Sometime later, Genia's identity was revealed; she was taken to a prison and Michál was placed in an orphanage. When the Gestapo informed Genia that they were about to deport her, she decided to take her son with her, fearing that the orphanage would be liquidated. In 1944, the mother and son were deported to Auschwitz and murdered; the children in the orphanage survived.

September 27, 1943

*Dear Miss Bronja,  
It is so hard for me to write to you...  
Miss Bronja, I beg you, look after my son,  
be a mother to him.  
Michál should eat as much as he can for  
who knows what is to come? He must be  
strong and able to endure great suffering.  
Please make sure that he dresses warmly  
and that he also wears socks. I cannot write  
any more, my tears have all dried up.  
May God watch over you both.*

### Kisses



Genia's letter sent to Bronja, the woman who hid her son



Genia and Michál, Sosnowiec ghetto, 1941-1942



# MOTHERHOOD

## ESTER FRENKEL



Ester and Richard, 1941  
Private Collection of Fanny Korman

Richard was born in France in 1940 to Ester (Esta) and Nissan.

On July 16-17, 1942, French police were ordered to arrest women and children over the age of sixteen. Since Nissan had already been deported to Auschwitz, Ester did not want to leave her son behind on his own. Ester and Richard were sent together to the Pithiviers transition camp in France. Some three weeks later the French police decided to deport only the mothers to Auschwitz. The children were forcibly separated from their mothers. Two-year-old Richard and the other children were left in the camp on their own.

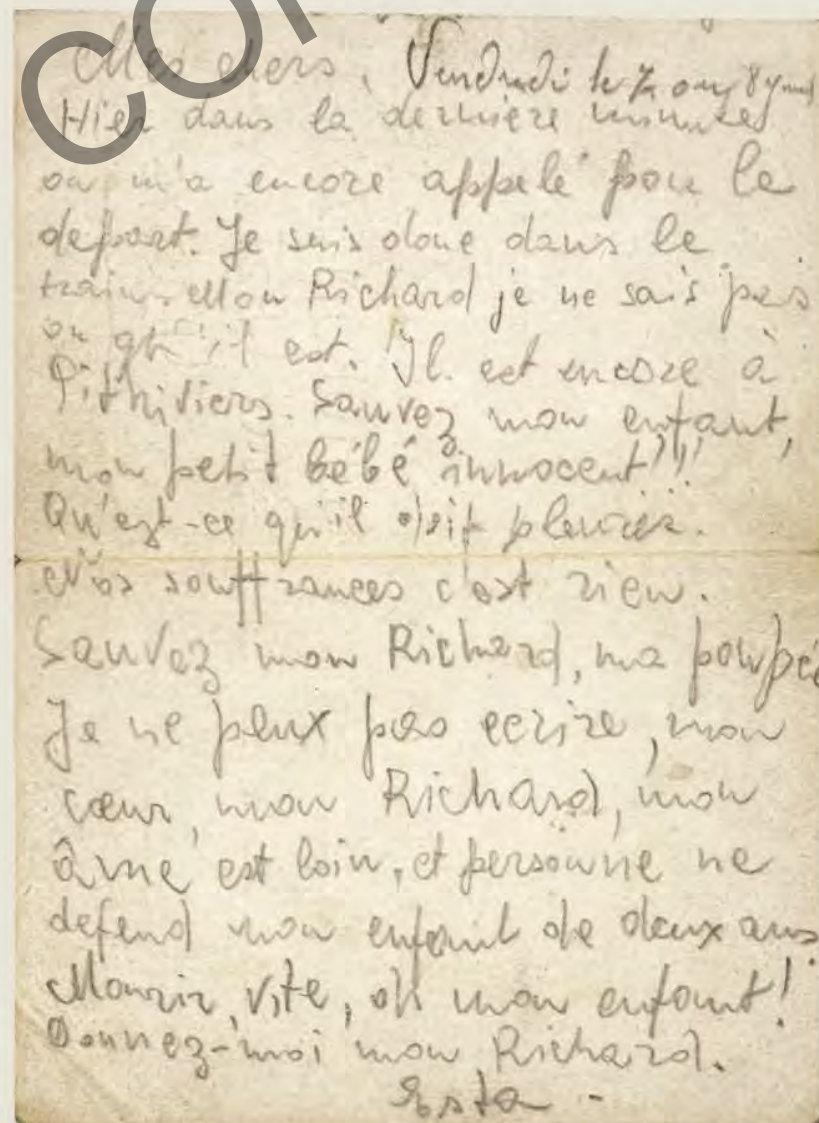
On her way to Auschwitz, Ester threw a postcard from the railroad car, addressed to her relatives, begging them to save her baby. About two weeks later, Adolf Eichmann instructed the French police that the children should be sent to Drancy transition camp and thence to Auschwitz.

**Mother Ester and son Richard were murdered in Auschwitz about one month apart.**

Friday

*My Dear Ones,  
I am in the train. My Richard, I don't know what's with him.  
He is still in Pithiviers. Save my child, my little innocent  
baby!!! How he must be crying. Save my Richard, my doll.  
I cannot write. My heart, my Richard, my soul is far away  
and nobody protects my two-year-old child.  
To die, quickly, oh my child!  
Give me my Richard.*

Esta



Postcard addressed to Ester's family in Paris, thrown by Ester from the deportation train on the way to Auschwitz

