

Reconstructing a Life: An Examination of Female Jewish Holocaust Survivors Life Writing

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Abstract

Directly following the end of the Second World War, accounts in the forms of autobiographies and memoirs were published by survivors of the Holocaust, and a significant proportion of these accounts were authored by women. Although, it was not until the mid-1980s that historians began to examine the experiences of women during the Holocaust by using female-authored survivor accounts. By doing so, these academics successfully reinserted the experiences of women into the historical narrative of the Holocaust. However, very few of these scholars have decided to make female-authored survivor accounts the focus of their research.

This study will examine three life narratives authored by Jewish female survivors of the Holocaust who all immigrated to Australia between 1948 and 1950. These women's accounts will be examined using a life history approach- which will see the accounts they give of the Holocaust examined alongside their accounts of their pre-war and post-war lives. By examining these women's accounts as whole texts, this study reveals the complex and varied ways in which these three women have constructed their memories of the past in the present, and how their Holocaust experiences and present role as a survivor of the Holocaust has shaped their life narratives.

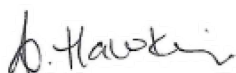
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This thesis is all my own work and has not been previously submitted for assessment at a tertiary institution.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A. Hawkins'.

Alexandria Hawkins

7th October 2017

Introduction

‘Life Stories have long offered a backbone to history, particularly in linking communities and in forging and recording experiences and identities.’¹

Directly following the end of the Second World War, personal accounts in the forms of autobiographies and memoirs were published by survivors of the Holocaust. A significant proportion of these accounts were authored by women. The feminist academic Judith Tydor Baumel has argued that during this period, accounts authored by women significantly outnumbered those authored by men.² In 1989, the edited book *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* was published and included reprinted versions of classic Holocaust reflections by influential writers including Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Yehuda Bauer, and Raul Hilberg.³ After receiving a copy of the book, Carol Rittner, a historian of genocide and the Holocaust, contacted one of the book’s editors John K. Roth and asked the following question: “Where are the women?”⁴ Rittner’s question was in response to the fact that the edited collection of reflections on the Holocaust edited by Roth and fellow academic Michael Berenbaum was dominated by reflections authored by male Holocaust survivors and male academics.

It was not until the mid-1980s that historians began to examine the experiences of women during the Holocaust by using survivor accounts of the

¹ Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas, “Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and Youth,” *Prose Studies* 35, no. 1 (2013): 1.

² Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998), 56-57.

³ John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* (NY: Paragon House, 1989).

⁴ Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), xi.

Holocaust which had been published by female survivors. The use of these accounts and the emerging study of women and the Holocaust began as part of a broader interest in women's historical experiences, arising out of second-wave feminism which was concerned with equality in relation to sexuality and gender. The media academic Anna Reading has also suggested that:

one could interpret the earlier marginalisation or gendered silences in mainstream Holocaust history as part of the general repression of women's experiences and roles in the past, rather than something specific to Holocaust studies.⁵

Joan Ringelheim was one the first academics to shed light on the invisibility of women in contemporary Holocaust scholarship and was the first to consider the possible benefits of using gender as a category of historical analysis within the field of Holocaust studies. In her 1984 article 'The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust', she argued that historians had created a male-centred 'universal' narrative of the Holocaust.⁶ They had privileged accounts authored by male survivors of the Holocaust and ignored those authored by women and as a result had misunderstood the experiences of women and had overlooked the possible role which gender may have played during the Holocaust.⁷ However, it was not until 1993 that the first widely read text about women and the Holocaust was published. In response to her question 'where are the women?', Carol Rittner co-edited a book with John K. Roth titled *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices*.⁸ Rittner and Roth explained that this collection was their combined attempt to give back a voice to female survivors while at the same time reinserting their experiences into the narrative of

⁵ Anna Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture and Memory* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 38.

⁶ Joan Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, edited by Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 169-177.

⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁸ Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices*.

the Holocaust.⁹ In the collection, they reprinted excerpts from the accounts of female Holocaust survivors alongside reflections and interpretations by female academics working in the field of Holocaust studies.

Since the early 1990s, and the publication of Rittner and Roth's edited collection, there has been a substantial amount of research published which considers the relationship between women, gender and the Holocaust. This includes Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman's edited collection *Women in the Holocaust* (1998), Judith Tydor Baumel's book *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (1998), Anna Reading's *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture and Memory* (2002), Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg's *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (2003) and Myrna Goldenberg and Amy Shapiro's edited collection *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* (2013).¹⁰ The most recent addition to this growing body of scholarship is the historian Zoe Waxman's 2017 book *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History*.¹¹ Waxman reflects on recent developments of how historians have used female-authored accounts of the Holocaust and notes that while these cannot be

⁹ Ibid., xi.

¹⁰ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (US: Yale University Press, 1998). Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, 1998. Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture and Memory*, 2002. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (US: Wayne State University Press, 2003). Myrna Goldenberg and Amy Shapiro, *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* (USA: University of Washington Press, 2013). See also: Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," in *Women and the Holocaust: Different voices*, edited by Carol Rittner and John K Roth (New York: Paragon House, 1993). Joan Ringelheim, "The Split between Gender and the Holocaust," in *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (US: Yale University Press, 1998). Myrna Goldenberg, "Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism: Women's Holocaust Narratives," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 548 (1996), 78-93. Sue Andrews, "Remembering the Holocaust - Gender Matters," *Social Alternatives* 22, no. 2 (2003), 16-21. Zoe V. Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Annabelle Baldwin, "Sexual Violence and the Holocaust: Reflections on Memory and Witness Testimony," *Holocaust Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010), 112-134.

¹¹ Zoe V. Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A feminist History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

representative of the whole Holocaust experience, they can however help us to learn more about the individuality of the lived Holocaust experience.¹²

The body of research outlined above and the scholars who have helped to create it, have succeeded in critiquing the male centred universal narrative of the Holocaust which Ringelheim first identified in 1984. They have also succeeded in not only identifying this gap in the literature but also filling it, by reinserting the experiences of women into the historical narrative of the Holocaust. In doing so have proved the benefits of using gender as a lens through which to explore the Holocaust experiences of women. To achieve this, these scholars have all drawn on survivor accounts of the Holocaust which have been authored by women. However very few have decided to make these accounts the main focus of their investigations. Rather, female-authored accounts of the Holocaust have largely been used by these scholars to document and explain the facts of what happened to women during the Holocaust to understand how they were persecuted differently by the Nazi regime because of their gender. Therefore, at present, very few scholars have chosen to examine these women's accounts as a whole, from beginning to end.

The lack of critical attention which has been paid to female-authored survivor accounts of the Holocaust as whole texts could be attributed to the fact that scholars working in this field have been preoccupied with reinserting the experiences of women back into the narrative of the Holocaust. To accomplish this, they had to pick and choose elements from female-authored survivor accounts to shed light on the Holocaust experiences of women, and as such were not able to examine these accounts from beginning to end. However, what this means is that when reading this body of scholarship, there is no sense of the overall construction of these women's

¹² Ibid., 150.

accounts or how the Holocaust is situated within them. Rather we are only given fragments of these women's experiences and accounts.

In 2006, the historian Tony Kushner authored the article 'Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation'.¹³ Kushner provided a historiographical overview of the study of survivor accounts of the Holocaust and criticised the works of earlier scholars for providing very narrow views towards survivor accounts and for failing to acknowledge their constructed nature.¹⁴ To overcome this problem, he suggested that for survivor testimony to be used to its full potential, the focus of the historian must shift towards a 'life history' approach which shows the full complexity of a survivor's identity. He notes that this may also involve valuing quality over quantity and working with much smaller numbers of testimonies. Until very recently, very few scholars have chosen to analyse female-authored survivors accounts of the Holocaust using the life history approach proposed by Kushner. However, one historian to utilise a similar approach has been Nina Fischer.

In the article 'Writing a Whole Life: Maria Lewitt's Holocaust/Migration Narratives in 'Multicultural' Australia' Fischer examines two autobiographical novels authored by Maria Lewitt, a Polish-born Jewish Holocaust survivor who emigrated to Australia.¹⁵ The first novel authored by Lewitt details her Holocaust experience, and the second describes her migration experience to and resettlement in Australia. In this article, Fischer examines in detail both of Lewitt's accounts and argues that both accounts when read together portray the narrative of a 'whole life' and reveal that

¹³ Tony Kushner, "Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 291.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Nina Fischer, "Writing a Whole Life: Maria Lewitt's Holocaust/Migration Narratives in 'Multicultural' Australia," *Life Writing* 11, no. 4 (2014).

Lewitt is not only a Holocaust survivor, but is also a Pole, an Australian, a Jew and a woman.¹⁶ By examining not only Lewitt's account of the Holocaust but also her account of migration, Fischer employs an approach which is similar to the life history approach suggested by Kushner. It also results in a much more holistic way of thinking about how survival and the experience of the Holocaust has affected the memories and lives of those who experienced it and how these survivors have come to make sense of their Holocaust experiences within their life narratives.

This thesis aims to contribute to the development of the study of women and the Holocaust and the study of survivor accounts of the Holocaust by adopting the life history approach proposed by Kushner and employed by Fischer. To do so, this thesis will be examining three life narratives authored by Jewish female survivors of the Holocaust whom all immigrated to Australia between 1948 and 1950.¹⁷ To employ Kushner's life history approach these women's accounts of the Holocaust will be examined alongside the accounts they give of their pre-war and post-war lives. By using such an approach, this thesis aims to shed light on the importance and benefits of examining female-authored accounts of the Holocaust not only for the facts which they can provide but also for what they can tell us about how survivors have constructed their life narratives. Additionally, how they have reflected upon and situated their Holocaust experiences within these narratives. Fischer has argued that Jewish Holocaust life writing does not only represent survival but also represents

¹⁶ Ibid., 392.

¹⁷ This thesis will use the terms life writing, life narrative, and accounts interchangeably to refer to these three women's accounts. The use of the terms life writing and life narrative has been informed by the work of scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson who state that: "we understand life writing as a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's as its subject. Both memoir and autobiography are encompassed in the term life writing. We understand life narrative, by contrast, as a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds...that take the producers subject as their subject." See: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (US: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

life.¹⁸ By examining these three women's accounts as whole texts, this thesis aims to broaden the parameters within which Jewish women's experiences during the Second World War have been understood by showing how this experience continued to shape their lives from liberation through to resettlement in the post-war period.

This thesis also intends to broaden the contexts within which Holocaust survivor history is understood and examined. In her article 'Sexual Violence and the Holocaust: Reflections on Memory and Witness Testimony', Annabelle Baldwin explores how Jewish-Australian survivors of the Holocaust articulate their experiences of sexual assault and how they have struggled to cope with the memories of these experiences.¹⁹ Baldwin is one of few historians who has emphasised the importance of examining female-authored accounts of the Holocaust from an Australian perspective and argues that:

discussions of Holocaust survivors in Australia can add greater nuance to our understanding of how survivors living in the Diaspora post-Holocaust deal with their memories. In this way, it is important to include Australian survivors in discussions about post-Holocaust life.²⁰

Baldwin has therefore paved the way for further discussions about the importance of conducting Holocaust research in different national contexts and examining the various ways in which the study of women and the Holocaust can cross national borders. This thesis intends to contribute to the continued development of research, like Baldwin's, that examines Holocaust survivor history in the Australian context.

As well as employing a life history approach to examining female-authored survivor accounts of the Holocaust, this thesis will also be contextualising these

¹⁸ Ibid., 399.

¹⁹ Baldwin, "Sexual Violence and the Holocaust," 112-134.

²⁰ Ibid., 115.

women's accounts to situate the experiences they describe within the social and political contexts of the time. Understanding the historical contexts in which these women were living provides us with a more informed understanding of these women's pre-war, wartime and post-war experiences. Doing so also brings attention to how Holocaust life narratives can be transnational and therefore must be understood and contextualised as specific to their national contexts while at the same time recognising that they cross national boundaries.

Primary Sources

The central primary source materials which will be examined in this thesis are the life narratives of three Jewish women who immigrated to Australia following the end of the Second World War. These include Edith Lowbeer's life narrative *My Pink Glasses: Lives Journey* (2004), Renate Grossman's *Survival: My Destiny* (2010), and Susanna Fischer's *The Seed that was Sown* (2013).²¹ All three women's accounts are around 100 pages long and have been published in partnership with the Sydney Jewish Museum as part of their 'Community Stories' program. This program was initially modelled off a similar program called 'Write Your Story' which was established in 1998 by the Makor Jewish Community Library in Melbourne, Australia.²² The 'Community Stories' program which has been run at the Sydney Jewish Museum since 2002 has two central aims. First, to 'provide members of the Sydney Jewish Museum and wider community with an opportunity to express their

²¹ Edith Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses: Life's Journey* (SA: Griffin Press, 2004). Renate Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny* (Published by The Sydney Jewish Museum as part of their 'Community Stories' program, 2010). Susanna Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown* (Published by The Sydney Jewish Museum as part of their 'Community Stories' program, 2013).

²² For more information about the Makor Jewish Community Library *Write Your Story* program see: Richard Freadman, *This Crazy Thing a Life: Australian Jewish Autobiography* (WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2007), 179-191.

individual family history in a written form' and to 'create an archival collection of the social history of the NSW Jewish community'.²³

When the 'Community Stories' program was first established its main service was providing editorial assistance to those wishing to write their stories and assistance getting their manuscripts published. However, in more recent years, the program has expanded to accommodate the needs of ageing Holocaust survivors. At present, they not only aid with editing manuscripts and getting them ready for publishing but they also provide 'ghostwriting' services, where survivors stories are recorded in oral interviews, transcribed, and then edited into book form. The survivors who participate in this program are not highly accomplished writers with literary ambitions or plans to even have their account widely published or read.

Therefore, most of the accounts produced are quite direct and matter of fact.

