

Introduction

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Preprint / Preprint

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pető, A., Hecht, L., & Krasuska, K. (2015). Introduction. In A. Pető, L. Hecht, & K. Krasuska (Eds.), *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* (pp. 9-24). Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN Wydawnictwo.
<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-71894-4>

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WOMEN AND THE HOLOCAUST: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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Publication of this volume has been made possible through support from the American Studies Center, the University of Warsaw, Poland, the Action and Protection Foundation, Hungary, and the Gender Center Foundation, Poland.



Cover illustration: An anonymous former Auschwitz prisoner, working in a collective of small industries. The image comes from a photo album confiscated from the Joint Distribution Committee Hungary office by the Hungarian government.

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ISBN: 978-83-64703-24-9

Printed and bound by
Omegapress Sp. z o.o.
ul. Szosowa 12
41-203 Sosnowiec

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Introduction

ANDREA PETÖ, LOUISE HECHT,
KAROLINA KRASUSKA

The volume *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* uses recent developments in gender studies to expand the existing scholarship on women and the Holocaust with specific emphasis on Central and East-Central Europe. While gender theory updates the analytical frameworks, the previously unexamined textual archive of this region produces new connecting lines between “women” and the Holocaust. Together they lead us to rethink the various levels of how the category of “gender” matters in Holocaust research in all parts of Europe and beyond.

Central and East-Central Europe and Holocaust Research

In his influential book *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Larry Wolff claims that the line between East and West in the minds of Enlightenment philosophers approximately converged with the border between the Eastern and the Western block, after World War II. He was convinced that because of its notorious history, the coercive mind-mapping of the Enlightenment that defined the “barbaric East” as the indispensable counterpart of Western civilization would “certainly outlive the collapse of Communism, surviving in the public culture and its mental maps.”¹ During the

¹ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 4.

last twenty-five years the majority of intellectuals and politicians in the former communist countries have worked hard to prove Larry Wolff wrong and struggled for a reconceptualization of Europe. In many respects, the process in which post-communist societies have attempted to come to terms with the memory of the Holocaust seems to be the touchstone for those societies' "return" to Europe, i.e. their triumph over Enlightenment's coercive mind-mapping.

In general, historical memory provides an effective tool for critically examining mental maps. Like many others before them, John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, the editors of the volume *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (2013) argue that the "Holocaust came to occupy a centerstage position in ethical thinking about the modern world"; thus, they embarked upon the comprehensive and systematic presentation of the subject in all post-communist countries, from Albania to Slovenia.² In the view of the editors' detailed and sensitive approach, two of their assumptions seem remarkable. By claiming that the cohesiveness of their volume could be attributed to the "relative unity of the situation of the postcommunist reception of the Holocaust," Himka and Michlic merely reproduced the ideological postulates of their predecessor, David S. Wyman's 1996 volume *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, who claimed that "these countries all followed the Soviet Union's approach to the Holocaust."³ While this line of thinking suggests ideological conformity in historical memory in post-communist countries, their second assumption refers to historical events and stresses "the messiness of actual historical experience" in the "East";

² John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, "Introduction," in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 3.

³ Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 12. David S. Wyman, "Introduction," in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, ed. David S. Wyman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), xxi.

whereas people could be neatly categorized into victims, perpetrators, and bystanders in the “West,” the situation in the “East” was, according to them, considerably more complex.⁴ A brief look at Henri Roussso’s *The Vichy Syndrome* or Vicky Carron’s *Uneasy Asylum* on the history and memory of World War II in France as well as on debates in the Netherlands, Italy, and other “Western” countries since the 1980s might suffice to undermine clear-cut regional divisions.⁵ Rather than confirming historical facts, Himka’s and Michlic’s categorizations thus seem to corroborate Larry Wolff’s hypothesis about the continuity of coercive mind-mapping.

The call for papers for the Warsaw 2011 conference, where the papers of this volume were first presented, stated that the organizers aimed at promoting the debate on “Women and the Holocaust” in Central Europe, while explicitly excluding Germany and Austria.⁶ Hence, the concept of Central (and East-Central) Europe used to delineate the geographical borders of our subject approximately corresponds to the “East”/“West” divide outlined by Wolff. Instead of substantiating this division, however, our limitation to Central and East-Central Europe seeks to prove that the historical developments and debates in this constructed geographical space are essentially compatible with the “West.” According to our opinion, the “return” to Europe of the former communist countries shall neither be effected by highlighting differences nor by glossing them over, but by providing a carefully crafted corpus of studies that allows for seeing parallels between “East” and “West” without dismissing (national) dissimilarities.