# MOTHERHOOD

## DINA BUCHLER



Dina aged five with her aunt Blanka (in partisan uniform), after the war

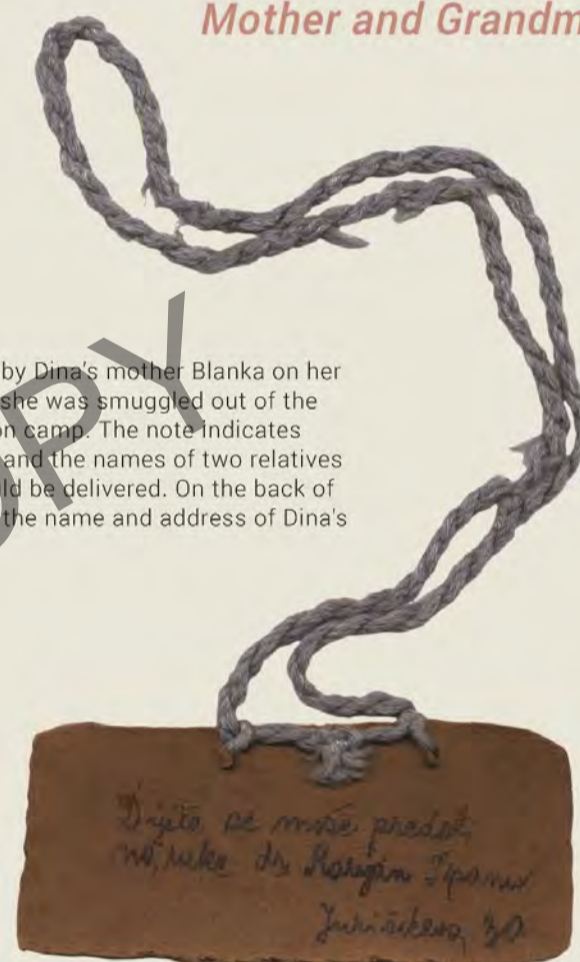
Dina was born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, to Dragutin and Blanka. About a year after the occupation began, her father was deported to the Jasenovac concentration camp, where he was murdered. Dina, her mother and her grandmother were sent to the Loborgrad concentration camp. After her mother managed to smuggle her out of the camp, Dina was transferred to Blanka First, her mother's cousin. A year later, Dina's mother and grandmother were murdered in Auschwitz.

Three months after Dina arrived at Blanka's home, Blanka placed her in a convent and joined the partisans. Dina was transferred to a woman named Anitza Beilitz, but she was treated poorly so Blanka had her transferred to the Beritić family, who cared for her devotedly and had her baptized under the name Maja. When the war ended, Blanka took Dina back, despite the Beritićs' reluctance to give her up, and moved to the Land of Israel.

Loborgrad, April 15, 1942  
Sender: Blanka Buchler  
Room No. 42

*My beloved little girl! The 28th of this month will be your second birthday. May God bless you with happiness and health; may you soon be with your parents.*

*Kisses,  
Mother and Grandma*



Cardboard note placed by Dina's mother Blanka on her daughter's chest when she was smuggled out of the Loborgrad concentration camp. The note indicates Dina's name, birth date and the names of two relatives to whom the child should be delivered. On the back of the note, Blanka added the name and address of Dina's pediatrician.



Blanka with her infant daughter Dina (in stroller)



Dina with Gina Beritić

# CARING FOR OTHERS

Women played a central role in caring for those more vulnerable than them

Women discharged a range of functions during the pre-Holocaust period. Most working women, however, were kindergarten teachers, schoolteachers, shopkeepers, childcare providers, cooks, seamstresses, and the like. This behavior pattern persisted during the Holocaust; one may even say that it expanded. Almost all women had to work. During the ghetto period, many women sought public functions that involved helping and caring for others.

Women managed public kitchens, ran children's homes and built networks for care of the elderly. They served as teachers and caregivers for children whose parents had been deported or mobilized for forced labor. They worked as doctors and nurses in the ghettos, with the partisans and in the camps. Women risked their lives and health by treating contagious patients and children in hiding places. Many went to their deaths with the children they cared for, although they could have been saved. They toiled from morning to night as the situation deteriorated with each passing moment, not allowing their physical weakness to abate their efforts.



OSE welfare officer Margot Stein giving children a medical checkup, Hotel Bompard quarantine camp, Marseilles, France 1941-1942  
USHMM, Courtesy: Margot Stein Samuel



Story Hour  
Terezin ghetto, 1942-1945  
Pavel Fantl

# CARING FOR OTHERS

## STEFANIA WILCZYNSKA



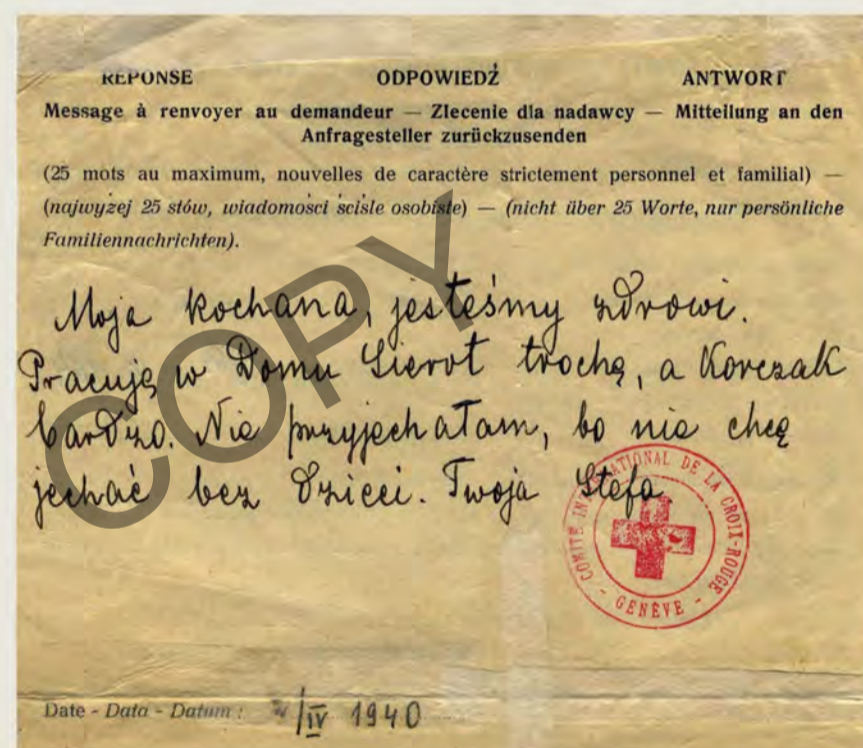
Stefania  
Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Archives, Israel

Date: April 2, 1940

*My dear, we are well. I work a little at the orphanage while Korczak is doing a great deal. I have not arrived [to the Land of Israel] because I do not want to go without the children.*

Yours  
Stefa

Stefania (Stefa) was born in 1886 in Poland. After completing her studies at the University of Liège, Belgium, she returned to Warsaw, and was placed in charge of a Jewish orphanage. In 1909, she met the renowned educator and author Dr. Janusz Korczak and the two formed a bond. In 1919, all the children were moved to a new orphanage, where Stefania served as general manager and Korczak as director-in-chief. When World War I began, Korczak was recruited into the army and Stefania remained in charge of running the orphanage, which had expanded and now housed some 150 children. In 1938, Stefania visited the Land of Israel. She lived at Kibbutz Ein Harod until 1939 and then returned to Warsaw. With the Nazi occupation, the members of Ein Harod arranged for her to leave Poland, but she turned it down and moved into the Warsaw ghetto along with Dr. Korczak and the children. On August 6, 1942, they received the order to deport the orphans. Stefania, Korczak and the other staff members refused to abandon their charges, and marched with the 192 orphans to the *Umschlagplatz* gathering point, with Stefania in charge of the group of children aged 9-12. All were murdered in Treblinka extermination camp.