However, as the historian Richard Freadman has noted:

narratives such as these do not need to be masterly in order to have value: they are precious human documents just as they are. It takes a very special writer- a Primo Levi- to make art out of Auschwitz.²⁴

The accounts which are published as part of the 'Community Stories' program and the narratives which are constructed are significantly shaped and influenced by those who facilitate the program. One clear difference between the survivor accounts of the Holocaust which are published as part of the 'Community Stories' program and those that are not is their narrative structure. Survivor narratives of the Holocaust tend to follow a very similar narratives structure. They begin by describing the weeks or days before the Second World War began, then devote most of their account to detailing their Holocaust experience, and end with liberation. However, the

²³ "Community Stories", *Sydney Jewish Museum*, available from- <http://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/explore/multimedia/>

²⁴ Freadman, *This Crazy Thing a Life*, 186.

facilitators of the 'Community stories' program encourage participants to write about their lives as a whole.

Therefore, one striking feature of these accounts is that survivors do not just focus on recounting their wartime and Holocaust experiences but also the lives which they led before and after the Second World War. As a result, the accounts which are created as part of the 'Community Stories' program are not just survivor narratives of the Holocaust but are also narratives which depict a whole life and therefore lend themselves well to being examined through the lens of a life history approach. As a result of their unique narrative structures, these life narratives provide us with interesting insights into how some survivors have reflected upon their childhoods and their lives in the pre-war period. They also shed light on the experiences had by survivors who chose to migrate to and resettle in Australia in the post-war period. These life narratives also allow us to examine how survivors accounts of the Holocaust fit within the overall narrative of a survivor's life.

It is important to note and recognise that these three life narratives, like most survivor accounts of the Holocaust written after the event, have been mediated in several ways. First and foremost, these accounts have been shaped by the narrative structure imposed on them by the facilitators of the 'Community Stories' program. They have also been constructed during a period when the Holocaust has become a part of the cultural memory of many Western nations. Most countries around the world have at least one if not more museums dedicated to Holocaust remembrance and the history of the Holocaust is taught in many Western schools as a part of the school curriculum. The horrors and atrocities of the Holocaust have been explicitly represented and depicted in widely consumed modes of popular culture such as film and television.

These accounts have also been mediated by the memory of the individual survivor. Unlike survivor accounts which were written during the Holocaust, or immediately after liberation, and record the immediate feelings and responses of survivors, the accounts of Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer were all published between 2004 and 2013 and have been written from memory. Memory is fragile, and in survivor accounts which have been written long after the event, often details can be missing or forgotten, and events can be chronologically distorted.²⁵ The historian Joanne Reilly has argued that the writer of these accounts also often acts as his or her own censor and when writing for a perceived audience which in this case is often the survivor's family, they will undoubtedly give a modified account of their memories.²⁶ Similarly, the historian Sarah Horowitz has argued that:

women writers do not simply provide raw material for researchers to analyse. Women have themselves been interpreters and analysers of their own experiences, using the space of their writing to think through the complexities of the Shoah for its survivors and for others.²⁷

Although it is important to recognise that memory has played an important role in the life narratives which these three women have constructed, it does not mean their accounts are any less valuable. In his 1988 book *Writing and rewriting the Holocaust: narrative and the consequences of interpretation* James Young an academic of literature and the Holocaust, has suggested that we can overcome the problems which memory poses in relation to survivor accounts of the Holocaust if we realise that the value of these accounts does not only lie in their historical accuracy.²⁸ He argues that narrative testimony documents, not the experience it relates but

²⁵ Joanne Reilly, "With Waving Flags: Bergen-Belsen and the Myth of Liberation," *Patterns of Prejudice* 29, no. 2-3 (1995): 62.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Sarah Horowitz, "Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory," in *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (US: Yale University Press, 1998), 374.

²⁸ James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

rather how the author has come to understand that experience, and those working with Holocaust testimony need to adopt the method of being a ‘critical reader’.²⁹ This thesis therefore acknowledges the mediated nature of these three women’s accounts, however, their accounts are still extremely valuable sources for the historian who is interested in what these life narratives can tell us about how female survivors of the Holocaust have made sense of their pasts in their life writing.

Structure

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One examines the portions of Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer’s accounts that are devoted to describing and reflecting on their lives in the pre-war period.³⁰ The social and political contexts of the countries each of the women were living in during this period are examined to provide context for the experiences they recall. This chapter will show how these three women have employed a nostalgic mode of remembering to construct romanticised and idealised accounts of their childhoods in the pre-war period. Reflecting on their past through a nostalgic lens also allows these women to use their life writing to bear witness to and reconstruct families and homes which were destroyed during the Holocaust.

Chapter two charts the geo-political context of Europe at the beginning of the Second World War and explores how these three women have reflected upon their wartime and Holocaust experiences in their accounts. This chapter shows how these three women both experienced and reflect back upon these experiences as both Jews

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

³⁰ In this thesis, the term pre-war period is used to refer to the period before the Second World War. This period is also commonly referred to as the ‘inter-war period’. However, the three women whose accounts are examined in this thesis were born after 1924 and therefore, they do not reflect on this period in their accounts as the inter-war period but rather the pre-war period, the period before the Second World War and the Holocaust.

and as women and as such shed light on the gendered nature of the Nazi persecution. The understated and unemotional tone of all three women's accounts of this period in their lives is discussed and suggests that they must distance themselves from the emotions associated with these past traumatic experiences so that they can recount these stories in the present.

Chapter three charts these women's accounts of their liberation from Nazi camps and the period between their liberation and immigration to Australia. Each woman's account reveals that for them the liberation period was not a time of joy, relief or happiness, rather it was experienced as a continuation of their Holocaust experience. They had survived the war, however they also needed to survive their liberation. The decisions and factors which influenced these women's decisions to immigrate to Australia in the post-war period are also discussed.

The final chapter of this thesis examines these women's experiences of resettlement in Australia in the post-war period. The policies of the Australian government and the attitudes of the Australian public towards Jewish displaced persons and refugees are discussed. This chapter shows that the experience of arrival could be quite different for Holocaust survivors depending on whether-or-not they already had family residing in Australia. This chapter sheds light on both the challenges and successes that Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer had when trying to rebuild their lives and families in Australia in the post-war period.

Chapter One:

Nostalgia, Memory and Witnessing in

Jewish Women's Accounts of Childhood in the Pre-War Period.

‘At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time- the time of our childhood.’³¹

Yad Vashem, the world Holocaust remembrance centre in Israel, defines the Holocaust as:

the sum total of all anti-Jewish actions carried out by the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945: from stripping the German Jews of their legal and economic status in the 1930s; segregating and starvation in the various occupied countries; the murder of close to six million Jews in Europe. The Holocaust is part of a broader aggregate of acts of oppression and murder of various ethnic and political groups in Europe by the Nazis.³²

Despite the fact that the Holocaust, as it is defined above, began in Germany in 1933 during the pre-war period with the systematic restriction of Jewish economic and civil liberties, it is often a period which is overlooked in survivor accounts of the Holocaust. However, survivor accounts of the Holocaust published as part of the Sydney Jewish Museum's 'Community Stories' program do not overlook the lives that survivors led in the period before the Second World; rather survivors are encouraged to reflect on this period in significant detail. The three women whose life narratives are examined in this thesis were all born between 1924 and 1927. Therefore the

³¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (USA: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

³² "The Holocaust", *Yad Vashem*, available from-
http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/the_holocaust.asp

accounts they provide of their lives before the war, are also accounts of what it was like growing up and experiencing childhood in the pre-war period and during the early stages of the Holocaust.

Susanna Fischer was born in Cluj, Romania on March 3, 1924, Edith Lowbeer was born on December 29, 1924, in Senec, Czechoslovakia, and Renate Grossman was born in Dortmund Germany on January 10, 1927. Therefore, the beginning of this chapter will chart the political and social contexts of Germany, Romania and Czechoslovakia from 1933 to 1939, to contextualise the contexts in which each of these women were living in the pre-war period. Understanding these different contexts and the different ways in which anti-Semitic legislation was introduced and enforced in each of these countries helps to provide us with a more informed understanding of how each woman's geographical location affected her daily life in the pre-war period.

This chapter will examine each woman's account of her childhood and life during this period and will draw from the fields of life-writing and autobiography to argue that all three women have employed a nostalgic mode of remembering when reflecting on their childhood experiences. This chapter will show how these women have not only used this nostalgic mode to present romanticised and idealised versions of their childhoods but how they have also used it to bear witness to and reconstruct families and childhood homes that were destroyed during the war. This chapter will also demonstrate how these women's first memories and experiences of anti-Semitism present a rupture in their accounts of this period signifying an end to their childhoods and the nostalgic mode of remembering they employ to reconstruct this time in their lives.

Germany in the Pre-War Period

In 1933, 500,000 people identified as German Jews, making up less than one percent of the total German population.³³ Around seventy percent resided in large German cities, with around one-third living in Berlin.³⁴ The Jewish population living in Germany at this time were largely middle-class with almost sixty-two percent working in business and commerce, and the employment of Jewish women had increased to twenty-seven percent.³⁵ Although Jews living in Germany had adapted to their social, political and cultural contexts, they also preserved their ethnic and religious identities by establishing religious groups and by maintaining traditional religious holiday celebrations.³⁶

Politically, most German Jews supported democratic traditions and institutions in Germany, and for the most part, they enjoyed equal rights, economic freedoms and had successfully assimilated into German society.³⁷ However, the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, saw the lives of German Jews change dramatically. From 1933 to 1939, the Nazi Party introduced legislation which abolished the economic and civil rights of German Jews, forcing their separation from the non-Jewish German population, while at the same time promoting Jewish emigration out of Germany.³⁸

As early as April 1933 laws were enacted that saw the expulsion of Jews from the civil service, legal and medical professions, and higher education institutions such as universities.³⁹ Jewish unemployment rose steadily from 1933 to 1939, and

³³ Marion A. Kaplan, "Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Daily Life, Daily struggles, 1933-1939," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 581.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid., 582.

³⁷ Francis R. Nicosia, and David Scrase, *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany: Dilemmas and Responses* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 4.

³⁹ Ibid

Jewish men who had been successful lawyers, doctors and business owners found themselves out of work, while Jewish women were forced to take up extra jobs outside of the home to compensate for their husbands and father's unemployment.⁴⁰ By April 1938, only 9,000 of the 50,000 Jewish retail businesses that had existed in 1932 were still Jewish owned.⁴¹ The rest had either been destroyed or were now owned by Germans as part of a process of "Aryanization" which saw the transfer of Jewish property to non-Jews.⁴²

The social lives of German Jews also changed dramatically during this period. They became increasingly isolated when their non-Jewish neighbours and friends would no longer be seen speaking or interacting with them.⁴³ German Jews living in the German countryside suffered even more from social isolation than their city counterparts since in small towns there were very few Jewish families or Jewish institutions whom they could look to for support.⁴⁴ The historian Marion Kaplan has suggested that the social ostracism that was experienced by German Jews during this period affected women more so than men because they were more integrated and dependant on the local community and neighbourhood.⁴⁵

Jewish children were also affected by the increased restrictions placed upon Jewish life in Germany. In April 1933, the 'Law Against Overcrowding of German Schools' saw the introduction of strict quotas on Jewish enrollment in German schools, and anti-Semitic Nazi racial doctrine was introduced into the school curriculum.⁴⁶ By November 1938, Jewish children were no longer allowed to enrol in

⁴⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁴¹ Margaret Limberg and Hubert Rubsaat, *Germans No More: Accounts of Jewish Everyday Life, 1933-1938* (US: Berghahn Books, 2006), 4.

⁴² Ibid., 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, "Jewish Women in Nazi Germany," 585.

⁴⁶ Nicosia and Scrase, *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, 4-5.

German schools and were forced to either enrol in Jewish synagogue schools or forfeit their education altogether.

One of the most notorious laws passed during this period was the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor” which was passed in 1935 as part of the Nuremberg Laws which were adopted at the annual Nazi party rally in Nuremberg on September 15 of the same year.⁴⁷ The law prohibited sexual intercourse and intermarriage between Jews and non-Jewish Germans.⁴⁸ Historians Mary Limberg and Hubert Rubsaat have argued that this law affected German Jews more than any other.⁴⁹ Non-Jews used the law to inform on their friends and neighbours on charges of ‘race defilement’, and non-Jews in mixed marriages often succumbed to state pressure and divorced their spouses, either out of fear or for personal benefit.⁵⁰

The *Kristallnacht pogrom* on November 9-10, 1938 marked a turning point in the persecution and treatment of Jews in Germany.⁵¹ The *pogrom* claimed the lives of at least one hundred Jews, saw the destruction of over a thousand synagogues, homes and Jewish-owned shops, and over 30,000 Jewish men were incarcerated in German concentration camps.⁵² *Kristallnacht* demonstrated that the civil rights of German Jews were no longer recognised and the Nazi regime could violently target the Jewish population without facing any significant protest from the non-Jewish population.⁵³ The *Kristallnacht pogrom* influenced the acceleration of anti-Jewish decrees and measures in late 1938 and 1939 as Germany moved closer to war and anti-Semitism became widespread among the non-Jewish German public.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 583.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Limberg and Rubsaat, *Germans No More*, 56.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ The *pogrom* occurred in response to the murder of a junior Nazi diplomat in Paris by a seventeen-year old student from Poland. See: Nicosia, and Scrase, *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, 6.

⁵² Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 584.

⁵³ Limberg and Rubsaat, *Germans No More*, 147.

⁵⁴ Nicosia and Scrase, *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, 6.

Romania in the Pre-War Period

Following the end of the First World War, the territory of Romania almost doubled in size and the country's population increased from 7.2 million to more than 16 million.⁵⁵ By 1930, the Jewish population in Romania was estimated to be more than 756,000.⁵⁶ Romania in the interwar period suffered from what the historian David Crowe has called a "political malaise" which saw the country drift between political normalcy and martial law.⁵⁷ In 1925, Romania's king, Carol II renounced his right to rule over a marital scandal, and his son Prince Mihai (Michael) took over. In 1930, King Carol II returned, overthrew his son, and reinstated himself as King of Romania and ruled until he was forced to abdicate in 1940.⁵⁸

One continued source of instability during this time was the Romanian politician Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Codreanu was the founder and leader of the pro-Nazi and far-right political party the "League of the Archangel Micheal" and its paramilitary group the "Garda de Fier" (Iron Guard).⁵⁹ The members of the Iron Guard were known at the time as Legionaries and operated in a very similar way to the Nazi parties SA. They were extremely nationalistic, anti-Semitic, anti-communist, and anti-capitalist. King Carol II banned the Iron Guard in 1933, fearing their growing influence. However, Codreanu responded by transforming the Guard into a viable political party that gained almost sixteen-percent of the popular vote in the 1937 elections.⁶⁰ In response to the growing power and influence of this rightist and extremist threat, King Carol II executed Codreanu and other influential Legionaries.⁶¹

⁵⁵ David M. Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath* (US: Westview Press, 2008), 319.

