Zoë Waxman. “*Women in the holocaust: a feminist history*”

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- 1 As one of the most daunting experiences of the twentieth century, the Holocaust has informed the collective memory of the people who witnessed it first-hand, were directly implicated or lived through it, but also of the post-generations and the general public across the globe. Various disciplines and media – historiography, literary studies, film, to name just a few – have dealt with the subject for the past seven decades. Scholarly interest in the Holocaust has indeed not decreased with time, as different topics and perspectives offer new possibilities for understanding the event. Restorative efforts in terms of archival research help to uncover stories that were not publically available and discussed up till now.
- 2 Zoë Waxman's book *Women in The Holocaust. A Feminist History* is a timely addition to the existing body of research on the gender specificity of the Holocaust experience. Waxman is aware of the dangers of such an endeavour, since many historians have long argued that the Holocaust can only be regarded in its entirety, as a "totalizing event" (8), thereby excluding gender differences and rendering the experience "gender-neutral" (6). What Waxman seeks to propose is a *feminist history* of the Holocaust – an intention explicitly stated in the title of the book. The author's initial assertion that "[w]omen's lives in the Holocaust were different – and they were different *because* they were women" (8) together with her later argument that "the collapse of the political and social structures that the Holocaust engendered did not, remarkably enough, undermine the structures and importance of gender itself" (113), are both crucial points that endorse the need to view the Holocaust through a feminist lens. In other

words, to equate the Holocaust experiences of men and women, or rather to negate the differences between them, is not a viable approach. The book therefore aims to render "the female voice as an antidote to what remains an overwhelmingly male narrative" (8).

- 3 *Women in The Holocaust. A Feminist History* is divided into four parts. The first chapter is dedicated to the lives of Jewish women in the ghettos and depicts in how far familial structures generally, and gender dynamics within families in particular, were affected by the Holocaust, while the second chapter focuses on the women who survived by hiding in various German-occupied countries. The third chapter chooses concentration camps as the focal point to investigate how men and women were physically separated and how inmates were discriminated on the basis of their gender. More specifically, visibly pregnant women or those "accompanied by children under the age of 14 were sent straight to their deaths" (17). The last chapter looks at Jewish life in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps. All chapters significantly rely on testimonial evidence, either by way of diary entries of eye-witnesses, or by including the narration of experiences by female Holocaust survivors. The earlier chapters of the book reveal how the Nazis marked Jewish women as a specific biological group and reduced them "to their biological functions [be it] rape, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and so on" (8-9). The last chapter, "After the War", stresses how gender continued to inform the lives of men and women even after the cessation of war, particularly in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps. This remains a much neglected aspect of gendered Holocaust history and is given due prominence by Waxman. I therefore choose to elaborate some of her findings here.
- 4 Waxman remarkably shows the multi-layered gendered experience of the immediate post-war period with a special focus on aspects of marriage and motherhood. As "[m]ost survivors wanted to rebuild their lives as quickly as possible" (129), the time-frame between engagement and marriage was kept rather short. The marriages were thought to "compensate for all the suffering survivors had been forced to endure and to form the basis for a new, often idealized, future" (130). Yet, these hurried marriages were also a result of the strong encouragement by religious leaders in the DP camps, who feared "sexual promiscuity – that they saw as being rife in the DP camps" (130). Such regulations of female sexuality mirrored the pre-war supervision of women's lives in terms of their sexual chastity.
- 5 The experience of motherhood in the aftermath of the Holocaust was characterized by its ambivalence. Pregnancy had until recently been associated with death, and it was hard to overcome the fear that "a Jewish child could not possibly survive" (138). Women in post-war times had to (re)adjust in many ways. On one side of the spectrum we notice a Jewish baby boom in the DP camps that must be understood as "a specific and direct response to the catastrophic losses of the Holocaust" (135). On the other side, a large number of women had difficulties becoming pregnant due to malnutrition and bad health, and when pregnant, miscarriage and stillbirths remained a dire threat. Women who deliberately chose not to become pregnant often felt the pressure to start a family in order to contribute to the "Jewish renewal" (138).
- 6 By way of a conclusion, it can be said that the feminist history of Holocaust is indicative of how gender structures persist in disastrous times. As Waxman puts it, "old values of pre-war gender roles became an ideal to which both Jewish men and women hoped to return" (140) after the war. Traditional gender roles were consolidated and reinforced

in the aftermath of the Holocaust and served as strong identity markers that sustained the process of rehabilitating Jewish life.