Gender and the Holocaust

By Ruth Sinai

Pregnancy, forced abortion, sterilization, halted menstruation, were some of the additional problems unique to women in Nazi concentration and extermination camps. In the hell in which they found themselves, many females felt they ceased to be women, even though they had to muster all their remaining strength to function as mothers and protect their children.

Their experiences are described in lectures, art, photography, and drama during an international conference taking place this week in Israel entitled "The Family During the Holocaust – Gender Perspectives."

Senior women scholars are taking part in the conference to address a subject relatively new in western historiography - an examination of the Holocaust from a feminist perspective. The purpose of the conference, taking place in Israel for the second year in a row, is to expand and institutionalize research, teaching, and commemoration of the Holocaust from a gender perspective.

The conference is sponsored by the social sciences department and the department for the teaching of the Holocaust of Beit Berl College, in cooperation with Terezin House at Kibbutz Givat Brenner-Ihud, and the Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot Ghetto Fighters Museum. Part of the funding for the conference came from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany.

Up to 15 years ago, feminist research on the Holocaust was controversial, to say the least, and even regarded with hostility. "Many survivors and scholars believed that dealing with this aspect trivialized the tragedy and the universality of the suffering," says Dr. Esther Herzog, head of the social sciences department at Beit Berl. However the field is now becoming more widely accepted and during the last decade Israeli women scholars have also entered it.

The entire study of the Holocaust is dominated by men, says Dr. Irmgard Kloenne of the University of Paderborn in Germany, who studied the part played by girls in youth movements in Nazi Germany. During the conference, Kloenne presented a series of letters written by Else Dobkowsky, who later perished in Auschwitz, to her 15-year-old daughter, Ursula, whom she sent to England after Kristallnacht (the "night of broken glass," of fires and looting in Germany in November 1938 when thousands of synagogues and Jewish businesses were destroyed).

"This is amazing testimony that men dismissed as trivial - the mother reminds her daughter to iron her clothes and to behave nicely, but she expresses so much of the essence of motherhood under impossible conditions," Kloenne explains.

Prof. Dalia Ofer of the Hebrew University, a leading scholar of Holocaust and gender, says "the voice of motherhood during the Holocaust is minimal. A good deal of the testimonies of mothers
and of women in general is heard through the voices of men, or through the voices of children who later wrote from the point of view of children of those days and parents of today."

The way women dealt with life in the camps was unique and has not yet been sufficiently expressed in scholarship, says Dr. Rochelle Saidel of San Paulo University in Brazil and the Remember the Women Institute in New York. In her lecture, Dr. Saidel described the advantages women had in the camps – their traditional function as housewives made it easier for them to maintain cleanliness, and to dress and feed their families, to whatever extent was possible in such circumstances. On the other hand, their socialization made them submissive and made things more difficult for them than for men, says Saidel.

Prof. Judith Buber-Agassi of Tel Aviv University, described a phenomenon unique to women in the Holocaust - small groups, especially in the women's Ravensbruck camp, were based on family ties or previous acquaintance and were known as "camp families." They served as mutual aid frameworks that greatly increased the chances for survival.

"It is important to understand the uniqueness of the experience of each group,” says Prof. Esther Fuchs of the University of Arizona, who wrote a book about women in the Holocaust and gave a lecture at the conference on marriage and the presentation of the family in Holocaust-related films. "It is also important to examine the gender perspective because the Nazis were opposed to feminism."

Women are trying to take over part of the discussion of the Holocaust just as they are trying to consolidate their status in other areas of life," says Esther Herzog, and also so that the subject will be more relevant to women. "It is much easier for a women to identify with the memoires of a mother or a daughter in the Holocaust than with those of a father or a son,” Kloenne says.

"The entire narrative of the Holocaust is seen through the eyes of men - Primo Levy, [Aharon] Appelfeld, Eli Weisel, [Janusz] Korczak, [Raul] Wallenberg. Even in the movie "Shoa" that was to have given the ultimate expression to the experience, it was a male barber who told about the shaving of the heads of women," Fuchs says.

In Israel, the scholars say, the gender aspect has special importance. "The Holocaust in Israel is a political issue. The politics of revenge were adopted in its name," Fuchs explains. "But this is not necessarily the lesson that women learned from the Holocaust."

Dr, Vandana Joshi, from India,who recently completed her doctorate in Germany on German women who informed against Jews, says women's discussion of the Holocaust specifically highlights humanistic values of hope and self-sacrifice, and not of revenge.

"In response to the Holocaust, Israel built a macho hero that is the antithesis of the Jew who was led to the slaughter," says Kloenne. "The Holocaust and heroism are always talked about," adds Fuchs, "but heroism in feminist eyes is in the expressions of love that overcame the hatred that surrounded everyone, with empathy, by helping each other."