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid, 320.

The Jewish community in Romania suffered from inadequate minority rights and protections during the interwar period. However, things worsened for them during the 1930s when they became the principal targets of Codreanu's Iron Guard.⁶² Romanian Jews living in the east of the country were specifically targeted because the Iron Guard believed that they were associated with Soviet Communism.⁶³ The historian Raul Hilberg has argued that what Germany wanted from its allies including Romania was a cloning of the anti-Jewish regulations which had been developed and implemented in Germany throughout the 1930s.⁶⁴ In a manner which closely resembled the German "Aryanisation" process, properties owned by Jews were confiscated, by the Iron Guard and ownership was transferred to ethnic Romanians.⁶⁵

Czechoslovakia in the Pre-war Period

When the First World War ended, the Habsburg, German, Russian and Ottoman empires were disbanded and a state system of national-self determination took their place in eastern central Europe.⁶⁶ As a result, the entirely new country of Czechoslovakia was established. Czechoslovakia was a multinational state, consisting of Bohemia, Moravia, part of Silesia, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Ruthenia.⁶⁷ At the time the largest ethnic groups in Czechoslovakia were the Czechoslovakians who made up around fifty-percent of the population, twenty-two percent were German, and sixteen-percent were Slovak.⁶⁸ Other small numbers of ethnic groups including

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ "Romania", *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, available from-
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005472>

⁶⁴ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 75.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁶ Rebekah Klein Pejsova, *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia* (US: Indiana University Press, 2015), 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ "Czechoslovakia", *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, available from-
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005688>

Hungarians, Ukrainians, and Polish made up the other twelve-percent of the population.⁶⁹

In 1921, census data estimated that approximately 350,000 Jews were living in the newly formed country of Czechoslovakia.⁷⁰ Despite, its multinational population and tense relations with its neighbouring countries, all of whom sought-after its territory Czechoslovakia remained a relatively successful and functioning democracy under the leadership of President Edvard Benes until 1938.⁷¹ During this period the Jewish population in Czechoslovakia lived in a relatively safe and peaceful environment.

After the Nazi party came to power in 1933, they requested that the German population of Czechoslovakia and the land that they lived on, known as the *Sudetenland*, be returned to Germany. The *Sudetenland* was a border area where the majority of the ethnic German population lived but was also the Czechoslovakian armies defensive position in the event of war with Germany.⁷² Czechoslovakian authorities dismissed German claims for the *Sudetenland* until 1938 when Hitler threatened war if the *Sudetenland* was not given back to Germany. Fearing the possibility of another war, the leaders of Britain, France, Italy, and Germany held a conference on September 29-30, 1938, at Munich where they agreed to give Germany control of the *Sudetenland* in exchange for a promise of peace.⁷³

In the wake of the Munich Pact, President Benes resigned, and Czechoslovakia was restructured into an authoritarian regime and renamed Czecho-Slovakia. In late 1938, Hungary and Poland both annexed territories of Czecho-Slovakia, and in

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Pejsova, *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia*, 13.

⁷¹ "Czechoslovakia", *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, available from-
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005688>

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

March 1939, Nazi Germany invaded the country in direct violation of the Munich Pact and occupied the Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia.⁷⁴ During the inter-war period, the Jewish population in Czechoslovakia lived in relative safety. However, the beginning of the Second World War dramatically changed the environment in which these Jews were living, and the effects of this will be discussed in the following chapter.

Reflecting on Childhood in the Pre-War period

Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer all devote the first sections of their life narratives to detailing their childhood experiences of growing up in the pre-war period. Both Grossman and Lowbeer devote around ten pages to recalling this time in their lives, whereas Fischer devotes a considerably larger portion of about thirty pages to describe her life before the Second World War. All three women's accounts of their childhood in the pre-war period follow a very similar narrative structure. They begin by detailing when and where they were born, they then describe first their parents, and then their siblings, then they describe in minute detail the houses which they grew up in and finish their accounts by discussing their experiences of schooling. Memories of holidays, and of family gatherings and special events are also dispersed throughout these pages of their accounts.

All three of these women's accounts of their pre-war life are also recollections of their childhoods. However, within the field of Holocaust studies, there is little to no mention of how survivors have come to reflect upon and recount their experiences of childhood in the period before the Second World War. This absence could be attributed to the fact that it is rare that Holocaust survivors will reflect on their

⁷⁴ Ibid

childhood in their life writing, instead, choosing to devote the majority of their account to the atrocities which they witnessed and experienced.

One field of study which has examined how adults reflect on and reconstruct their childhood experiences is the field of life writing and autobiography. The amount of scholarship, however, which examines this relationship is still quite limited. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a small number of scholars including Richard N. Coe, David McCooey, and Gillian Whitlock examined early twentieth century 'literary' autobiographies and considered how reflections on childhood were used by authors to emphasise their personal growth.⁷⁵ More recently academics including Kate Douglas, Claire Lynch, and Anna Poletti, have examined recently published autobiographies of childhood.⁷⁶ These scholars have examined the relationship between accounts of childhood and trauma, accounts of childhood authored by children and adolescence's, and the different ways that young people are constructing their experiences of childhood in the digital age.

Kate Douglas, an academic of English and literature, has conducted one of the most recent and comprehensive studies which considers the complexities and nuances of autobiographical texts which reflect on childhood. In her 2010 book, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*, Douglas considers the interplay between autobiographies of childhood, trauma and memory. In her discussion on childhood autobiography and memory, she argues that adult's who write about their childhoods are far removed from this period in their lives by both

⁷⁵ See: Richard N. Coe, *When The Grass was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). David McCooey, "Australian Autobiographies of Childhood: Beginning and Myth," *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature* 55, no. 1 (1995): 132-155. Gillian Whitlock, *Autographs: Contemporary Australian Autobiography* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1996).

⁷⁶ Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010). Claire Lynch, "The Ante-Autobiography and the Archive of Childhood," *Prose Studies* 35, no. 1 (2013): 97-112. Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti, *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

time, and usually by distance.⁷⁷ To write about one's own childhood, an author must first remember and then attempt to reconstruct their experiences of childhood into a coherent narrative.⁷⁸

Douglas also importantly notes that a person's memories of their childhood are mediated and reshaped over time by both cultural memory and their experiences in the present.⁷⁹ She concludes that at best childhood memories are fragmented and fragile, and as a result, reconstructing a narrative of one's memories of childhood is a difficult task.⁸⁰ She argues, however, that one of the most common strategies used by authors to overcome this difficulty is the use of a 'nostalgic mode'.⁸¹ Nostalgia relies on distance whether it be temporal or spatial, or both, and nostalgia allows the author to gloss over their forgetfulness and create a more aesthetically complete and satisfying recollection of their childhood.⁸² Another feature of nostalgic autobiography is that the past is idealised, childhood is romanticised and remembered as idyllic and uncomplicated.⁸³

In their accounts, Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer all use a nostalgic mode of remembering as a way to reflect upon their childhood experiences in the pre-war period. All three women use this nostalgic mode to represent their childhood as a period which was characterised by carefree fun and enjoyment. This is particularly evident when they recall time spent on family holidays, and trips to visit their grandparents. However, what is perhaps more interesting is how these three women have used a nostalgic mode of remembering to reconstruct their pre-war homes and

⁷⁷ Douglas, *Contesting Childhood*, 21.

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid., 84.

⁸² Ibid., 85.

⁸³ Ibid., 86.

families and in doing so, perhaps find a temporary relief for their longing for a past which is now lost to them.

The historian Richard Freadman has argued that life narratives authored by survivors of the Holocaust differ from other forms or genres of life writing because of their intent. He argues that most life narratives authored by Holocaust survivors are written with a testimonial intention.⁸⁴ Survivors record their experiences to reconstruct on paper families who were destroyed and to memorialise those who perished.⁸⁵ I would also add that when survivors write about their life before the Holocaust, they also write to reconstruct important places and spaces in the pre-war period such as the family home which was either destroyed during the war or is a place which they can no longer to return to in the present.

The historian Joy Damousi has argued that nostalgia is an attempt to re-enact a reunion with a lost object⁸⁶ and similarly, the nostalgia theorist Svetlana Boym has argued that nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists and is a sentiment of loss and displacement.⁸⁷ Therefore, employing a nostalgic mode when reconstructing their memories of their childhood in the pre-war period allows these women to fulfil their perceived duty to bear witness. They can bear witness to and reconstruct families and places which were destroyed during the Holocaust, and which they now long for.

In their accounts of their childhoods and life in the pre-war period, each woman reconstructs their lost past by describing it in vivid and minute detail. Much of their accounts of this time in their lives is devoted to reconstructing for the reader a clear

⁸⁴ Richard Freadman, "Generational Shifts in Post-Holocaust Australian Jewish Autobiography," *Life Writing* 1:1 (2004): 23.

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Joy, Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-War Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68.

⁸⁷ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii.

image of what their family homes were like. For example, after describing her parents, Grossman immediately begins constructing an image of the homes which she grew up in Germany in the pre-war period. She writes that:

Our first apartment had a swing attached to a door frame and my father used to push me on it. My room had wallpaper covered with pictures of toys...our family became well established and we moved to another apartment in an elegant district...which was one of the main streets of the city. We had central heating, a big kitchen with black and white tiles and it was a very spacious home. My room was filled with dolls and a variety of different toys and we owned a car which both parents could drive.⁸⁸

Similarly, to Grossman, Lowbeer also begins her account of her pre-war life by describing in minute detail the family home which she grew up in Czechoslovakia.

She recalls that:

We lived in a large two-storey house, with a huge gate which one could lock. It was completely private, and no one could look in. There was a separate entrance to the business...there was also a back entrance out onto the yard and to the staircase. The stairs led up to our home which consisted of three bedrooms, a separate lounge and separate dining room, a large kitchen and bathroom...we had a new modern flush toilet...My mother later told me that we were the first family to have hot water coming into the bath directly from a tank.⁸⁹

Unlike Grossman and Lowbeer, Fischer uses a nostalgic mode of remembering not to reconstruct her family home in Romania, but instead, to reconstruct her family. She devotes almost half of her account of her pre-war life and childhood to describing in detail all nine of her siblings, including their names, their personalities, their relationship to her and then finally, whether-or-not they survived the Holocaust. She begins by describing her two half-sisters, recalling that:

My two half-sisters were very different from one another. The older sister was Hermin. She was jovial, with a big bum, and big face and was always laughing. She was deported with us, but did not survive. Next was Sarolta. She married

⁸⁸ Grossman, *Survival: my destiny*, 2.

⁸⁹ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 6-7.

and had seven children. She remained in Romania so she and her family survived, except her second son...He did not survive.⁹⁰

Fischer goes on to describe each of her family members in the same manner as the quote above, and in doing so not only reconstructs her family tree but at the same time, is able to memorialise the family members which she lost during the Holocaust.

Reflecting on the End of Childhood in the Pre-War Period

Douglas argues that childhood is, for the most part, represented in nostalgic modes of life writing as uncomplicated, and the most confronting event in these narratives is the end of childhood which usually coincides with the end of a particular social-historical era.⁹¹ The end of childhood in these three women's accounts is marked by their first memories and experiences of anti-Semitism and is when the nostalgic mode in which these women are writing appears to come to an end. This rupture in each woman's account not only signifies the end of their childhood but the experiences they recall also tell us something about the spread of anti-Semitism in the late 1930s and how it was experienced and understood by Jewish children in Germany, Romania and Czechoslovakia.

For Grossman, her first experience of anti-Semitism was while she was attending a German primary school and she reflects on how this affected both her and her Jewish classmates, recalling that:

At school the children were taught to hate Jews. There was a special lesson, "Rassenurkunde", in which the teacher picked a 'Jewish-looking' girl. She was made to stand in front of the class and the teacher pointed out her nose and hair. The poor child was crying and visibly upset. I was never picked as I didn't fit the stereotypical profile but other children started spilling ink on my homework and making life miserable for me.⁹²

⁹⁰ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 4.

⁹¹ Douglas, *Contesting Childhood*, 87.

⁹² Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 9.

Like Grossman, Fischer's nostalgic account of her childhood ends with an experience she had at school. During the 1930s in Romania, restrictions were placed on Jewish religious expression which was enforced by the Iron Guard. Fischer recalls in her account how these restrictions led to her expulsion from school:

In approximately 1937 the Iron Guard took over and it hit me particularly hard because the school headmaster told me that Jewish students were no longer exempt from writing on Shabbat. The headmaster was very sympathetic but he had his orders. He said if I just went to the blackboard and wrote my name he would accept that as writing. I would have gladly done that but I could not disappoint my father. Therefore, I was expelled from school. I was devastated.⁹³

The historian Marian Kaplan, who has done extensive research on how the daily lives of children changed in Germany in the late 1930s, has argued that children often had to walk a tightrope between meeting the demands of their parents and of their school which was at the time under the influence of a strict Nazi racial doctrine.⁹⁴ Fischer's experience as quoted above reveals that the same experiences and difficulties that Jewish children had to navigate in Germany were also faced by Jewish children in other countries such as Romania, where Nazi anti-Semitic policies had begun to influence and take hold.

Unlike Grossman and Fischer, the moment which signifies the end of Lowbeer's childhood does not happen at school but instead occurs when she witnesses public displays of anti-Semitism in her hometown. In 1938, Hungary, with the assistance of Germany, annexed the upper provinces of Czechoslovakia, which included Lowbeer's hometown of Senec. She reflects on the brutality of the Hungarian troops, and how the introduction of anti-Semitic legislation, like that which was being continually

⁹³ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 1.