Postcard written by Stefania and sent via the Red Cross to the members of Kibbutz Ein Harod, 1940

Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Archives, Israel



Dr. Korczak and Stefania with the children in their care, 1923

Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Archives, Israel

# CARING FOR OTHERS

## TRUDE GROAG



Trude  
Beit Theresienstadt - Theresienstadt Martyrs Remembrance  
Association, Givat Haim Ichud, Israel

*Since our Zionist conscience required us to spare the children from even spiritual harm - to the greatest extent possible - as they passed through the hell of the deportation, it is no surprise that we considered all means acceptable. Paper could be obtained and I had a little cotton [wool] because I was a nurse. That's how the young boys and girls made those cotton statuettes....*



Trude was born in 1889 in Honenstadt, Czechoslovakia. She completed a certified preschool teachers' course in Vienna in 1911, and in 1939 she took a nursing course.

In 1942, Trude and her family were deported to Terezin, where she worked as a hospital nurse, caring mainly for the elderly and the mentally ill. She was also a kindergarten teacher and instructor at an infant-care center and various preschools.

She gave lectures in the ghetto on the activities that took place in these institutions and on how to create games and toys using paper and cotton wool. Trude cared for the elderly, the infirm and the children with equal devotion, striving to enrich their lives in Terezin with a little light.

**Trude and her entire family survived.**



Children's artwork, Terezin ghetto  
Beit Theresienstadt - Theresienstadt Martyrs Remembrance Association, Givat Haim Ichud, Israel

# WOMANHOOD

By asserting their femininity during the Shoah, women attempted to maintain their humanity.

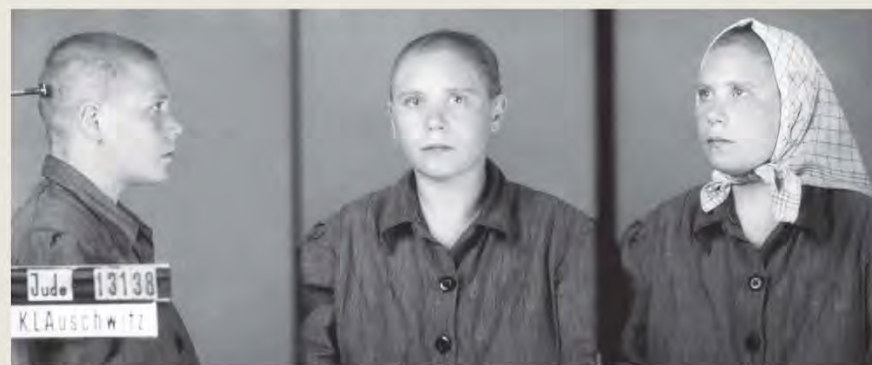
There is no contrast more glaring than that between the Holocaust and womanhood. Investing in one's femininity were considered indulgences at such times. Nevertheless, a woman's feminine aspects was a basic component of her personality. An affront to womanhood was an affront to women themselves as complete human beings.

Some women used their sexuality to survive or in order to earn a favor - to save a family member, to obtain a slice of bread, etc. From their standpoint, it was just another way to stay alive. Looking good during the Holocaust also carried the meaning of life - before selections, women smeared crumbs of rouge on their cheeks or pinched them to make them look healthier and thus avoid death. A lice comb in a camp might enable a woman to live, since lice carried disease. Women continued to wash themselves in whatever water they could find - even if it was frozen from the harsh European winter - if they were fortunate to have the opportunity.

Although the racial laws forbade sexual contact between Nazis and the victims, there were plenty of ways to attack women: ordering their total undressing in public places, touching their bodies, and carrying out harsh beatings. In the camps, selections in the nude were part of the daily fare.



A blouse received by Helen Ryba in a camp near Leipzig, to which she added an orange bead



Jewish prisoner no. 13138 from Radom, Poland, after her hair was shaved off, Auschwitz

Panstwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, Poland



In Plaszów we found some used lipstick... we took a piece of celluloid, smeared what remained on it, and folded it. Whenever we went to a new camp, we smeared it on our cheeks very delicately.

Maryla Sziperling

# WOMANHOOD

## LINA BERESIN



Lina (left) and her sisters Betty and Anna, October, 1945

Lina was born in 1910 in Lithuania. She married Jacob Beresin in 1933 and moved to Kovno. Her daughter Shulamit was born in 1935. In 1941, all the Jews were deported to the ghetto. In the March 1944 *Children's Aktion*, Shulamit was taken to Auschwitz, where she was apparently murdered. When the ghetto was liquidated in July 1944, Lina and her two sisters were deported to the Stutthof concentration camp, where Lina made the bra for herself. Her husband was sent to Dachau and murdered. Lina and her sisters survived. She immigrated to Mexico, where she remarried.