⁴ Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 4; emphasis added.

⁵ Henri Roussso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1991). The book was originally published in 1987; Vicky Carron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); cf. e.g. Debórah Dwork and Robert-Jan van Pelt, “The Netherlands,” in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, 45-77.

⁶ We shall not venture to discuss the ideologically highly charged term “Central Europe,” neither to delineate its eastern border.

Gendering the Holocaust

Similar efforts to challenge received knowledge inspired scholars to gender Holocaust research. Scholars like Sara Horowitz set out two aims for those undertaking gender analyses of the Holocaust: "recovering the experiences of women and reshaping or nuancing Holocaust memory."⁷ The first approach – "recovering the experiences of women" – seeks to gather the lost and neglected stories of the Holocaust; the second focuses on the framework, or rather settings, in which these stories are situated. The archeological work of recovering what has not been seen is well-advanced – several prominent works of recent decades as well as the recent exhibition *Spots of Light – Women in the Holocaust* at Israel's Holocaust Memorial Yad Vashem have addressed the lost experiences of women. This epistemological approach tries to describe what has happened. As Sara Horowitz points out, historians "examine documentary, and sometimes physical, evidence to determine what was done to whom by whom, when, and how."⁸ The second task, delineated by Horowitz, is focused theoretically. Here we are to ask how different cultural forms of Holocaust memory use traditional notions of gender. This attempt makes the work of historians more diverse and complex. Horowitz's interest "in shapes and texture of memories of survivors, in the differences between the recollections of women and of men, in the images and tropes that have emerged in over half-century of representing the Holocaust" is also an agenda this collection is aiming to follow.⁹

In order to amend current conceptions of the geographical paradigm, as well as of the gendered approach to the Holocaust, revisionism seems to be an adequate tool. Aviezer Tucker's typology

⁷ Sara R. Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory," *Prooftexts* 20, no. 1/2 (2000): 176.

⁸ Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory," 163.

⁹ Ibid.

defines three strategies for historical revisionism.¹⁰ The first one is *significance-driven* revisionism when there is a major change in what historians find significant in history. The second one is *evidence-driven* revisions: when new evidence is discovered. And third one is *value-driven* revisionism: when historical events and processes are reevaluated due to a new system of values becoming hegemonic. A gendered history of the Holocaust is a revisionist history writing, which is strongly connected to all three types of revisionisms.

Adopting the current approaches to gender studies and focusing on the texts and contexts from Central and East-Central Europe, this collection aims to contribute to the rich history of researching the Holocaust in a critical way. The impact of the Holocaust on gender roles has already been noticed during the war.¹¹ Also women's role in memorial projects was emphasized immediately after the end of WWII.¹² Systematic research on women and the Holocaust, however, developed since 1983 when Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz organized the first conference on women and the Holocaust in the United States. At that conference, Joan Ringelheim argued eloquently that in failing to recognize that men and women suffered differently we "lose the lives of women for a second time."¹³ A strong professional alliance was built up

¹⁰ Aviezer Tucker, "Historiographic Revision and Revisionism," in *Past in Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe*, ed. Michal Kopecek, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 1-15.

¹¹ Ringelblum's *Oyneg Shabbes* study plan proposed to analyze how the war changed traditional gender roles, see: Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabbes Archive* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 241-242.

¹² Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, "The Identity of Women in Sher'it Hapletha: Personal and Gendered Identity as Determinants in Rehabilitation, Immigration and Resettlement," in *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities*, eds. Dalia Ofer, Francoise S. Ouzan and Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (Oxford, New York: Bergahn Books, 2012), 16-45, esp. 29.

¹³ Robin Ruth Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves: Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993).

between the so-called second wave of the women's movement and those who wanted to rewrite or revise women's history.¹⁴ The scholarship on women and the Holocaust followed the same epistemological route as women's history writing in general. Scholars started to collect the facts and evidence making women visible – and covering such topics as, for example, the history of women in the ghettos and of their participation in the Jewish resistance movements. Yet, scholars in the field were also asking a “different question” about the Holocaust – to use Matsuda's term.¹⁵ The 1986 conference “Autobiographies, Biographies, and Life Histories of Women: Interdisciplinary Perspectives” may have been a starting point for such an analysis. The organizers of this conference, The Personal Narrative Group, published *Interpreting Women's Lives* stating that they aimed to work against the traditional construction that viewed men's experiences as normative and exemplary, and to create a more inclusive narrative strategy, a value driven revisionism.¹⁶