⁹⁴ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.

enforced in Germany, affected her and the Jewish community in Senec. She writes that:

Their aggressive attitude upon marching in encouraged the local mob to throw stones and loot Jewish properties. The streets were full of shattered glass, reminiscent of Kristallnacht. This was only the beginning. Then, anti-Jewish laws were introduced. A drum call announced all the new changes. Tuition in schools became strictly Hungarian and the Slovak language was forbidden...My father's business was restricted too. We could only display and sell two or three types of grain and corn. We could no longer employ the book-keeper in the office, who no longer wished to work for a Jew anyway...Anti-Semitism was flourishing and we Jewish people felt as if we were being squeezed more and more. There was nothing we could do, just try to cope with the situation.⁹⁵

Examining how these women have used a nostalgic mode of remembering to reconstruct their childhoods in the pre-war period helps us to better understand how some survivors of the Holocaust have come to reflect upon and make meaning out of their pasts in the present. On the one hand, these women use nostalgia to construct an idealised version of the past and their childhoods. However, these women also employ nostalgia as a lens through which they can bear witness to and reconstruct families and homes which were destroyed during the Holocaust and childhood memories which have since been tainted by the traumatic experiences endured during this period. By using a nostalgic mode as a way to reflect upon their childhood, these women use these memories and the symbol of the innocent and unknowing child as a way to juxtapose the idyllic times of this period with the horrific and traumatic events of the Holocaust, events which will be discussed in the following chapter.

⁹⁵ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 21-22.

Chapter Two:

Gender and Emotional Silence in Jewish Women's Accounts of the Second World War

“The hell may have been the same for women and men during the Holocaust,
but the horrors were different”.⁹⁶

The Final Solution which was carried out by the Nazi regime during the Second World War was intended to ensure the annihilation of the entire Jewish population of Europe. As part of this plan, both Jewish men and Jewish women were eventually targeted by the Nazi regime for extermination. However, as the above quote suggests and as the Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg has argued, “The road to annihilation was marked by events that specifically affected men as men and women as women.”⁹⁷

This chapter will examine Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer's accounts of their wartime experiences and will draw on the scholarship of gender and the Holocaust to show how these women not only experienced but also reflect upon the experiences they had during this period as both Jews and women. An examination of these women's memories of the arrival and selection process at one of the Nazis largest extermination camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau, will show how all three women reflect on these experiences as a time during which they were singled out for sexual humiliation and degradation because of their gender and the threat they posed to the German Reich.

⁹⁶ Myrna Goldenberg quoted in *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices*, edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 3.

⁹⁷ Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Victims*, 126.

This chapter will also discuss the tone of all three women's accounts of their wartime experiences and will argue that they are characterised by an emotional silence. By drawing on the work of psychologist Judith Herman, this chapter will argue that these women use emotional silence as a way to cope with the trauma associated with their wartime memories, while at the same time trying to fulfil their perceived duty as a survivor of the Holocaust to bear witness to the atrocities which they experienced.

When the Second World War broke out, Grossman had moved with her family from Germany to Poland, which was not long after invaded by Germany. Fischer was still living in her hometown in Romania, as was Lowbeer in Czechoslovakia, however, both countries soon came under Hungarian rule. The Second World War dramatically changed the lives of each of these women. However, this change occurred at different times depending on each woman's location. Therefore, the beginning of this chapter will situate these women's accounts within the contexts in which they were living during the Second World War and will show just how important location was in determining and shaping the wartime experiences had by each of these women.

The Second World War Begins

Hitler's annexation of the *Sudetenland* and the remaining Czech provinces of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1939 saw Germany regain a significant amount of the territory which the country had lost after the First World War. However, now Hitler and the Nazi government's attention turned towards territorial expansion and extending Germany's borders to secure Lebensraum (German living space). Hitler turned his sights to Poland, and on August 23, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to a non-aggression pact. As part of this pact, Poland was divided into

German and Soviet 'spheres of influence', and the Soviet Union agreed not to interfere when Germany invaded Poland.⁹⁸ As a result of the pact, the Soviet Union became a reluctant but active partner with Nazi Germany in the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939.⁹⁹ Hitler had hoped that the Allies would once again appease his demands and ignore his attempts at expansion,¹⁰⁰ however, on September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany and the Second World War commenced.

When Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland, the country had a population of 35, 340, 000 of which around 3.3 million were Jews.¹⁰¹ On September 22, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union finalised their spheres of influence. Germany gained control of just under half of the country's territory, with the Soviet Union gaining control of the rest.¹⁰² Approximately two million Jews were trapped in the areas of German-occupied Poland.¹⁰³ The treatment and persecution of the Jewish population in the German-occupied areas of Poland closely resembled that which had been inflicted upon the Jews of Germany throughout the mid to late 1930s.

A series of anti-semitic laws were introduced in German-occupied areas of Poland which stripped Polish Jews of their homes, businesses and any personal property.¹⁰⁴ Curfews were imposed, Jewish newspapers were shut down, and forced labour and public hangings were used to make examples out of those who would dare to defy German authority.¹⁰⁵ By October 1939, all Polish Jews between the ages of

⁹⁸ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 158.

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Robert G. Moeller, *The Nazi State and German Society: A Brief History with Documents* (USA: St. Martin's, 2010), 17.

¹⁰¹ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 159.

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 167.

¹⁰⁵ Jane Caplan, *Nazi Germany* (USA: Oxford University Press 2008), 222.

twelve and sixty were forced to work for two years in forced labour camps,¹⁰⁶ effectively transforming them into a source of slave labour. In November 1939, all Jewish assets in banks and other financial institutions were frozen, and Jews were only permitted to keep 2,000 Zlotys (\$625), and any valuables they owned which collectively exceeded that amount were also confiscated.¹⁰⁷

The historian David Crowe has argued that the German occupation of Poland presented Nazi officials with problems far more complex than the ones they had faced in Germany.¹⁰⁸ The huge size of the Jewish population in Poland meant that it would not be an easy task to force their immigration as they had attempted to do with German Jews throughout the 1930s. To overcome this dilemma, the German government decided to create an extensive and elaborate ghetto system within Poland, which would eventually become the 'dumping ground' for Jews and other undesirable groups of people throughout Europe.¹⁰⁹

Throughout the German-occupied areas of Poland, German authorities established hundreds of ghettos, some of which were completely closed off, trapping the Jews inside, while others remained partially open.¹¹⁰ Once in these ghettos, the Jewish population could be isolated from the Polish and German populations, they could be used for forced labour for the benefit of the Third Reich, and their possessions could be handed over to German officials and eager neighbours.¹¹¹ However, the ghettos also became important meeting points where Jews and other groups deemed undesirable by the Nazi government were taken before they were

¹⁰⁶ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 167.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 168.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 188.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 188.

¹¹⁰ Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A feminist History*, 21.

¹¹¹ Caplan, *Nazi Germany*, 222.

sent to their deaths in the concentration and extermination camps which were established in Poland during the war.¹¹²

The situation for Jews living in the Soviet-occupied areas of Poland was not much better. Approximately 1.3 million Jews were residing in the Soviet-occupied areas of Poland, and another 300,000 to 350,000 Jews had fled into these areas when Germany had invaded not knowing that they would soon be under Soviet rule.¹¹³ At first, the Jews in the Soviet-occupied areas believed that they would be better off than those in the German-controlled areas of Poland. However, they soon realised that the anti-Semitic sentiment of the Russians closely resembled that of Nazi German.¹¹⁴ Polish Jews who were now living in the Soviet-occupied areas of Poland were viewed as foreigners and were followed and monitored by Stalin's secret police who were suspicious of all foreigners.¹¹⁵ Most of the Jewish refugees who had fled from Nazi-occupied Poland had no jobs or homes and were separated from their families, and Stalin's decision to close down synagogues, temples, schools and Jewish Aid organisations further intensified their situation.

A number of European countries became Allies of Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and they played a crucial role in supporting Germany's implementation of the Holocaust. One European country which showed its continued support for the Nazi regime not only during the Second World War but also in the years prior was Hungary. Hungary was one of the first European countries after World War One to introduce anti-Semitic legislation. In 1920, a law was passed which restricted the enrollment of Jews in higher education to just six percent of the total enrollment.¹¹⁶ However, it was during the 1930s, that the position of Hungarian

¹¹² Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 188.

¹¹³ Ibid., 192.

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Ibid

Jews changed significantly when the countries regent and acting head of state admiral Miklos Horthy, gradually accepted and supported successive pro-Nazi Hungarian governments who aligned themselves with Nazi Germany.¹¹⁷

The pro-German policy which the Hungarian government pursued proved successful when it enabled Hungary to regain territory which it had lost after World War One. In late 1938, as part of the First Vienna Award, Germany rewarded Hungary's continued support by helping the country annex the southern areas of Slovakia. On August 20, 1940, as part of the Second Vienna Award, German and Italian arbitration also saw Hungary gain the Romanian territory of Northern Transylvania. As a result of these territorial gains, the Jewish population in Hungary increased from around 400,000 to 725,000.¹¹⁸

During the 1930s Horthy gave in to German pressure and introduced a number of anti-Semitic laws which closely resembled those imposed on the Jews of Germany, and in particular saw the economic rights of Hungarian Jews restricted. However, despite the introduction of these laws, and Hungary's close alliance with Nazi Germany, Horthy and the Hungarian government went to considerable lengths to protect its Jewish population. In 1941, there were approximately 825,000 Jews residing in Hungary and while the Jews in the Nazi-controlled areas of Europe were being systematically persecuted, the Jews of Hungary were able to live in relative safety during the first four and a half years of the war.¹¹⁹ This safety was because the Hungarian government refused German requests for the deportation of Hungarian Jews to German-controlled forced-labour and concentration camps.¹²⁰ However, on

¹¹⁷ Jost Dulffer, *Nazi Germany 1933-1945: Faith and Annihilation* (UK: Arnold, 1996), 188.

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Randolph Braham, "The Holocaust in Hungary: A Retrospective Analysis," in *The Holocaust and History: the Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, the Re-examined*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (USA: Indiana University Press, 1998), 432.

¹²⁰ Ibid

March 19, 1944, Germany invaded Hungary, fearing the possibility that Hungary might change sides in the war, and saw the country's large Jewish population as a new and viable source of slave labour.¹²¹

The historian Randolph Braham has argued that in no other country was the process of the Final Solution including Jewish isolation, ghettoisation, concentration, and deportation, carried out with as much speed and brutality as it was in Hungary.¹²² German officials led by Adolf Eichmann with the support of Hungarian ultra-right groups such as the Arrow Cross were able to carry out their orders with no internal or external opposition.¹²³ Between May and July 1944, over 430,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to German forced-labour and extermination camps, and the deportations, murder and persecution of Hungarian Jews continued until early April 1945, when Hungary was liberated by the Soviet Union.¹²⁴

Surviving the Holocaust as both Jews and Jewish Women

When the Second World War broke out, Renate Grossman was twelve-years-old, and both Susanna Fischer and Edith Lowbeer were fifteen. All three women had spent the mid-1920s and 1930s growing up in the interwar period in relative safety. However, as has been noted in the previous chapter, the late 1930s signalled an end to these women's childhoods when they began to witness the increasing presence of anti-Semitic sentiment in their hometowns and felt the effects of newly introduced anti-Semitic legislation on their families and communities.

All three women devote varying portions of their accounts to detailing their wartime and Holocaust experiences. Fischer devotes only ten pages of her account to

¹²¹ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 306.

¹²² Braham, "The Holocaust in Hungary," 436.

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 308.

detailing this time in her life, whereas, Lowbeer devotes around nineteen pages. Grossman devotes the most of the three women, using around twenty-eight pages to detail her recollections of this period. The differences in the amount of attention which each woman gives to describing her life during the Second World War can be understood as a result of where they were located geographically during the conflict.

During the Second World War both Lowbeer, and Fischer were living in areas which had come under Hungarian rule. Lowbeer's hometown of Senec in Czechoslovakia had been annexed by Hungary in 1938, and Fischer was living in the Romanian town of Cluj which had also been annexed by Hungary in 1940. Both of these women were able to remain in their own homes in relative safety during the first four and a half years of the Second World War. During this time, Lowbeer was able to complete a two-year Hungarian business college course and was then able to assist her parents doing office work for the family business.¹²⁵ During this period, Fischer recalls taking family holidays with her sisters and her mother to visit the Hungarian village where her mother was born, and in the first few years of the war, her older sister was able to open a retail store.¹²⁶

It was not until late 1943 that both Lowbeer and Fischer began to truly feel the effects of the war on their daily lives. Fischer's sister was no longer allowed to keep her business and was forced to sell it to a Christian Hungarian.¹²⁷ In late 1943, Lowbeer's father and another fifteen men from their village were arrested by the Hungarian police and interned indefinitely for 'political reasons'.¹²⁸ However, it was not until after the German invasion of Hungary in April 1944, that both women and their families were forced out of their homes. Lowbeer was sent to a local ghetto, and

¹²⁵ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 25.

¹²⁶ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 33.

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 25.

Fischer was sent to a local brickworks. Therefore, Lowbeer and Fischer's accounts of their wartime experiences are considerably shorter than Grossman's because although they did face difficulties during the first four years of the war, they were spared from forced labour or deportation due to the protection of the Hungarian government. It was not until mid-1944 after Germany's invasion of Hungary that both women felt the full force and effects of the Second World War impact on their daily lives.

In contrast, Grossman and her family had moved from their home in Germany to Poland after the events of *Kristallnacht* in the hope of escaping the violent anti-Semitism emerging in Germany. However, this did not spare them for very long as Poland was invaded by Germany on September 1, 1939. Grossman and her family were able to remain relatively safe in the Polish city of Lvov because they were living in an area of Poland which was under Soviet-occupation. However, they then moved to the German-occupied area of Tarnow where they were able to live with relatives, until May 1941, when they were forced to move into the Tarnow Ghetto.¹²⁹ Therefore, for Grossman, the effects and impact of the war affected her and her family much earlier than it did Lowbeer and Fischer, and as a result her account of this time in her life is considerably longer.

Examining the contexts within which all three women were living when the Second World War broke out shows the important role that location played in dictating their wartime experiences. It is also possible that their location played an important role in their survival. Both Lowbeer and Fischer first entered Nazi forced labour and extermination camps very late in the war. Therefore, they were fitter and healthier and had a much shorter duration between their internment and their

¹²⁹ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 15-17.

liberation than most other Jews. This makes it all the more surprising and remarkable that Grossman survived as she was the youngest of the three women and was residing in one of the first countries to come under Nazi rule during the Second World War.