*They dressed us in prisoners' outfits. As a professional seamstress, I began to dream about how to make myself a bra and what materials I would use.*

*I removed the lining from the sleeves [of men's jackets] and now had some fabric. From my men's shirt I removed three buttons. A woman who found a needle in her jacket gave it to me in return for a full day's food ration. I unraveled thread from the ribbon around the blanket. I found a broken window and removed a shard of glass from it.*

*I lay down on the ground with my fabric and the shard of glass and I cut my prized item. Then I sewed it.*

*I wore the bra for almost seven months until the liberation.*



The bra made by Lina in the Stutthof concentration camp

# WOMANHOOD

## MARGOT FINK



Margot, after the war

Margot was born in 1925 in Cologne, Germany. In 1938, Margot and her younger brother, Max, were sent to their uncles in the Netherlands. In 1942, Margot and Max went into hiding with other relatives in the home of her uncles in Amsterdam. In 1943, the entire family was captured. Margot was placed in a group that worked in a factory of the Philips concern. In June 1944, her group was sent to Auschwitz and from there to the Reichenbach women's prison camp. In February 1945, the women were taken on a death march. Liberated on May 1, 1945, they were transferred to Sweden. Margot returned to the Netherlands to rejoin her uncle and his young daughter who had survived; there she learned that her parents, younger brother and aunt had been murdered. One year later, Margot immigrated to the Land of Israel.

*I had a chance to steal some leftover wire.  
That's how I made the comb.  
I kept the comb with me all the time, taking  
the chance that they'd catch me.  
I assume that if they'd have caught me, I'd  
have been badly punished.*



The comb made by Margot in the Reichenbach women's prison camp



# RESISTANCE AND RESCUE

## Women used their gender to contribute towards resistance efforts

Almost anyone who engaged in warfare against the Nazis and their accomplices during the Holocaust was expressing a choice - accepting active, rather than passive, death (e.g., in a gas chamber). Jews could neither ensure their survival nor win the war by fighting back. It was foremost an act of pride.

On the whole, women avoided this option altogether, as long as they remained in the family setting. The only women who could indulge in the idea of fighting or going underground were young adult women who were not yet responsible for others.

As a rule, women were totally unwanted in non-Jewish partisan groups. Insofar as women were admitted to such units, they were forced to mop floors, wash men's laundry and endure sexual harassment even if they established hospitals, performed surgery and engaged in other lifesaving actions.

Yet women had an important role to play in the resistance, mainly in rescue. When women were tasked with transferring clandestine materials from place to place, they disguised themselves as social workers involved in child care. In the camps, women's active role in resistance was usually limited to sabotaging the armaments they manufactured. Occasionally, a woman attacked a guard and was immediately murdered. Escape attempts ended similarly. These actions were threatening in that the price for them would be paid not only by their instigators but also by many hostages who would certainly be executed.



Three women resistance fighters removed from bunkers during the repression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, 1943. Right to left: Malka Zdroiewicz and her comrades, Bluma and Ruchaleh, members of the Jewish Fighting Organization



Rachel Rudnicki with a group of partisans that operated in the Rudniki forests. Taken upon the liberation of Vilna, 1944  
Central Government Archives, Moscow

# RESISTANCE AND RESCUE

## FANNY SOLOMIAN



Fanny in uniform

*I began performing surgeries right away. I drained pus that had not congealed; I even amputated a finger. I did it all not with great knowledge but with all my heart... After I found the book "The Health-Preserving Doctor," based on the fundamentals of natural healing, I became an ardent aficionado of this method.*

*Almost all the women in the unit had spouses, who served them concurrently as masters and as defenders of their "honor" against other men... I couldn't get used to the thought that to be privileged with relative calm during the day I had to agree to annoyance at night.*

Fanny studied physical education and worked as a medical gymnastics instructor in hospitals. The Polish Ministry of Education sent her to Sweden for advanced studies but she returned to Pinsk, her hometown, when the war broke out. When the Pinsk ghetto was liquidated and all its inhabitants murdered, she was one of the few who managed to flee to the forests and join the partisans. Initially, she served as a nurse with small partisan companies, but later on worked as the chief physician of a partisan brigade and set up an operating room where she performed numerous operations.

Despite her status and centrality, Fanny felt that her colleagues did not give her the treatment and respect she deserved because she was both a woman and a Jew. After the war, she moved to Israel with her husband and daughter.



Victory medal and page of a medical book used by Fanny in the forests  
"A Girl Facing the Gallows," Moreshet and Sifryat Poalim, 1971

# RESISTANCE AND RESCUE

## MIRJAM WATERMAN



Mirjam and Menachem, 1943

During the war, Mirjam and Menachem Pinkhof were active in the Dutch resistance for the rescue of children. Mirjam's assignment was to gather infants whose parents were marked for deportation, or who had already been deported to Westerbork transit camp, and bring them to the train station in Amsterdam.

Mirjam would arrive at the station with a baby carriage and wait for the liaison who would deliver the children to their hiding places. Mirjam did not know the babies' destinations or the identity of the woman who claimed them. She was eventually caught and deported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. After liberation, Mirjam was active in returning the hidden children to the Jewish authorities.



Baby's eating utensils that arrived together with Henri Hamerslag to Hilversum.

*Many children were hidden in the children's institution run by Katy Mulder in Hilversum. On one of my visits to this institution, Kitty [my friend, who was hidden in the institution] led me to a closed room and said, "I have another job here—to take care of two babies who've just arrived." When she showed them to me, I realized that they were the brother and sister whom I had passed on at the train station just a few days earlier. The girl, Mirjam Hamerslag, was a year-and-a-half old, and the boy [Henri] was only two weeks old.*



Mirjam Hamerslag and her brother Henri (Zvi) at an institution in Hilversum, 1944



Baby jacket in which Mirjam Hamerslag was swaddled while being transferred to Hilversum.

# FRIENDSHIP

## Groups of friends became substitute families that saved lives

Growing up took place very quickly during the Holocaust. Girls normally considered very young functioned as adult women. In many cases, parents ceased to be the family's breadwinners. The girls often developed survival mechanisms and took their fates into their own hands. Nevertheless, girls yearned for a friend who would support them and to whom they could give of themselves. Together, they derived strength from memories of home, friends and the very fact of discovering inner strengths of which they had been unaware.

Adult women also needed friends - in the ghettos if they had survived without spouses, in gender-segregated labor camps, or upon the loss of the family that had been their source of strength and support.

Group companionship in the Holocaust was a phenomenon unique to women. As stated by the historian Judith Baumel-Schwartz, it was advantageous to "stay invisible" at this time; a network of friends was something that attracted attention. Grouping, however, provided an advantage in terms of the possibilities of support and survival that it facilitated. Small groups composed of a couple or threesome of friends, relatives or older women came together to form larger groups that protected a girl or girls younger than them.