The literature on gender and the Holocaust still suffers from the negative consequences of the equality-difference debate, a debate that was one of the main flashpoints in feminist theory in the 1990s. On the one hand, in the research on the Holocaust and gender men and women have been considered a unified Jewish subject – the victims, resisters, and survivors of the same murderous regime. On the other hand, in this scholarship Jewish women became marked as maternal and sexual bodies, who represent women's difference, which led to emphasizing the uniquely female experiences of sexual assault, pregnancy, menstruation, prostitution etc. Of course, this latter approach, as Horowitz points

¹⁴ See: Andrea Peto, “Writing Women's History in Eastern Europe. Towards a ‘Terra Cognita?’” *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (2004): 173–183.

¹⁵ Mari J. Matsuda, “Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1183–1192.

¹⁶ Personal Narratives Group. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

out "runs the risk of viewing women only as objects of a particular subset of genocidal practices connected to biological functions: for example, pregnancy, motherhood and sexual violation."¹⁷ It is no surprise then that some Holocaust scholars distance themselves from the idea of looking at Jewish women as if they were "only" the victims of sexism; they argue for the equality of Jewish suffering. Or they demand that attention be given to gender differences when studying the Holocaust in "ideological" terms with the aim of raising consciousness.¹⁸ For example, Lawrence Langer strongly opposed making a distinction between men and women generally claiming that to do so banalizes the Holocaust. According to Langer, differentiating between victims is a distraction from the Nazis' goal of total annihilation.¹⁹

Another critique of this approach to women and the Holocaust may be advanced from the perspective of the recently developing men's or masculinity studies. Scholars point out that Jewish men also suffered the same bodily humiliations, which scholars of women's studies and the Holocaust claim as their own.²⁰ We might well agree with Horowitz again who suggests that what we need to do is to "explore the place of gender for what it can teach us about the Shoah."²¹ This is especially relevant because there is another significant group of scholars who are reluctant to contribute to the study of "women and the Holocaust." Some gender theorists are concerned about the "women and the Holocaust" approach as

¹⁷ Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory," 177.

¹⁸ Ibid., 181.

¹⁹ See the oft-quoted words of Langer about non-comparability of suffering of mothers to fathers, in the path breaking book edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, who also contributed to this collection: Lawrence Langer, "Gendered Suffering. Women in Holocaust Testimonies," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 351-363.

²⁰ Stephen R. Haynes, "Ordinary Masculinity: Gender Analysis and Holocaust Scholarship," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 143-163.

²¹ Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory," 178.

an intellectual enterprise because, in their view, it reproduces gendered stereotypes about women and re-marginalizes women as one unified and essentialized group.

Gender analysis of the Holocaust should definitely not be what Horowitz called “domesticated *histoire des femmes*,” which lists where women were and what they did.²² One possible solution to the problem of inclusion is offered by social history within which gender is defined as the “social organization of difference.” In their pioneering work, Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman defined four structural sources for gender differences in the Holocaust, which may advance this framework: the prewar roles of Jewish men and women, anticipatory reactions, German policy and treatment of men and women, and the responses of Jewish men and women to Nazi persecution.²³ However useful this approach may be, it does not revise the leading analytical categories.

The aim of gendered Holocaust research should be to do nothing less than to interrogate its very assumptions: to ask what we think we know while acknowledging that our knowledge remains partial and incomplete and that, in Joan Scott words, we have “only paradoxes to offer.”²⁴ The gender analysis of the Holocaust is essential for three reasons. First, it focuses on the dynamics in historical processes and their role in production of gender. Second, it conceptually uses the concepts from feminist theory, continuously being inflected by and/or critically approaching its theoretical revisions and newest developments. Finally, it is analytically questioning normative positions, constantly contextualizing and interrogating the sedimented concepts of what we think is “feminine” and “masculine” in relation to other categories of difference.

²² Horowitz, “Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory.”

²³ Dalia Ofer, Lenore J. Weitzman, “Introduction: The Role of Gender in the Holocaust,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1-19.