The feminist academic Sarah Horowitz has argued that the ‘Nazi atrocity attacked Jewish women as both Jews and as women’.¹³⁰ In their accounts of their wartime experiences, Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer all recall how they experienced the Holocaust not only as Jews but also as Jewish women. Jewish women, especially those of child-bearing age posed a great threat to the racially pure German nation which the Nazi government sought to establish because they were the ones who could ensure the continuation of Jewish life in Europe.¹³¹ Thus, Nazi ideology dictated that Jewish women and Jewish motherhood be eradicated.¹³² Therefore, Jewish women were put uniquely at risk because of the perceived threat which they posed to the Third Reich. As a result, historians Carol Rittner and John K. Roth have argued that the killing operations used in the Holocaust, especially those where the Jews were concerned, made explicit distinctions between women and men.¹³³ These distinctions were perhaps made most apparent in how Jewish men and Jewish women were treated in Nazi camps.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Horowitz, “Women in Holocaust Literature,” 375.

¹³¹ Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices*, 2.

¹³² Nicole Ephgrave, “On Women’s Bodies: Experiences of Dehumanization During the Holocaust,” *Journal of Women’s History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 12-32.

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ The focus of this chapter is the experiences of women during the Holocaust, specifically in Nazi camps, however, to fully understand the role that gender played during the Holocaust it is also important that scholars pay close attention to the gendered treatment of Jewish men, which at present is an under-researched area of Holocaust studies. For a discussion of the importance of examining the gendered experiences of men during the Holocaust see: Lisa Pine, “Gender and Holocaust Victims: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1, no. 2 (2008): 121–141. Sarah Horowitz, “Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (US: Yale University Press, 1998), 375-376.

Nazi camps were initially established after the Nazi party came to power to eliminate political opponents of the Third Reich.¹³⁵ In 1940, there were 53,000 people interned in Nazi camps, however, by 1945 this number had dramatically risen to over 700,000 as the SS desperately tried to use the forced labour of camp inmates to compensate for the shortcomings of the Third Reich's war economy.¹³⁶ It is important to note that during the Second World War, there were several different types of Nazi camps. These included concentration camps, forced-labour camps, transit camps and extermination or death camps.¹³⁷ As part of the Final Solution, extermination camps were established in Poland after 1941 and by 1942 there six major extermination camps in Poland and the Soviet Union, the largest and most deadly of which was the Auschwitz camp complex.¹³⁸

The Auschwitz camp complex included three main camps. Two of the camps were used as concentration camps and for forced labour as well as for the housing of prisoners working in local German factories. It was Auschwitz II, also known as Auschwitz-Birkenau which became the most infamous of the camps and was where Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer were all sent in late 1943 and mid-1944 before being transported to other forced labour camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau was established in 1941 and by 1942 began operating as an extermination camp and did so until the SS dismantled the camp in November 1944.

It is estimated that approximately 1.25 million people were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau, most of whom were Jews. However, thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, Gypsies and Poles were also murdered inside the camps gas

¹³⁵ Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: the End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (US: Yale University Press, 2015), 10-11.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁷ For more detailed information regarding the differences between different types of Nazi camps see: Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 267. Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 9-18.

¹³⁸ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 226.

chambers.¹³⁹ Due to the large number of people who were arriving at the camp, not all could be killed upon arrival. When prisoners arrived at the camp, they were taken through a selection process where most were sent to the gas chambers immediately, and those that were spared were destined for extermination through forced labour.¹⁴⁰

Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer all spent time in Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Holocaust, and it was here that they experienced and witnessed the gendered treatment of Jewish men and women when they arrived at the camp and were forced to endure the brutal and humiliating selection process. Upon arrival, Jewish men and women were separated according to gender, and during this process of selection, it was made extremely clear that the fate of Jewish women was closely tied to both their gender and their roles as Jewish mothers. Any woman who was visibly pregnant was sent straight to the gas chambers and mothers with small children were allowed to accompany them to their deaths. However, this same courtesy was not extended to fathers and, as Sybil Milton has argued, women became more vulnerable and their chances of survival significantly decreased if they were mothers.¹⁴¹

The historian Nicole Ephgrave has argued during the Holocaust; women were dehumanized and experienced this dehumanization in distinctively different ways from men that specifically targeted their bodily integrity.¹⁴² The concentration camp environment challenged women's identities as women, and the Nazis employed a system of sexual humiliation that disoriented girls and women when they arrived at the camp and were being separated from their families.¹⁴³ Women and men who survived the initial selection were forced to undergo a humiliating and terrifying

¹³⁹ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 268.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German Jewish Women," in *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices*, edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 227.

¹⁴² Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies," 16.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 21.

process of decontamination, where their heads, underarms and pubic areas were forcibly shaved by an SS officer before they were doused in a cold shower and given one piece of ill-fitting clothing to wear.¹⁴⁴ Milton has argued that for religious Jewish women, who once married kept their hair covered under a wig or a scarf, this experience was felt as a both a physical and spiritual nakedness.¹⁴⁵

Feminist historian Zoe Waxman has argued that although this process was humiliating for both men and women, it was perhaps especially traumatic for women.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Ephgrave notes that although men also experienced forced public nudity during the selection process, for most women, taught from a young age to be modest and chaste, the exposure of their bodies and the loss of their hair was one of the cruellest forms of dehumanisation experienced by women during the Holocaust.¹⁴⁷ Waxman notes that regardless of their background and whether-or-not they were religious Jews, nearly all female survivors remember with remarkable detail the trauma of their initiation into the camp.¹⁴⁸ This is certainly true for Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer whom all recall in their accounts this terrifying moment of violation. Grossman arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau in late 1943, where she stayed for seven days before she was transferred to a forced-labour camp. In her account, she remembers her arrival in detail and recalls that:

We were taken off the train and the women were separated from the men. The Germans surrounded us with rifles and snarling dogs... My hair was cut very short, my clothes were taken away and I was pushed under the shower. Thank God it was water that time...Afterwards we were given some clothes to wear and the dress I was given proved to be too short because I was tall. We were made to stand in a line and an officer told us we no longer had a name. Suddenly there was a table and we were getting a number which was tattooed on our arms. It was a very painful process and as mine didn't come out clearly the officer

¹⁴⁴ Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 87.

¹⁴⁵ Milton, "Women and the Holocaust," 228.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴⁷ Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies," 23.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*

wanted to do it again. I managed to get away and mingled with the other girls. My number that I had to answer to when called was A14422. This had to be memorised.¹⁴⁹

Lowbeer arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau on June 17, 1944, where she stayed for around six weeks before also being transferred to a forced labour camp. However, her recollections of her arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau convey the confusion and speed with which she was initiated into the camp. She remembers that:

It was all so fast. Stripping naked, we went into a building with showers, in on one side and out on the other. I wondered, "How will I get my clothes back which I had left in a pile on entering the showers?" The German SS had no concerns like that: they had no intention of returning our clothes. At the exit, coming out of the showers, they just handed us a piece of any garment, one person had a top only, another, a skirt only, and another, a dress two sizes too big.¹⁵⁰

Fischer arrived in the camp in mid-1944, where she remained for eight weeks. Like, Lowbeer she too recalls the confusion she experienced, and also remembers the gendered nature of her initiation. She recalls that:

When we got off the train in Auschwitz we saw the SS. We had to line up, five in a row, while they separated the men and the women. There was no crying, no sound, no screaming, nothing. I had no idea what was going on.¹⁵¹

Waxman has argued that for many women this process of initiation, and in particular, the forceful and violent removal of their hair was an act of humiliation and mutilation which was a form of sexual assault, second only to rape.¹⁵² Waxman has also argued that women were singled out in Nazi camps for sexual humiliation and the initiation process set the tone for the what was to come as women fell victim to sexualised violence at the hands of both female and male camp guards.¹⁵³ In her

¹⁴⁹ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 32-33.

¹⁵⁰ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 33.

¹⁵¹ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 34.

¹⁵² Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 88.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 91.

account, Fischer recalls being sexually and physically humiliated during the selection process in front of SS officers for their entertainment, recalling that:

We then had to be selected naked in front of the officers. We had to take our clothes off, put them on our head and parade in front of the officers to be selected. It was very frightening.¹⁵⁴

Australian historian Annabelle Baldwin has argued that the conditions of the Holocaust put women in danger of sexual abuse and Jewish women were often put in situations where they had little to no control over their bodies.¹⁵⁵ When recalling her time in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Grossman states that “The pretty girls were chosen for the ‘doll’s house’ to be prostitutes for the German soldiers.”¹⁵⁶ It is unlikely that these women would have had a choice in whether or not they were chosen for this role and in her account, Grossman later reflects on how Jewish women in this position were victim to horrific treatment at the hands of Nazi officials. She recalls that:

The prettiest girl in the camp was chosen to go to the German barracks and work for the highest officer to cook and clean for him. She had good food to eat and we envied her until one day she was dragged into the centre of the camp, tied to a post and whipped repeatedly until she was drenched in her own blood. She was left there overnight and by the next morning the girl was dead.¹⁵⁷

Traumatic Memory and Emotional Silence

All three women reflect in quite vivid detail on their memories of the selection process when they arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau and how they were separated from their male Jewish counterparts. Both Fischer and Grossman also recall the sexual humiliation they experienced and witnessed being directed towards Jewish women at the hands of Nazi camp officials. However, what is missing from all three of these

¹⁵⁴ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 35.

¹⁵⁵ Baldwin, “Sexual Violence and the Holocaust,” 114.

¹⁵⁶ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 27.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

women's accounts of their wartime/ Holocaust experiences is any reflection of how they felt during this period. Remarkably, each woman can describe and recall the facts of what happened during this period and the horrors which she witnessed. However, none reflect on how they reacted to these experiences and the emotional responses they had to them.

In her 1997 book *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence- from domestic abuse to political terror*, the American psychiatrist Judith Herman argues that for victims of trauma there are three steps to recovery.¹⁵⁸ First, a survivor needs to find safety and feel safe, then the survivor must recount the story of the trauma in its entirety, and finally, they must then reconnect with 'ordinary' life by developing a new sense of self, planning for a future and reconnecting with other people.¹⁵⁹ Understanding the second step in this process of recovery can help shed light on why the wartime and Holocaust experiences of Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer appear understated and unemotional.

Herman argues that a survivors initial account of the traumatic event they experienced may be repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless, it may appear to the listener or reader as a recitation of the 'facts' and the story does not reveal the storyteller's feelings or interpretation of events.¹⁶⁰ At this stage, the trauma story is in its 'untransformed' state and is what Herman describes as a 'prenarrative'.¹⁶¹ I would argue that Grossman, Fischer, and Lowbeer's accounts of their wartime and Holocaust experiences are all examples of a Holocaust narrative which is in this 'prenarrative' stage.

¹⁵⁸ Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (NY: Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 142.

¹⁶¹ Ibid

Herman argues that for a narrative of trauma to transcend this prenarrative stage, the survivor must recount not only the facts of what happened but also what she felt.¹⁶² The description of the survivor's emotional state during the event must be just as detailed as the description of the 'facts'.¹⁶³ However, this is no easy task as Herman notes that when a survivor can do this, they are not only describing what they felt but are also relieving those feelings in the present.¹⁶⁴ Baldwin has argued that in survivor accounts of the Holocaust silence can be used as a coping strategy that can minimise the trauma of the past in the present.¹⁶⁵ Therefore, the emotional silence which characterises all three women's accounts of their wartime experiences is perhaps a mechanism used to distance themselves from their traumatic pasts, and the emotions they experienced during that period, while at the same time giving these women a way to tell their stories to others in the present.

There could also be other reasons behind why the tone of these women's accounts of their wartime experiences lacks in emotion. Many survivors of the Holocaust suffer from survivor guilt. They feel shame at having survived the Holocaust when millions of others died. Freadman has argued that survivors often feel it is their duty to bear witness to the events of the Holocaust. However, they would 'see extended introspection as obscene self-indulgence, an abuse of their privilege of survival'.¹⁶⁶

It is also possible that the intended audience has also shaped and influenced the use of an unemotional tone in these three women's accounts. Usually, the intended audience for the accounts published as part of the Sydney Jewish Museum's 'Community Stories' program are the survivors themselves and their families.

¹⁶² Ibid., 144.

¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Baldwin, "Sexual Violence and the Holocaust," 129.

¹⁶⁶ Freadman, *This Crazy Thing a Life*, 184-185.

Freadman has also argued that survivors who are writing accounts which they know will be read by their children and grandchildren often exercise a certain amount of restraint.¹⁶⁷ He writes that survivors want their families and others to know ‘what happened’ but at the same time, they do not want to overwhelm or burden them with feelings of rage, horror, or sorrow.

The portions of their life narratives which Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer devote to recounting their wartime and Holocaust experiences provide us with interesting insights into the experiences these women had during this period. The accounts of all three women shed light on how important location was in determining and shaping their wartime experiences. All three women’s recollections of their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau also shed light on the gendered nature of the Nazi extermination camps and the sexual humiliation which Jewish women were forced to endure in addition to being targeted for the Jewishness. The understated tone of all three women’s accounts and the emotional silence which characterises them suggests that for these women to be able to tell their stories in the present, they must distance themselves from the emotions of the past. However, it also reveals the limitations of survivor accounts of the Holocaust in that they are not always the best modes with which a survivor can express or convey the emotional trauma which they have experienced.

These three women’s accounts also demonstrate that life writing authored by Holocaust survivors exists on a spectrum. At one end are the accounts of well-known Holocaust survivors such as Elie Weisel, Primo Levi who were able to reconstruct the emotions they experienced during the Holocaust in their present retellings. While on the other end of the spectrum are the accounts of women like Grossman, Fischer, and

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 187.