A pendant made of bread given to Hana Frankel as a birthday present from her friends in a labor camp



A card given to Fella Rosenberg at Auschwitz on January 10, 1945, for her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, from her mother's friends, prior to their departure on a death march

# FRIENDSHIP

## HILDE GRÜNBAUM



Hilde (right) with the members of the orchestra, after the liberation  
Courtesy: Hilde Zimche, Kibbutz Netzer Sereni, Israel

Hilde was born in Berlin. She studied violin, and played in a youth orchestra. In 1940, Hilde joined a Zionist training farm in Ahrensdorf. On April 20, 1943, the trainees were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In Auschwitz, they continued to stay in touch; their counselor, Anne Borinski, was their main liaison in the women's camp. The girls slipped notes to each other to keep up with the news, and looked out for each other's needs.

Hilde was recruited by the women's orchestra in Birkenau. The conductor of the orchestra was Alma Rosé, a virtuoso violinist. Alma considered the orchestra as a means of survival for the women. She also managed to provide the orchestra members with conditions considered good by camp standards. Hilde managed to transfer as many friends as she could to the orchestra, and provided food to those left behind. Hilde played the violin at first, but later became a recorder of notes and Alma's main assistant. Alma was murdered in Auschwitz. Hilde, Anne and some members of the training farm survived and eventually immigrated to Israel.

*We were always one for all and we felt that the others were all for us. Even if we were not always together, we always had a sense of belonging. It helped us very, very much, both practically and, without a doubt, psychologically.*

*Anne Borinski*

*Alma believed that if we survived this period, we might be able to prove that we could build something in the camp, that there would be some point in having survived.*

*Hilde Grünbaum*



Music bag made by Hilde from a pillow cover given to her by a friend at Auschwitz and a pen used by Hilde to write the music for the orchestra at Auschwitz  
Loaned by Hilde Zimche, Kibbutz Netzer Sereni, Israel



Anne, Switzerland, 1945  
Courtesy: Eldad Aloni,  
Kibbutz Maayan Zvi, Israel



Alma playing the violin, Netherlands, 1942  
Amadeus Press, Courtesy: the Mahler-Rose  
Collection, Ontario

# FRIENDSHIP

## LILI KASTICHER



Lili, Israel, 1953  
Courtesy of Itzhak Ben-Chanoh Haifa, Israel

Lili (Alice) was born in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. During the Holocaust, she was deported from Hungary to Auschwitz. From Auschwitz she was sent to the Ober Hohenelbe concentration camp. Every other Sunday, the women were given time to tend to their personal hygiene. During this time, Lili organized cultural events in which some twenty women participated. They held a painting, poetry and short-story writing contest. They made a stage out of boxes, performed recitations and skits, conducted debates, made sculptures out of potatoes, set their poems to melodies, sang songs and dreamed about the liberation. Lili concealed the pages of poetry and drawings in her blouse. Lili survived and immigrated to Israel in 1948.

*I had only one thing in mind: to encourage the Jewish women there not to give up, not to be let down, not to be pessimistic, and to endure.*



**Write, paint, and you can win**  
**Here are the prizes:**  
1- a bowl of potatoes  
2- a sewing needle  
3- a palm-reading [session]



Drawings by Erika Goldmann, Fajgi Spiegel and an unidentified young woman

# FAITH

In the years of despair, women found comfort and moral strength in faith

Many questions have been raised regarding religion during the Holocaust. Some Jews felt that God had abandoned them, and did not understand how and why they endured such suffering. Others found solace and mental fortitude in faith during the Holocaust, as they could nowhere else. Words can hardly describe the power that these people derived from faith, the moral strength it gave them, and the subsequent difficulty in breaking their spirit as human beings even when their bodies could no longer endure the agonies.

Religious women who adhered to their religion continued to observe the commandments and festivals as best they could. They prayed, fasted, abstained from bread during Passover, and lit candles for the Sabbath and on Hanukah.

Apart from maintaining their faith and continuing to observe religious customs, these women obtained moral strength from their conviction. This affected their behavior in the hellhole they inhabited, and enabled them to give and be more considerate of others.



A prayer service on Yom Kippur, Lodz ghetto, Poland, 1941  
The Jewish Heritage-Writing Project



Ester Obstfeld, hiding in a cellar in Amsterdam, Netherlands, Hanukah 1942. After the hideout was discovered, Ester was deported to the Sobibor extermination camp, where she was murdered.