²⁴ See: Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

New Perspectives on "Women and the Holocaust"

The new challenges and approaches undertaken by the articles in this collection are determined precisely by the three coordinates delineated above. The major way of defamiliarizing the concept of gender is provided by the context of Central, respectively East-Central Europe, and the (gendered) national modes of remembering of the Holocaust in the countries in this region. This is especially important if we acknowledge that, as Sue Andrews suggests drawing on Claire Kahane, gender – a primary signifier marks “the response to the traumatic rupture as well as its *representation*.”²⁵ Numerous articles here then take into account the specific cultures of memory in post-communist Central Europe: they thematize communism both as a background for the rising possibility of (gender) research after the fall of the system, but also as a crucial framework for historical processes in the texts analyzed, which is the case especially in the texts by Dana Michăilescu, Hedwig Turai, and Monika Hanková.

The sedimented regulatory notions of gender are interrogated in the analyses within specifically delineated national settings, including the Czech/German (Hanková), Hungarian (Jeges; Turai), Hungarian/Austrian (Lappin-Eppel), Lithuanian (Malinauskaite), Polish/Israeli (Ubertowska), Romanian/US-American (Michăilescu), and Slovak (Vrzgulová). Together these texts provide a multiplicity of contexts in which what is hegemonic does not remain fully stable. This criticism of a unified notion of gender is only amplified by multiple disciplinary approaches: a particular discipline also shapes the way gender as a “category of knowledge” is

²⁵ Emphasis added. Sue Andrews, “Remembering the Holocaust – Gender Matters,” *Social Alternatives* 22, no. 2 (2003): 18. See also: Claire Kahane, “Dark Mirrors: A Feminist Reflection on Holocaust Narrative and the Maternal Metaphor,” in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 166–181.

conceptualized.²⁶ The collection features texts by historians – those active both in the academy and in museums, art historians, literary and film scholars, sociologists, ethnologists. They are engaged in the analysis of archival materials – including traditional and crucial archives for Holocaust memory, such as the Ringelblum archive, and newest digital archives – and representations in literature, film, art, as well as meta-thematic readings of scholarly texts.

The contributors represent different generations, some with more interest in identity politics, some rather focusing on constructions of subjectivity in an intersectional historical perspective. Despite talking about “Women and the Holocaust” we do not limit ourselves to specific women’s experiences, nor to texts by women alone or to phenomena coded as normatively “feminine.” The volume signals its roots in women’s studies, but expands into what gender studies have become today, critically incorporating the newest developments in gender theory, including masculinity and queer studies. The texts by Hedvig Turai and Edit Jeges explicitly refer to the theory of intersectionality, programmatically looking at the intersections of various social categories of difference which in this way create new gendered configurations. This perspective, however, is present on other levels in more texts in this collection: Bożena Karwowska brings up canonical texts by African-American authors, the hotbed of intersectionality in the 1980s; Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman develop their paper programmatically based on a multiplicity of femininities determined by various sociological coordinates; texts by Monika Vrzgulová and Edit Jeges feature the dimension of lesbian presences to add another layer to the study of “Women and the Holocaust.” Moreover, masculinity studies, one of the perspective the initial “women and the Holocaust” approach was criticized from, and their concepts give shape to the text by Bożena Karwowska and Aleksandra Übertowska.

²⁶ See Christina von Braun and Inge Stephan, “Gender@Wissen,” in *Gender@Wissen: Ein Handbuch der Gender-Theorien*, eds. Christina von Braun and Inge Stephan, 3. ed. (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2013), 11–54.

The contributions in this volume are, then, not divided with regard to the disciplines they represented, nor to their national contexts, nor to the themes that they focus on. Rather, their groupings express the mode of how they broaden our knowledge about the gendered experience of the Holocaust. The first section "Framing Knowledge" includes two texts with a stronger theoretical emphasis. In their chapter "The Sequential Development of Jewish Women's Coping Strategies (in the Ghettos) during the Holocaust: A New Theoretical Framework," the pioneers in the field, Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman explore and relativize the aporias which, as they claim, are characteristic for "continuation" and "disrupture" approaches, most common in the historical research on gender and the Holocaust.²⁷ Accordingly, they propose to read their carefully selected case studies more effectively within the "sequential framework." Bożena Karwowska's "Women's Luxury Items in Concentration Camps" has multiple broad theoretical inspirations, but centrally it explores the limits of comparison between captives – slaves and camp prisoners in relation to their bodies. From a broader perspective, the text resonates with the recent argument that African-American slaves were dehumanized and hence genderless, even if this question is not present there explicitly.²⁸ On a different plane, analyzing the perverse functions of the beautiful in the camps, Karwowska defamiliarizes our received knowledge about them.