Lowbeer who are emotionally silent, but are however, at the same time are compelled to recount the events which they experienced and witnessed to bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust. However, examining how these women have constructed their memories of their wartime experiences plays an important role in also understanding how they have come to reflect upon their memories of liberation and this will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Three:

From Liberation to Immigration

‘Liberation constitutes a bridge between the war years and the postwar’¹⁶⁸

On May 7, 1945, Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies, bringing an end to the Second World War and a beginning to *zero hour*, or the period we now refer to as liberation.¹⁶⁹ However, the liberation of the Nazi forced-labour, concentration, and extermination camps was a gradual process beginning in July 1944, almost a year before the end of the war.¹⁷⁰ The liberation of Nazi camps is an area of research which has largely been overlooked in the field of Holocaust studies. The historian Joanne Reilly argues that this is largely because survivor accounts of the Holocaust rarely dwell on or recount the liberation period and the ones that do often end on the day of liberation or shortly after.¹⁷¹ However, recently the historian Dan Stone has attempted to fill this gap. In his book *The Liberation of the Camps*, he provides a detailed account of this period in the history of the Holocaust, in which he argues that liberation needs to be understood as a process and something which happened over time.¹⁷²

As the quote above suggests, this chapter is a bridge between Grossman, Lowbeer, and Fischer’s accounts of their liberation and their accounts of their resettlement in Australia in the post-war period. When they were liberated, all three

¹⁶⁸ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ The German’s referred to liberation as “Stunde null” or “Zero hour”.

¹⁷⁰ On July 23, 1944, the Soviets liberated the first major concentration camp, Majdanek. For more information about when each of the Nazi camps were liberated and by which Allied forces see: Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 385-389.

¹⁷¹ Reilly, “With Waving Flags: Bergen-Belsen and the Myth of Liberation,” 62.

¹⁷² Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 2.

women were being held as prisoners in Nazi camps. Therefore, the beginning of this chapter charts the aftermath of the liberation of the Nazi camps and the establishment of displaced persons camps used by the Allies to house survivors.

For many survivors, including the three women whose accounts are examined in this thesis, the liberation of the Nazi camps did not signify an end to their suffering, and for those who survived the first few weeks, there was no return to normalcy.¹⁷³ This chapter will argue that survivors of Nazi camps were also forced to survive their liberation. An examination of the accounts of Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer show how all three women describe the liberation period in their life narratives as a period during which they had to continue to fight for their survival. This fight for survival and the dangers that the liberation period posed to survivors are also highlighted through an examination of the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen camp complex where both Grossman and Fischer were liberated.

This chapter will also examine the portions of these women's account which are dedicated to describing the period in their lives after their liberation and before they finally immigrated to Australia. This chapter will argue that several different factors shaped and influenced these women's decisions to immigrate to Australia in the post-war period, including the contexts within which they were living, and their desires to rebuild their lives in countries outside of Europe.

From Nazi Camps to Displaced Person's Camps

The liberation of the Nazi camps by the Allies was a process which occurred over time as the Allied forces began to advance into German-controlled territory. In April and May of 1945, the last of the Nazi camps inside Germany itself were finally

¹⁷³ Reilly, "With Waving Flags: Bergen-Belsen and the Myth of Liberation," 73.

liberated by the Allies. It is impossible to know the exact number of Jews killed during the Holocaust because Nazi records are incomplete and therefore all figures are only an estimate.¹⁷⁴ However, it is largely believed that the number of Jews killed during the Holocaust was at least six million. More than eleven million prisoners of war and displaced persons (DPs) of many different nations were liberated by the Allies at the end of the war.¹⁷⁵ Historians estimate that approximately 90,000 Jews were liberated by the Allies in 1945.¹⁷⁶ The responsibility and care of the DPs was given to the four victorious nations, the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and France, in their occupied zones of Germany and Austria.¹⁷⁷ Most of the Jewish DPs were in the American zone because the United States offered DP status to those fleeing Eastern Europe. By the end of 1945, there were around 150,000 Jewish DPs in the American occupied zones of Germany, 15,000 in the British zone, and 2,000 in the French.¹⁷⁸

By the time the Allied forces entered and liberated the Nazi camps, their resources had been nearly exhausted, and the military personnel who liberated the camps had been trained for war and not its chaotic aftermath.¹⁷⁹ Many survivors were forced to remain in the concentration camps which they had been liberated in while the Allied forces established 'assembly centres' in nearby towns and villages which later became more commonly known as displaced persons camps (DP camps).¹⁸⁰ As a result, the daily lives of those who remained in the newly liberated

¹⁷⁴ Barbara Rogasky, *Smoke and Ashes: the Story of the Holocaust* (USA: Holiday House Publishing, 1988), 157.

¹⁷⁵ Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (Rev. ed., New York: Franklin Watts, 2001), 370.

¹⁷⁶ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 19.

¹⁷⁷ Arie J. Kochavi, "Liberation and Dispersal," in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, edited by Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

¹⁷⁸ There were also a very small number of DP camps in Austria and Italy. See: Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 140.

¹⁷⁹ Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath*, 384.

¹⁸⁰ Reilly, "With Waving Flags: Bergen-Belsen and the Myth of Liberation," 68.

Nazi camps changed very little. They had to remain behind the barbed wire fences, supervised by guards, and restrictions were placed on people leaving the camps.¹⁸¹

David Crowe has argued that for many Holocaust survivors the end of the war and the liberation process was the beginning of a new struggle for survival.¹⁸² One of the sites where this struggle for survival played out perhaps most brutally was during the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Bergen-Belsen was established in 1941 as a Soviet prisoner of war camp. However, in March 1944, the camp became a dumping ground for sick and exhausted camp inmates from other forced-labour and concentration camps.¹⁸³ In April 1945, as part of a local ceasefire, the camp was handed over to the British. However, unlike other camps which were evacuated and found nearly empty of people when the Allied armies arrived, most of the Bergen-Belsen inmates were not evacuated by the SS due to illness and had been left to die slow and painful deaths.¹⁸⁴

When British forces entered Bergen Belsen on April 15, 1945, they faced what the historian Marky Wyman has called a 'horrific reality'.¹⁸⁵ In the months before liberation, it is estimated that approximately 37,000 people perished in the camp.¹⁸⁶ As the British officers liberated the camp, they found piles upon piles of dead bodies and around 60,000 emaciated Jewish and non-Jewish survivors, most of whom were barely alive, suffering from starvation and a typhoid outbreak.¹⁸⁷ In the first few days after the liberation, British officers began to give malnourished survivors food and British medical personnel intravenously fed those who were close to starvation.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 68.

¹⁸² Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath*, 435.

¹⁸³ Christine Lattek, "Bergen-Belsen: From 'Privileged' Camp to Death Camp," in *Belsen in History and Memory*, edited by Joanne Reilly et al., (UK: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1997), 53.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁸⁵ Kochavi, "Liberation and Dispersal," 4.

¹⁸⁶ Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, 359.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid

¹⁸⁸ Kochavi, "Liberation and Dispersal," 4.

However, many of those fed died as their starved bodies were unable to digest the food they were given.¹⁸⁹ Thousands of others also died from typhoid, which was running rampant in the camp. Despite the efforts of the British military and medical personnel, there was little they could do to save the 14,000 Bergen-Belsen inmates who died in the days and weeks following the liberation of the camp.¹⁹⁰ It is estimated that of the 14,000 who perished, roughly 10,000 were Jewish.¹⁹¹

On May 21, 1945, the buildings which made up the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp were burnt down to prevent the spread of typhus. Those who had survived the horrendous conditions in the camp, including 13,000 Jews, were moved to a displaced persons camp which had been established by the British in the nearby town of Hohne.¹⁹² The British had planned to call the DP camp Hohne. However, Stone argues that the Jewish survivors recognised the powerful value of the Belsen name and insisted on using it in reference to the newly established DP camp.¹⁹³ The Bergen-Belsen DP camp became the largest of all the Allied DP camps in Germany and had the largest population of Jewish Holocaust survivors.¹⁹⁴ The relatively large number of Jews among the survivors led other Jewish refugees in the British-occupied areas of Germany to move to the camp, and as a result, nearly all of the Jewish DPs in the British zone lived in this one camp.¹⁹⁵

Life in the DP camps brought about a new set of challenges which survivors had to face. There were food, water and clothing shortages in most of the Allied DP camps, and there was no employment available.¹⁹⁶ Other challenges also arose for

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, 359.

¹⁹¹ Ibid

¹⁹² Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 104.

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Mark Wyman, "Survivors" in *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*, edited by Peter Hayes (USA: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 5.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, 375.

Jewish survivors who were living in the displaced persons camps. When the western Allies established the DP camps, they made no special provisions for Jewish survivors. The Allies believed that treating the Jewish survivors as a separate group would be accepting and perpetuating the Nazi categorisation of Jews as a separate race.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, as DPs were brought together by the Allies in hastily constructed displaced persons camps and divided according to their country of origin, survivors of the Holocaust often found themselves sitting next to the people who had only a short time before been their persecutors and torturers.¹⁹⁸

The Allied occupation forces also initially refused the assistance of Jewish relief organisations who wanted to assist Jewish survivors and would not allow them into the DP camps.¹⁹⁹ Tensions also arose between the Jewish DPs and the soldiers who guarded them. At first, the soldiers were sympathetic towards the Jewish DPs because they had been the ones to liberate them from the Nazi camps and had witnessed the horrific conditions which the survivors had been living in.²⁰⁰ However, these soldiers were gradually replaced by service personnel who had not witnessed the horrors of war and had little sympathy for the Jewish survivors who refused to return to their former homes and demanded the establishment of separate Jewish DP camps.²⁰¹

The conditions for Jewish survivors in the DP camps improved in mid-1945 after American President Harry S. Truman sent Earl G. Harrison (Dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Law School) to inspect the camps.²⁰² In his report, Harrison stated that 'As matters stand now, we appear to be treating the Jews as the

¹⁹⁷ Kochavi, "Liberation and Dispersal," 3.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹⁹ Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath*, 389.

²⁰⁰ Ibid

²⁰¹ Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, 371.

²⁰² Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath*, 390.

Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them'.²⁰³ Harrison's report led to a number of changes in how the Allied forces approached the organisation of DP camps. It led to the creation of separate camps for Jewish survivors, camp guards were chosen from among the DPs themselves, and food and clothing rations were increased.²⁰⁴

The DP camps in Europe continued to exist for far longer than the Allies had first anticipated in 1945. After the war, some Jewish survivors had attempted to return to their pre-war homes however, most quickly left again in the aftermath of anti-Semitic *pogroms* which took place throughout central and eastern Europe when the war ended and left hundreds dead.²⁰⁵ As a result, this led to a large westward migration, which saw the majority of those fleeing central and eastern Europe make their way to the DP camps in occupied Germany.²⁰⁶ As a result, the DP camps in Europe gradually grew larger and became centres of Jewish communal life with unique social, economic, and cultural characteristics.²⁰⁷ For example, the Jewish DPs in Bergen-Belsen created a self-governing Jewish community who tried to live normal lives in extremely abnormal times.²⁰⁸ The Central Jewish Committee was formed and represented the Jewish DPs in the camp. The Committee worked to ensure that survivors had enough food, proper sanitation, and even established a

²⁰³ Wyman, "Survivors," 759.

²⁰⁴ Ibid

²⁰⁵ The most notable of these post-war *pogroms* was the Kielce *pogrom*, which took place on July 4, 1946. There were about 200 Jews in Kielce, most of them Holocaust survivors living in the former Jewish community centre in the town. However, a rumour that Jews had been killing Polish children spread through the town and police, soldiers and townspeople stormed the centre and killed several Jews. Outside a mob attacked Jews trying to flee, and others were attacked on their way to the hospital. By the end of the day, between 37 to 42 Jews were dead and another 50 to 82 seriously injured. This open, violent and escalating antisemitism helped to drive thousands of returned Jews out of Poland and neighbouring countries from 1945 onwards. See; Wyman, "Survivors," 765.

²⁰⁶ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 129.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 140.

²⁰⁸ Wyman, "Survivors," 5.

Jewish police force to protect Jewish DPs from anti-Semitic assaults by other non-Jewish survivors in the camp.²⁰⁹

By the end of 1946, there were approximately 141, 000 Jewish DPs in the American-occupied zones of Germany, and a further 50,000 in the British.²¹⁰ However, the number of DPs reduced extremely quickly with the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948. By September 1948, there were only 30,000 Jewish DPs still in Germany and in 1951 those that remained were transported to Fohrenwald which became the last of the displaced persons' camps.²¹¹ Despite the desire of the German government and the Jewish relief organisations to see Fohrenwald closed, the camp did not finally shut down until February 1957.²¹²

Surviving Liberation

Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer were all liberated while being held as prisoners in Nazi camps. When they were liberated, Grossman was eighteen years old, Lowbeer was twenty, and Fischer was twenty-one. They devote a very small amount of their accounts, around two pages each, to describing the moment when they were liberated by the Allies. The emotional silence and understated tone which characterised all three women's accounts of their wartime experiences is also reflected in their recollections of liberation. Stone has argued that 'Not only were many survivors feeling far from joyful, often they were just as far from being healed.'²¹³ Similarly, Reilly has argued that for many survivors, they were physically unable to enjoy their liberation, they were either starving from hunger or suffering

²⁰⁹ Ibid

²¹⁰ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 130.

²¹¹ Ibid., 193. For a more detailed discussion about life in the DP camps during this period see; Wyman, "Survivors," 793-810.

²¹² Ibid. For a more detailed discussion of why so many Jewish Holocaust survivors chose to remain in DP camps in Germany up until the late 1950s see; Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 193-195.

²¹³ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 2.

from diseases like typhus.²¹⁴ Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer all recall and reflect on their liberation as an experience during which they had to continue to fight for their survival, and any feelings of joy, excitement or relief are absent from their recollections.

Both Fischer and Grossman were being held prisoner in Bergen-Belsen when they were liberated by the British forces. At the time, Fischer was extremely ill, because she had contracted typhus and in her account, she captures the chaotic nature of the liberation and recalls the deaths of those who died after they were fed by the British soldiers. She recalls that:

I remember the constant screaming in the camp to get the attention of the English soldiers...When they came in, they looked after us. They gave us food too soon and that made many people very sick...I got typhus with an incredibly high temperature...for weeks I couldn't eat, and I was so deaf I couldn't hear a thing.²¹⁵

Therefore, for Fischer, like many others in Bergen-Belsen, liberation did little to change the horrendous circumstances in which she was living. Grossman was also liberated at Bergen Belsen and when she recalls this moment in her account she chooses to reflect not on her reactions to being liberated, but rather the reactions and emotions of her liberators. She writes that:

One day I noticed that nobody was guarding us and realised the guards had run away. Then all of a sudden soldiers on jeeps came in to liberate us. These were English soldiers, and they were in shock when they saw what was awaiting them. Dead bodies everywhere. They gave us tinned food and I was too sick to eat which proved lucky as the ones who ate the food died.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Reilly, "With Waving Flags: Bergen-Belsen and the Myth of Liberation," 62.