Women baking *matzot* for Passover, Warsaw ghetto, Poland

# FAITH

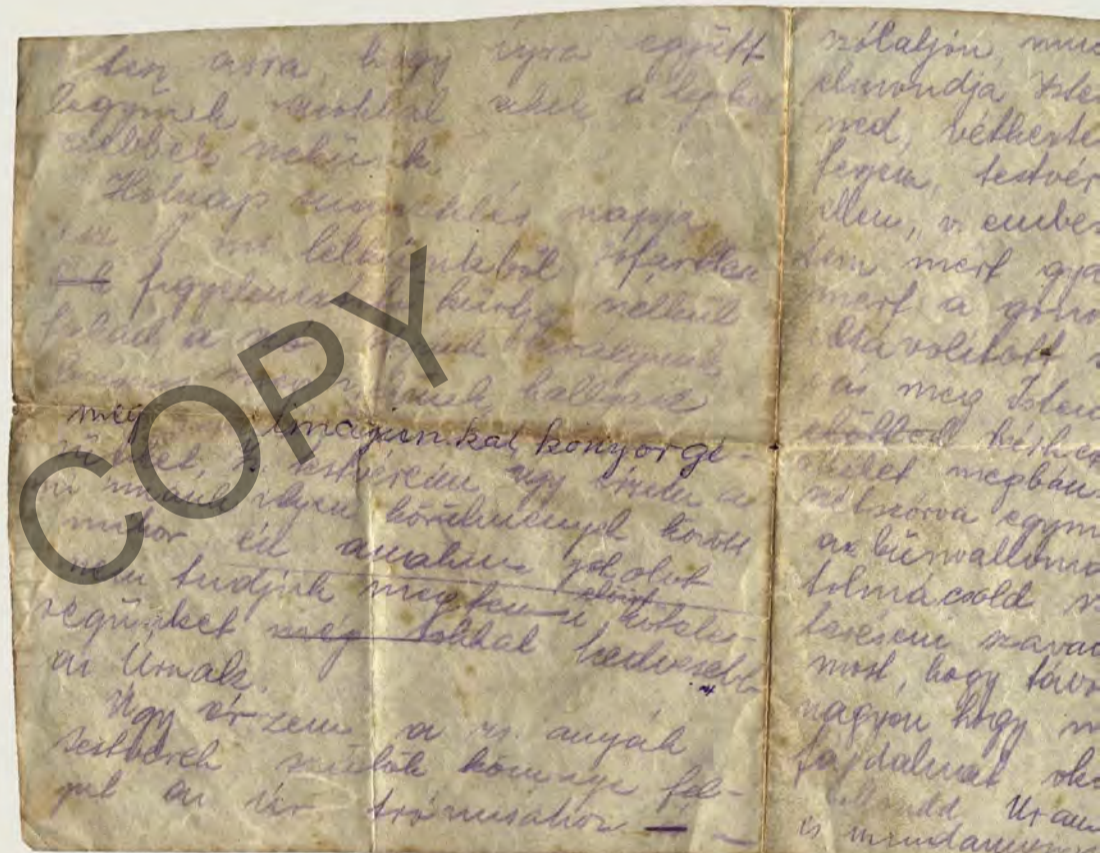
## LIVIA KORALEK



Livia (second from right) and her students, Csorna (Sopron), Hungary, 1943

*Our rabbi in the town of Gyor gathered us before he went to Auschwitz, and said, among other things: "It is not the place that sanctifies man but man who sanctifies the place." On this holy day, we are being put to a test. We must observe the commandment 'You shall not steal.' Each of us receives a tiny ration and has to be content with it.*

From the sermon given by Livia in the Parschnitz concentration camp, Yom Kippur, 1944



Born in Gyor, Hungary, Livia was deported to Auschwitz in June 1944. In August, she was transferred to the Parschnitz concentration camp, where she worked in a factory manufacturing aircraft parts.

On the eve of *Yom Kippur* 1944, at the request of her friends Livia gave a sermon to the women in the camp. "I didn't want to be a kapo; I didn't want to be a leader. There was no need for it. I only wanted to give [them] encouragement." The women did not eat the bread that they received on *Yom Kippur*; instead, they stored it under their pillows.

On Passover, the women attempted to conduct a *seder* but the Germans broke it up. Livia refrained from eating bread that entire week.

After the war, Livia married Aladar Spiegel and immigrated to Israel.



Paper fragments of the sermon that Livia gave on Yom Kippur in the Parschnitz concentration camp



# FAITH

## DITA KURSCHNER



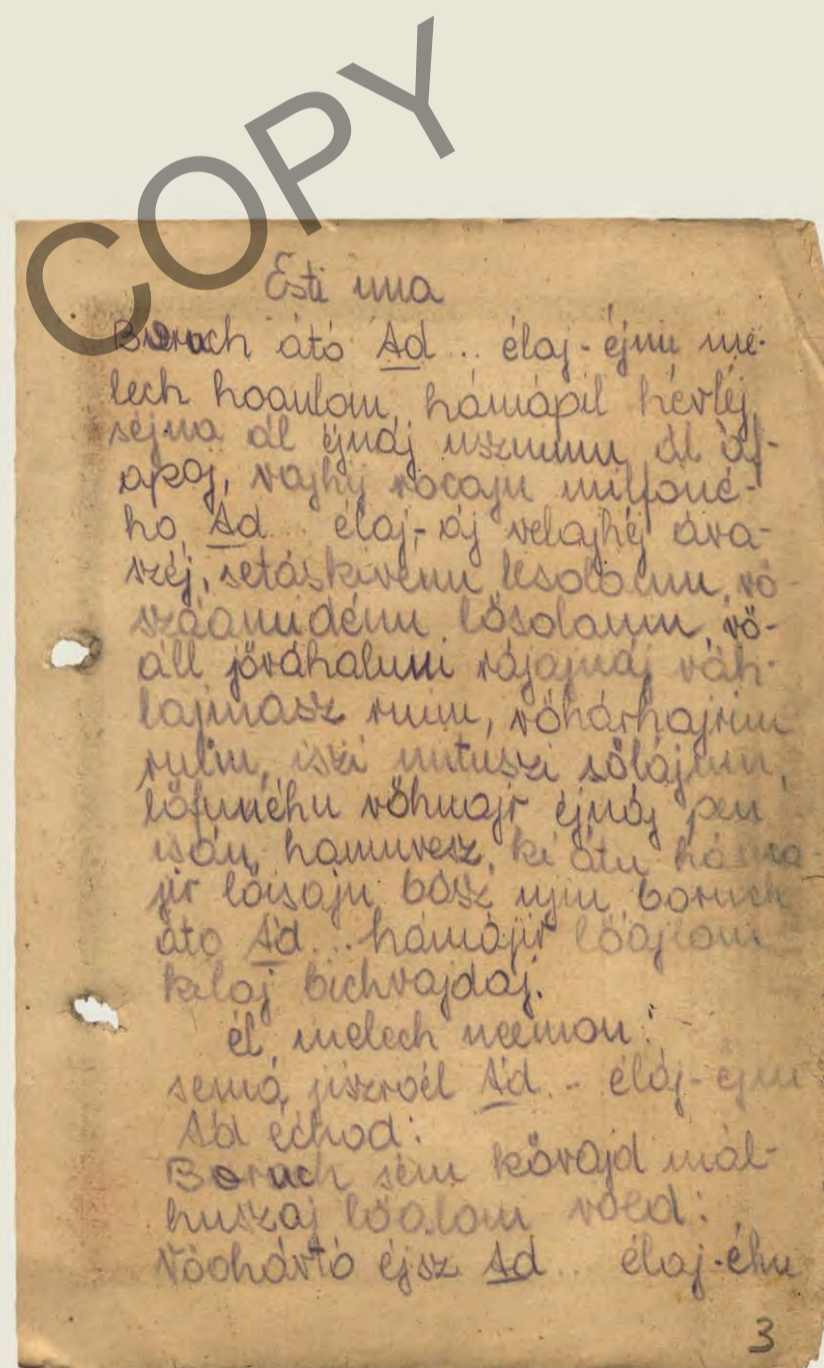
Hedy and Dita in a DP camp, 1946

*There was this woman there, Klari Kahna. She prayed all day and night. I listened to her prayers and thought I'd write them down, so that if we died they would know that Jewish women had been there. She prayed in archaic Hebrew and I recorded the prayers in Latin characters.*

Dita was born in Vienna. In 1939, she fled with her family to Hungary. In June 1944, they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. From Auschwitz, Dita and her mother, Hedy, were sent to the Gelsenkirchen labor camp, and from there to the Sommerda labor camp.