²⁷ Natalia Aleksium has recently suggested complicating the dichotomy between the "continuity" and the "disrupture" of gender roles by adding the categories of "class" and "age," cf. Natalia Aleksium, "Gender and the Daily Life of Jews in Hiding in Eastern Galicia," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 27 (2014): 38-61.

²⁸ See: Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Sabine Broeck, "Enslavement as a Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique," *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 22 (2008), <http://www.genderforum.org/issues/black-womens-writing-revisited/enslavement-as-regime-of-western-modernity/page/3/>.

The second section of the collection "Filling the Blanks" groups together the texts that revise the gendered history of the Holocaust mostly by supplying new evidence. The texts map out the questions of gender in underexplored archives and artistic representations from different Central European contexts. In the first chapter of this section, Eleonore Lappin-Eppel focuses on the testimonies of women survivors of the Strasshof transports from Hungary to Austria. As she demonstrates, the historically peculiar conditioning of this camp as a potential bargaining asset with Western allies in Himmler's plans "allowed for a tenuous 'normality,'" also in relation to gender roles, "because families and members of communities were kept together." Monika Vrzgulová provides yet another insight into a different set of testimonies by women. In her chapter, she extensively quotes from and analyzes a video archive of the testimonies of the survivors in Slovakia she helped to establish in the mid-1990s as a part of a "rescue research," thus providing more evidence about specifically women's coping strategies during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Whereas Lappin-Eppel and Vrzgulová contributions read multiple testimonies to explore a specific set of historical circumstances, Monika Hanková explores in detail various identity coordinates performed within a set of texts around a single individual. Analyzing the case of K.P., a female doctor of medicine born in Karlsbad, she extends the research on the (gendered aspects of) discrimination that German Jews suffered within the (national) Czech context also after World War II. While extending our knowledge into previously underexplored contexts, the last chapter in this section is located at the intersection of the historical and artistic. Hedvig Turai in her "Intersection of Erasures in Hungarian Art History: Erzsébet Schaár" de-universalizes the narrative around this Hungarian artist highlighting the previously muted aspect of her gendered Jewish identity performance.

Finally, the texts in the third section of the volume "Comparing (Con)texts" share an epistemological approach to the material analyzed, which is explicitly comparative. Consequently,

the analysis becomes more dynamic and the claims made do not try to engage in misleading universalisms and gain an additional dimension of specificity and significance. Aleksandra Ubertowska's contribution explores in parallel two narratives of heroic Jewishness at the time of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising written by two authors who were a married couple: Cywia Lubetkin and Icchak Cukierman, also known by their anglicized names as Zivia Lubetkin and Yitzhak Zuckerman. In her dense textual analysis, she traces the differences between Lubetkin's and Cukierman's memoirs and the gendered conventions of autobiographical writing, but also the power of social gender norms. Whereas Ubertowska focuses on different textual renditions of parallel events, Dana Mihăilescu analyzes the shift in gendered experiences and/or memorial cultures in different political and/or national contexts that shape a single memoir, Anca Vlasopolos's *No Return Address*. This approach enables her to shed new light on the shift from the pro-Nazi to a communist regime in Romania, but also to illustrate a tenuous subject position of a female Eastern European immigrant within the incipient Holocaust memorial culture in the US. The two last contributions focus on the comparisons of the transmission of memory in different media. Gintare Malinauskaite explores the possibilities and limitations of Holocaust memory in both documentary and feature films. Specifically, her text focuses on the contemporary documentary films around the prominent female fighters of the Vilna Ghetto and a narrative film *Ghetto*, with its female protagonist based on the ghetto singer Liuba Levitska, thus revealing what in these two genres is within the realm of (gendered) representation. Edit Jeges's text engages in a narrative displacement that is conditioned both by the specific historical context and the medium, through which the memories are represented. Her text approaches Olga Lengyel's memoir written in the 1940s and her video testimony given half a century later showing how gendered assumptions have changed in time and through a medium.

With all of its contributions, this book presents the current state of scholarship (mostly) in post-communist countries of Central and East-Central Europe, and helps identifying future research directions. Scholars in and of this region have become increasingly sensitive to the intersection of gender with other differences, open to explore new topics and use interdisciplinary methods in order to revise Holocaust narratives along values, significance, and evidence. Within the broader geo-political context, however, this project aims at transcending the "East"/"West" divide that Larry Wolff outlined by demonstrating that the Holocaust experience and its memory are influenced by national and/or ideological discourses but should not be limited to them. Just as the "messiness" of the historical experience reigns on both sides of the former Iron Curtain so does scholarly sophistication that tries to make sense of it.

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