²¹⁵ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 40-41.

²¹⁶ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 39.

As was described in the previous chapter, all three women's accounts are what Judith Herman has called 'prenarrative's' of trauma.²¹⁷ A characteristic of this 'prenarrative' type of trauma story is that the survivor can reflect on the facts of what happened to them. However, they are unable to describe or reflect on the emotions they experienced during these events. This emotional silence in survivor accounts is usually a mechanism used so that they can tell their stories while at the same time protecting themselves in the present from reliving these traumatic emotions of the past. What is interesting about the quote above by Grossman, is that she distances herself even further from this memory by choosing to describe and recall the emotional reactions of her liberators. Therefore, in her account, Grossman can bear witness to what happened to those around her at the moment of liberation but is unable to bear witness to how she experienced this moment.

Unlike Fischer and Grossman, Lowbeer was liberated in a smaller Nazi sub-camp in the *Sudetenland* called *Parshnitz*. *Parshnitz* was a sub-camp of the Gross-Rosen camp complex which became an autonomous concentration camp in 1941.²¹⁸ Germany's increasing reliance on the use of concentration camp prisoners in armaments production led to the expansion of the camp in the summer of 1944, and the camp became the centre of an extensive industrial camp complex which included a vast network of at least 97 smaller sub-camps.²¹⁹ It is estimated that of the 120,000 prisoners who were part of the Gross-Rosen complex, at least 40,000 died either in

²¹⁷ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 144.

²¹⁸ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 50.

²¹⁹ The total number of Gross-Rosen subcamps has never been precisely determined and researchers have also been unable to agree on the exact location of many of the camps. The reason for this debate is that most subcamp documents and the catalogue of prisoners were kept at the main Gross-Rosen camp and were destroyed when it was evacuated. Other difficulties also include that some subcamps only operated for a short period of time, after which they were dismantled, and prisoners were transferred to other camps. The camps were of various sizes, some held as little as a few dozen prisoners and others held thousands. At the end of the war, the Soviet units that liberated the area confiscated all documents that the Germans left behind. For a more detailed discussion of this debate see; Bella Guttmann, *A Narrow Bridge to Life: Jewish Forced Labour and Survival in the Gross-Rosen Camp System, 1940-1945* (US: Berghahn Books, 2008), 96-97.

the camp or during its evacuation in February 1945.²²⁰ The size of the Gross-Rosen camp complex and the vast number of its subcamps meant that not all were evacuated by the time that the Soviet troops liberated the main Gross-Rosen campsite on February 13, 1945. Soon after they also liberated the smaller sub-camps of the complex including *Parshnitz*.

Lowbeer and her mother had been transferred to *Parshnitz* to work in the General Electric Factory producing parts for German aeroplanes.²²¹ Unlike both Fischer and Grossman, Lowbeer and her mother had been preparing for their liberation for some time. Lowbeer had made friends with a German-Czech girl called Mia who warned Lowbeer and her mother that the war was coming to an end and offered her home as a shelter for when they were liberated.²²² When the SS abandoned the camp gates at *Parshnitz*, and the Soviet troops arrived to liberate the camp, Lowbeer and her mother went to Mia for help. However, after they arrived they realised that were still in danger, she writes that:

We now decided to go to Mia for help and we turned up on her doorstep...“Wilden Kommen” (The wild ones are coming!), screamed Mia’s mother, referring to the Russians. Mia, in her calm way, went up to the attic and brought down their flag, the Czechoslovakian flag, and put the flag outside their attic window so it could be seen from the street...this is how she welcomed the Russians, who frantically knocked on her door...she suggested to them that they should go over to the other side of the street where there was a Nazi family and they should pay them a visit. The Russians did just that, and the next day we heard how they robbed and raped that family.²²³

Lowbeer’s experience of liberation is one that Bella Gutterman has argued was experienced by many women in areas which were liberated by Soviet forces. She has noted that to their dismay, female survivors of Nazi camps realised that they now

²²⁰ Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life*, 96-97.

²²¹ Ibid

²²² Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses: Life’s Journey*, 38.

²²³ Ibid., 39.

faced a new plight and that the ordeal which they had survived was far from over.²²⁴ As the Soviet troops advanced into the German-occupied territory and then into the German interior, what followed was the widespread rape of German women who were targeted by Soviet troops as revenge for the Wehrmacht's crimes during the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.²²⁵ However, the historian Antony Beevor has noted that when the Soviet troops were inebriated by alcohol, the nationality of their 'prey' made little difference and any woman of any age who crossed their path could become a victim of the brutal gang rapes which were carried out by the Soviet troops.²²⁶

Making the decision to emigrate to Australia

After they recall their liberation in their accounts, all three women then devote a handful of pages to describing their lives after they were liberated from the Nazi camps and reflect upon why they decided to immigrate to Australia. Sharon Cohen has argued that the Holocaust testimonies of survivors living in Australia in the post-war period reveal that there are three main reasons for why they chose Australia as a possible destination for resettlement.²²⁷ The most common reason given is that a family member in Australia sponsored them and their journey, or survivors had made several applications to other countries and chose Australia because it was the first country to accept them, and finally, other survivors had a strong desire to resettle as far away from Europe as was possible.²²⁸ Furthermore, Cohen suggests that the desire to settle outside of Europe could be understood in terms of survivor's

²²⁴ Guttermann, *A Narrow Bridge to Life*, 225.

²²⁵ Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall 1945* (UK: Penguin Books, 2007), 31-32.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

²²⁷ Sharon Kangisser Cohen, "Choosing a Heim: Survivors of the Holocaust and Post-War Immigration," *European Judaism* 46, no. 2 (2013): 40.

²²⁸ *Ibid*

attempts to distance themselves not only physically, but also psychologically from their pasts.²²⁹

Lowbeer was the only one of the three women to return and remain in her pre-war hometown after the war. After her liberation, Lowbeer and her mother travelled by train back to their pre-war hometown in Senec, Czechoslovakia. When they arrived, Lowbeer discovered that her father, uncle, aunt and several of her cousins had survived the war. Not long after, she met her husband, Ernest, and they married on May 1, 1946.²³⁰ Together, they opened a broom making factory at the back of their house and had their first child Judy soon after.²³¹ Lowbeer's decision to emigrate to Australia in 1948, was influenced by not only some of the reasons highlighted by Cohen but also by the context in which she was living.

After the Second World War Czechoslovakia had become a Soviet satellite state and the country was on good terms with Stalin remaining largely independent, with a genuine coalition government running the country.²³² However, in 1947, communist tactics changed when the Marshall Plan Aid was offered, and communist support was declining.²³³ Czechoslovakia's acceptance of an invitation to a conference discussing the Marshall Plan in July 1947 marked the end of the country's coalition government as well as an end to the stability which they had enjoyed after the war.²³⁴ Stalin forbade the Czechs from attending the conference, fearing that they would develop a Western-style parliamentary government and would come under the influence of the United States if they accepted Marshall Plan aid.²³⁵ By early 1948, the Communist

²²⁹ Cohen, "Choosing a Heim," 41.

²³⁰ Ibid., 46.

²³¹ Ibid., 46-47.

²³² J R. Wegs and Robert Ladrech, *Europe Since 1945: A Concise History* (US: St Martin's Press, Inc. 1996), 37.

²³³ Ibid

²³⁴ Ibid

²³⁵ Ibid

Party of Czechoslovakia had taken control of the government and had silenced all of their opponents.²³⁶

In June 1948, the Czechoslovakian president Edvard Benes refused to approve the new communist inspired constitution, and he was forced to resign.²³⁷ It was during this tumultuous period that Lowbeer and her husband decided to emigrate to Australia. She recalls that:

One day my husband passed a communist rally and listened to a few speakers, which helped him make up his mind that it was definitely time to emigrate as soon as possible. My father's sister Iionka came to Australia in 1938 and she sent us a permit to come and join her in this beautiful country.²³⁸

The quote above suggests that Lowbeer and her husband had been considering the possibility of immigration for some time. It also shows that a number of different factors influenced their final decision to emigrate. These included the geopolitical context in which they were living and the fact that Lowbeer had an aunt who could nominate and sponsor their immigration to Australia. However, in her account Lowbeer writes that after her first daughter was born, she believed that 'The sad part was now behind us and we felt that happy times were ahead'.²³⁹ This also suggests that for Lowbeer, the birth of her daughter signified a new beginning and this was perhaps something that could only be successfully achieved if she distanced herself from her past and left Europe behind. Lowbeer and her husband, along with their daughter, and Lowbeer's mother all left for Australia by plane on February 14, 1948, and arrived in Sydney four days later.²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Ibid

²³⁷ Ibid

²³⁸ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 47.

²³⁹ Ibid

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 52.

When she was liberated in Bergen-Belsen, Grossman was extremely ill. The Swedish Red Cross who were assisting the British medical personnel in the camp transported her by boat to Sweden where she was cared for at a boarding school for children and young adults who had survived the Holocaust.²⁴¹ The boarding school was eventually closed, and she completed a three-month nursing course offered by the Red Cross in Stockholm.²⁴² Soon after, she registered her name with the Red Cross to find out if any of her family had survived the war.²⁴³ Two of her mother's sisters had survived, and Grossman on December 31, 1946, emigrated to Belgium where she lived with one of her aunts.²⁴⁴

While living in Belgium, she met her first husband, Leo Stark, and they married on June 22, 1947, and soon after she fell pregnant with her first son, Josef.²⁴⁵ In her account, Grossman attributes her choice to immigrate to Australia to the need to leave Europe behind and rebuild her life in a country which was far removed from the horrors which she had experienced during the war. She recalls that:

Finally, we had a chance to register to go to Australia. My husband told me we had to start saving money for our new home and go out less. We also took English lessons...we waited two years until our documents were ready. I was happy to leave Europe and start a new life in a new country.²⁴⁶

The above quote also shows that the process of immigration could be experienced quite differently by survivors. For Lowbeer, the period between her decision to emigrate to Australia and her arrival was only one month because she had a relative who could sponsor her and her family. Therefore, the process for their immigration moved through official channels quite quickly. However, as is

²⁴¹ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 40.

²⁴² Ibid., 44.

²⁴³ Ibid., 55.

²⁴⁴ Ibid

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 56.

²⁴⁶ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 58.

highlighted above, it took Grossman and her husband two years until they could emigrate to Australia because they did not have any relatives who could sponsor them. They were forced to go through Australia's general immigration system, which took time and required that they also be sponsored by a Jewish organisation.²⁴⁷ Their decision to travel to Australia by boat also extended their journey by five weeks.²⁴⁸ Grossman's decision to leave Europe is one which is commonly referred to by survivors. However, it is also possible that like Lowbeer, the birth of her son influenced her decision to leave the past behind and rebuild her life in a country where she believed she could safely raise her child. On December 20, 1950, Grossman and her husband, along with their newborn daughter left Europe and sailed for five weeks to reach Australia.²⁴⁹

After Fischer and her sister were liberated from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, they had to remain in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp for several months while Fischer recovered from typhus. However, when they returned to their pre-war home in Romania, they found that two of their sisters and one of their brothers had also survived. After she returned home, Fischer stayed with one of her sisters where she met her first husband, Stephen.²⁵⁰ Fischer and her husband left Romania in 1946 with false papers and with the intention of illegally emigrating to Palestine.²⁵¹ However, they were detained in Italy, and their papers were discovered to be false.²⁵² They stayed in Southern Italy in refugee camps for four years, from 1946 to 1950.

²⁴⁷ Australia's immigration policy, and response to the plight of the Jewish refugees in the post-war period will be discussed in the following chapter.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 58-59.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 58.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 43.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 44.

²⁵² Ibid

While living in the refugee camps, her husband had secured a job working for the International Refugee Organisation, helping to assist families emigrating to countries outside of Europe.²⁵³ Of her decision to immigrate to Australia, Fischer recalls that it was initially her husband's idea, she writes that: 'The propaganda for Australia was very positive, so he decided that was where we would go...as far away as possible.'²⁵⁴ Therefore, for Fischer, her decision to immigrate to Australia was a common one- to get as far away from Europe as possible and leave her past behind her.

Freadman has argued that many Holocaust survivors who chose Australia as their destination for emigration knew almost nothing about where they were headed. Similarly, Cohen has argued that Australia itself did not attract survivors- there was usually no emotional pull to emigrate there. Rather, it simply offered them with the quickest way out of Europe. This can be found evident particularly in Fischer's account when she recalls that her and her husband 'knew nothing about Australia'.²⁵⁵ Similarly, to both Lowbeer and Grossman, Fischer had also just given birth to her first child before she and her husband decided to emigrate.²⁵⁶ Like Grossman, Fischer and her husband had no family in Australia and therefore, they waited over a year before they left for Australia by ship and arrived in Sydney in early 1950.²⁵⁷

Understanding the historical context of the liberation period and how these three women have reflected on their liberation in their life narratives highlights that for these three survivors the liberation period was experienced as a continuation of their Holocaust experience. For women like Fischer and Grossman who were

²⁵³ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 46.

²⁵⁴ Ibid

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 47

²⁵⁶ Ibid

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 47-48.

liberated in Bergen-Belsen, it was a period characterised by disease and hunger. For women like Lowbeer who were liberated by Soviet forces, however, it was a period which posed new dangers, especially for female survivors who became victims of the Soviet troop's aggression and violence. Examining these women's accounts of the period between their liberation and immigration to Australia also sheds light on the different factors which shaped these women's decisions to resettle in Australia in the post-war period. It also highlights just how dramatically the Holocaust affected the lives of these women after liberation, in that they felt they had to escape to a country outside of Europe to be able to live their lives in the post-war period.