Convinced that no Jew would survive the Holocaust, Dita considered it important to record Jewish prayers. She stole the stickers from ammunition boxes at Sommerda, and on them recorded the prayers that she heard a woman named Klari Kahna recite as she prayed. As she was not versed in Hebrew, she recorded them as she heard them, in Latin characters.

As the war wound down, Dita and Hedy were forced on a death march. They were liberated in Leipzig and later immigrated to Israel.



Handwritten transcription of prayers, by Dita

# FOOD

When the stomach is empty, the imagination cooks

When women reached the camps after having lost their entire families, they attempted to maintain vestiges of their humanity. One way of doing this was to occupy themselves with food recipes.

Recipes are a tradition among women; handed down from mothers to daughters, they capture the women's family, community and geographic traditions. For this reason, in the most unexpected place of all, amidst terrifying physical slavery and the shattering of their world as they knew it, women engaged in remembering and creating recipes.

Women recorded recipes as if to prove to and remind themselves where they had come from, and to hand them on for posterity. Sometimes, they prescribed exaggerated proportions of ingredients in order to make the fantasy more enchanting.

They wrote on any scrap of paper that they could obtain, and with every precious piece of pencil they either found or obtained in exchange for bread. And when they had no pencil or paper, they shouted the recipes at night from bed to bed in the darkened camp barracks, transforming their quarters, for a moment, into the homes they had once had.



Woman at an improvised cooking facility, Gurs transition camp, France



Woman feeding a girl, Lodz ghetto, Poland

# FOOD

## YEHUDIT AUFRICHTIG



Yehudit shortly before her arrest, Netherlands, June 1944

Born in Hungary, Yehudit immigrated to Amsterdam in 1938. Upon the German occupation, she met the wife of the Hungarian ambassador to the Netherlands, who equipped her with a passport that did not identify her as a Jew.

Yehudit became a member of the resistance, distributing forged food ration cards and food to Jewish families who were hiding on Dutch farms.

When she was betrayed by a Dutch woman, she was deported in 1944 to Westerbork camp and from there to the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp, where she was put to work at a Siemens factory. Yehudit survived the war, moved to France and later immigrated to Israel.

Yehudit Aufrichtig was ill, and missed the distribution of the daily slice of bread. Edith Gombus, her best friend, sent her the bread along with a note telling her what they had imagined themselves as having eaten.

*Breakfast: Karlsbad-style breakfast - eggs, butter, cheese, jam.*

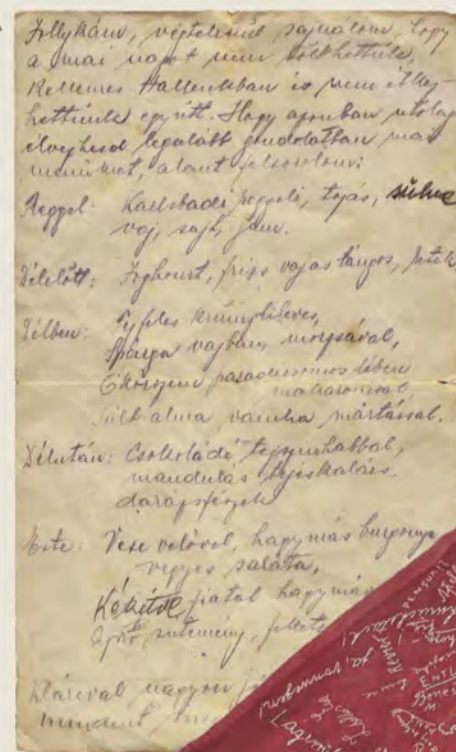
*Brunch: yogurt, langus and a radish.*

*Lunch: potato soup with sour cream and laurel leaves, asparagus in sour cream and bread crumbs. Sunny-side-up egg and beef in tomato sauce with macaroni. Fried apple in vanilla sauce.*

*Afternoon: chocolate milk with whipped cream and egg bread with almonds and a "hornet's nest."*

*Supper: marrow, fried potatoes with onion, salad with green onion, little cookies and black coffee, fruit.*

*We ate everything apart from a little slice of bread, which we saved for you.*



The "fantasy meal" letter that Edith forwarded to Yehudit



Strip of cloth left over from a Nazi flag, embroidered by Yehudit with the names of women prisoners in the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp

# FOOD

## VALY KOHN



Valy, before the war

*After a day of work, we went to the barracks. We were very tired and I wrote about food, what somebody said was best; we ate with our thoughts.*

*We wrote about food all night; I wrote on what I'd found, on pictures of Hitler [that I found in the street].*

### **Honeycake**

*1 kg. flour, 1/4 [sic] sugar, 12 [sic] honey, 2 egg whites, rum, coffee, baking soda*

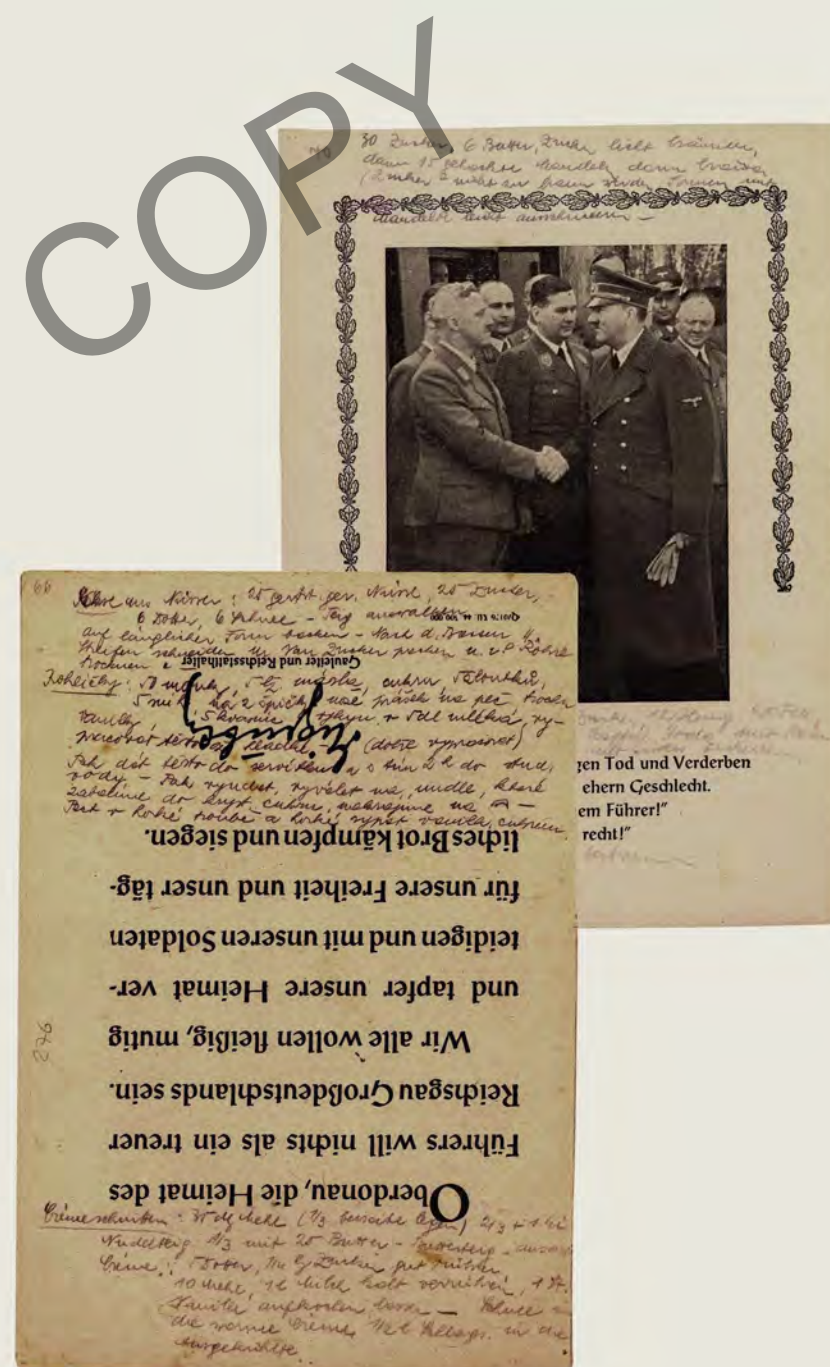
*Mix with sour cream, perforate egg and remove yolk*

*Sprinkle almonds and sugar on top*

Valy and her husband Ewald lived before the war in Prague. In July 1943, Valy, Ewald and Valy's mother were deported to the Terezin ghetto. In October 1944, Valy and her mother were sent on to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Valy survived the *selektion* but her mother was murdered. Several weeks later, she was sent to the Lenzing concentration camp, where she wrote recipe booklets on the back of Nazi propaganda she found in the street. Subsequently, she was sent to Mauthausen.

After liberation, Valy discovered that her husband had been murdered. "Everything inside me collapsed. This wound did not heal. I returned, but without Ewald I didn't have a home."

Valy immigrated to the Land of Israel in 1946.



Pages on which Valy wrote down some of the recipes

# ART

To create is to breathe! To create is to escape the difficult daily reality

At this time of darkness, there was an extraordinary need for signs of normalcy. One such sign was creating art.

Women were active participants in this phenomenon. They performed in concerts and plays in the ghettos and camps. In the domain of painting - at least as measured in the extent of material found - women were a minority. However, female historians in Warsaw played an active role in documenting the ghetto for Emmanuel Ringelblum's archive. Poetry was written much more intensively and much evidence of it, including many poems by women, survived. Women were also represented in art forms that were relatively new at the time, such as photography.

Most artistic endeavors were an expression of a psychological and social need, a source of oxygen amidst suffocation. Anything one could use to express one's pain or, in contrast, the use of laughter and irony to escape reality, provided a vehicle that people grasped and used to express the essence of their talents.



Self-portrait of Julia Pirotte, Marseilles, France 1942  
USHMM, Courtesy: Julia pirotte

As a member of the resistance, Julia used her camera to document operations of the Maquis resistance in 1944, women and children in camps, and additional matters. In 1943, she smuggled to the United States a photographed report that she titled "France under occupation." Later on, she documented the liberation.



Scene from a play performed in the Warsaw ghetto  
Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, Germany



Flamenco Dancer Catharina Frank  
Terezin ghetto, 1944  
Charlotte Buresova

# ART

## SELMA MERBAUM-EISINGER



Selma, Czernowitz, May 1940

Selma was born in Czernowitz, Bukovina and began to write poetry as a teenager. In October 1941, Selma and her parents were interned in the Czernowitz ghetto, and the following June, the family was deported to Transnistria. After an exhausting march, they were sent to the Michailovka labor camp, where the Germans and Ukrainians starved and terrorized the prisoners mercilessly.

Prior to her deportation to Transnistria, Selma managed to give her album of poetry and paintings to Leiser Fichman, her boyfriend from the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement, to whom she dedicated the poems. Selma died of typhus on December 16, 1942 at the age of eighteen. Her parents were murdered a year later.

Leiser was taken to a forced-labor camp at the beginning of the Nazi occupation. He kept the album until 1944, when he sent it to Else, Selma's friend, in Czernowitz. Then he boarded the clandestine immigrant vessel *Mefkure* on its way to the Land of Israel. The *Mefkure* was torpedoed and sank in the Black Sea; Leiser perished without knowing that Selma had died.

*"A Poem"*  
July 7, 1941

*I want to live.  
I want to laugh and give comfort,  
fight battles, love and hate,  
hold heaven in my hand,  
be free to breathe and shout:  
I don't want to die. No!  
No.*



Selma's album of poems and paintings



*The Death of Selma Merbaum-Eisinger*  
Bershad camp, Transnistria 1943  
Arnold Daghani