Chapter Four:

“Resettling and Rebuilding a life in Post-War Australia”

‘Starting a ‘new life’ was not something that happened overnight. For some survivor’s the process took many years.’²⁵⁸

By 1952, approximately 136,000 Jewish DPs had emigrated to the newly formed state of Israel, over 80,000 had emigrated to the United States, and another 20,000 had found refuge in other countries including Australia, Canada, Belgium and South Africa.²⁵⁹ As the quote above suggests the resettlement of Holocaust survivors in countries outside of Europe in the post-war period was not something which happened instantaneously when the war ended. However, this period of resettlement is often absent in survivor accounts of the Holocaust because of their similar narrative structures, which often results in survivor accounts ending with liberation.

The historian Sharon Cohen has noted that survivors when telling their stories, usually focus on their wartime experiences and hardly devote much time or consideration to telling the reader about their post-war lives.²⁶⁰ Similarly, Nina Fischer has argued that even though most Holocaust survivors became migrants, they rarely include their migration experience in their life writing.²⁶¹ However, the three accounts which are examined in this thesis do not end with liberation and

²⁵⁸ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 136.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 192.

²⁶⁰ Cohen, “Choosing a Heim,” 44.

²⁶¹ Fischer, “Writing a Whole Life,” 393.

provide us with a window into an aspect of the Holocaust survivor experience which is often absent in survivor accounts.

To understand Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer's accounts of the experiences they had migrating to and resettling in Australia in the post-war period it is vital also to understand the contexts within which they arrived. Therefore, this chapter will first chart the history of the Australian government and the Australian public's responses to the plight of the European Jews before, during, and after the Second World War. This chapter will examine all three women's accounts of their arrival in Australia and will argue that the process of arrival could be experienced quite differently by survivors, depending on whether-or-not they already had family residing in Australia.

Holocaust survivor's experiences of resettlement in countries outside of Europe in the post-war period has not only been overlooked in survivor accounts of the Holocaust but has also been neglected in historical scholarship in which scholars tend to end their general histories of the Holocaust with the liberation of the Nazi camps. This chapter will discuss this oversight and the limited amount of scholarship available which does address this aspect of the survivor experience. This chapter draws on this literature and will argue that in their accounts, each woman describes and frames their resettlement experience in post-war Australia as being characterised by both challenges and successes.

Australia's response to the plight of European Jews before, during and after the Second World War

The historian Michael Blakeney has argued that the major underlying influence which affected Australia's response to the plight of the Jewish refugees before the

Second World War was Australia's unwavering commitment to the 'White Australia Policy'.²⁶² After the Australian colonies decided to become a federation in 1901, one of the first pieces of legislation that was passed by the Australian government in that same year was the "Immigration Restriction Act". This legislation was specifically designed to limit non-British migration to Australia. By doing so, the Australian government believed they would be able to affirm the superiority of the white race while at the same time preserving the British composition of the Australian nation.²⁶³

As part of the act, there was a section which prohibited the immigration of any person into Australia who failed a dictation test of around fifty words in 'any European language', which could be administered at the discretion of a customs official.²⁶⁴ Although it was not explicitly outlined in the act itself, the dictation test was designed to be given to non-white immigrants, especially those of Asian descent and the implementation of the test became known as the 'White Australia Policy'.²⁶⁵ To complement this policy of exclusion, the Australian government encouraged the migration of the 'right sort' of immigrants.²⁶⁶ The 'right sort' of immigrants were white British migrants who were assisted to come to Australia through the introduction of assisted passage schemes which began in 1914 and continued until the onset of the Depression in December 1930.²⁶⁷ The significance of this legislation was that it established the perception that Australian immigration policy was a racial matter and became significant regarding the plight of European Jews in the 1930s. The Australian government regarded Jews as a separate race and therefore forced

²⁶² Michael Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees, 1933-1948* (Sydney: Croom Helm Australia, 1985), 24.

²⁶³ Ibid., 28.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁶⁵ The Australian government was particularly concerned about Asian immigration after the advent of the gold rush in the 1850s had seen an influx in Asian migration to Australia. See: Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, 23-24.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 29.

²⁶⁷ Ibid

them to sit the dictation test, which was later combined with the requirement of landing money to limit the admittance of Jewish refugees, without the overt appearance of racism.²⁶⁸

Until 1936, in Australia only ‘alien’ immigrants with 500 pounds in their possession, or dependent relatives of Australian residents, were allowed to enter Australia.²⁶⁹ However, due to the intensification of anti-Semitism in Europe, and the improvement of economic conditions after the depression, there was a gradual relaxation in the government’s immigration policies.²⁷⁰ The landing money for ‘aliens’ was reduced to 50 pounds in 1936, and the Australian government agreed that if a Jewish refugee did not have a family member in Australia who could sponsor them and their passage, then a Jewish organisation could act as their guarantor instead.²⁷¹

In April 1938, the Jewish-refugee problem in Europe worsened as a further 180,000 Jews came under Nazi rule after the Anschluss with Austria. However, to limit potential refugee immigration, the Australian government introduced a quota in June of 1938, that limited refugee immigration to 5,000 people per annum.²⁷² In July 1938, Australia was one of thirty-two countries to be invited by American President Franklin D. Roosevelt to attend a conference in Evian, France to discuss the plight of the European Jews and create an international committee which would facilitate the flow of refugees from Nazism.²⁷³ However, at the time of the Evian conference, the Australian government decided not to alter its alien immigration

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 29.

²⁶⁹ Ibid

²⁷⁰ Ibid

²⁷¹ Ibid

²⁷² Andrew Markus, “Jewish Migration to Australia 1938-1949,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 7, no. 13 (1983): 19.

²⁷³ Suzanne D. Rutland, “Australian Responses to Jewish Refugee Migration Before and After World War II,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 31, no. 1 (1985): 32.

quota which had been introduced in June. They believed that it would be too difficult to try and absorb large numbers of refugees without affecting the positions of Australian workers and that the influx of a large, separate ethnic minority into Australia could create racial tensions.²⁷⁴

The small number of Jewish refugees who did manage to immigrate to Australia immediately before the Second World War faced hostility when they arrived. This hostility came from both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities in Australia who were not critical of the Jews because they were refugees but because they were foreigners.²⁷⁵ The xenophobia which characterised the White Australia Policy was also reflected in the anti-refugee sentiment held by many non-Jewish Australians. These Australians opposed the admission of large numbers of non-British immigrants because they feared it would undermine Australian living standards.²⁷⁶ They were fearful of the economic competition which the refugees posed at a time of economic hardship in Australia. The effects of the Depression resulted in the feeling among Australians that the admission of refugees would increase unemployment and threaten their job security.²⁷⁷

Similarly, Australian Jews were concerned that the refugees would jeopardise their position in Australia.²⁷⁸ They feared that an influx of non-English speaking Jewish migrants could lead to a rise in anti-Semitism and therefore, Jewish leaders welcomed restrictions on Jewish immigration to Australia.²⁷⁹ However, the Jewish community expected the refugees who did arrive to adjust to the 'Australian way of

²⁷⁴ Ibid

²⁷⁵ Rutland, "Australian Responses to Jewish Refugee Migration Before and After World War II," 36-37.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 39.

²⁷⁷ Ibid

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

²⁷⁹ Ibid

life' immediately. Every boat that arrived was met by an official from the Jewish Relief Welfare Society, which had been established in 1937 and given the main responsibility for Jewish refugee resettlement in Australia.²⁸⁰ The refugees were expected to settle in their new country quickly, adopt Australian customs and become 'assimilated' into Australian society as quickly as was possible. In a widely circulated pamphlet produced by the Welfare Society and given to Jewish refugees upon arrival in Australia, it stated that:

Above all, do not speak German in the streets and in the trams. Modulate your voices. Do not make yourselves conspicuous anywhere by walking with a group of persons all of whom are loudly speaking a foreign language. Remember that the welfare of the old established Jewish communities in Australia, as well as of every migrant, depends upon your personal behaviour...You, personally, have a very grave responsibility.²⁸¹

By 1939, around 7,200 Jewish refugees had already arrived in Australia.²⁸²

However, the outbreak of war in 1939 ended the flow of refugees, and during the war the Australian government refused to respond or act upon calls from the Australian Jewish community when they asked the government to assist European Jews who were trying to escape persecution.²⁸³ Suzanne Rutland has argued that the Pacific war radically changed attitudes within Australia, and those in government believed that Australia had to 'populate or perish'.²⁸⁴ In July 1945, Arthur A. Calwell was appointed Australia's first Minister for Immigration, and for the first time in the history of Australia, non-British immigrants were both encouraged and assisted to immigrate to Australia.²⁸⁵ However, as Andrew Markus and Margaret Taft have noted, this new type of immigration was not to be allowed to change the national

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 31.

²⁸¹ Hilary L. Rubinstein, *Chosen: The Jews in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin Australia, 1987), 177.

²⁸² Suzanne D. Rutland, *The Jews in Australia* (US: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 57.

²⁸³ Ibid., 58.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 59.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 60.

character of Australia and these 'new Australian's' would have to adapt to the 'Australian way of life' quickly.²⁸⁶

Soon after Calwell was made Minister, he met with leaders of the Australian Jewish community and he agreed to introduce a Humanitarian Immigration programme. As part of the programme, 2,000 survivors of concentration and forced-labour camps would be admitted into Australia if they had a family member who was already living in the country and who could sponsor them and their journey.²⁸⁷ However, the announcement of this programme was met with hostility which closely resembled the anti-refugee and anti-Jewish sentiment which had arisen when Jewish refugees were arriving in Australia before the war.²⁸⁸

Anti-refugee articles and cartoons were published in Australian newspapers, and it was claimed that Jewish migrants were receiving preferential treatment over returned servicemen and women in securing passage back to Australia.²⁸⁹ In response to this public criticism, Calwell announced that Jewish passengers could make up no more than twenty-five percent of passengers on ships travelling from Europe to Australia, and this policy was soon after applied to those travelling by plane.²⁹⁰ Considering the growing anti-refugee sentiment, Calwell announced on January 23, 1947, that the Humanitarian programme would be terminated, explaining that the government had issued as many landing permits as it could on a 'humanitarian basis'.²⁹¹

²⁸⁶ Andrew Markus and Margaret Taft, "Postwar Immigration and Assimilation: A Reconceptualization," *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 234.

²⁸⁷ Rutland, *The Jews in Australia*, 60.

²⁸⁸ Suzanne D. Rutland, "Resettling the Survivors of the Holocaust in Australia", *Holocaust Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 36.

²⁸⁹ Suzanne D. Rutland, "Subtle Exclusions: Postwar Jewish Emigration to Australia and the Impact of the IRO Scheme," *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 10, no. 1 (2001): 52.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

²⁹¹ Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, 305. In July 1947, Calwell on behalf of the Australian government entered into an agreement with the International Relief Organisation (IRO), where

Despite Australia's reluctance to admit Jewish refugees and the restrictions they placed on Jewish immigration after the war, some 17,000 Holocaust survivors immigrated to Australia not as refugees but as migrants between 1946 and 1954.²⁹² They were forced to apply through Australia's general immigration policy. To do so, they had to possess skills which were required in Australia, be nominated by an Australian resident and had to have the finances to pay for their own passage and living costs once they arrived.²⁹³ As a result, of this post-war Jewish immigration the Australian Jewish community doubled in size, growing from 23,533 in 1933 to 48,436 in 1954.²⁹⁴

Arrival in Australia

Lowbeer, Fischer and Grossman were three of the 17,000 Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Australia in the post-war period. When they arrived in Australia, Lowbeer was twenty-four years old, and Grossman and Fischer were both twenty-six. All three women devote a considerable portion of their life narratives to describing their lives in Australia in the post-war period. Grossman's account is the shortest of the three women. However, she still devotes ten pages to detailing her post-war life. Both Lowbeer and Fischer's devote over fifty pages to describing this time in their lives. All three women begin this section of their accounts by describing their arrival in Australia, and their search for accommodation and employment. This is then followed by detailed descriptions of the experiences they had while trying to establish

Australia would accept 4,000 European displaced persons (DPs) in 1947 and a further 12,000 on assisted passages. When the scheme was announced, Jewish leaders in Australia believed that it would help to facilitate the immigration of Jewish refugees to Australia however, of the 200,000 people who were admitted into Australia as part of the IRO scheme between 1947 and 1951, it is estimated that only around 500 were Jewish. For more information see: Rutland, "Subtle Exclusions: Postwar Jewish Emigration to Australia and the Impact of the IRO Scheme", 50-66.

²⁹² Ibid., 50.

²⁹³ Ibid

²⁹⁴ Ibid

themselves in their new country of residence and the challenges and success they had in doing so.

Lowbeer, Grossman, and Fischer all arrived in Australia between late 1948 and early 1950, and by this time the hostile reception and anti-refugee sentiment which Jewish immigrants had been subjected to both before and immediately after the war had begun to decline. The resumption of British immigration to Australia and the popular acceptance of large-scale immigration to promote the economic development of Australia had seen both anti-refugee and anti-Semitic feeling decrease among the Australian government and public.²⁹⁵ However, the experience of arrival in Australia could still be quite different for those Jewish survivors who already had family residing in Australia and those who did not.

For Lowbeer, her experience of arrival in Australia was a positive one and as such is framed in her account as a time characterised by excitement. She and her family arrived in Sydney at night, and she recalls that:

The city was lit up and it was a breathtaking sight for us. Our hearts were filled with excitement- we were on the threshold of a new life...At the airport our relatives met and greeted us and...drove us to our new home which they had prepared for us- a downstairs flat in a duplex.²⁹⁶

As the above quote illustrates, Lowbeer's arrival in Australia and the positivity and excitement which she attributes to it can largely be attributed to the fact that upon arrival she and her family were not alone. They were greeted by familiar faces, and when they arrived a new home had already been established for them.

However, the experience of arrival in Australia was quite different for those Jewish immigrants like Grossman and Fischer who did not have any relatives already

²⁹⁵ Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, 311.

²⁹⁶ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 52.

residing in Australia. After the immigration minister Arthur A. Calwell ended the Humanitarian Immigration scheme for Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in August 1947, the Australian government refused to provide any funds for Jewish immigration.²⁹⁷ Jewish immigrants had to pay for their transportation and have their accommodation guaranteed by sponsors who were usually family members already residing in Australia.²⁹⁸ However, the Australian Jewish Welfare Societies in both Sydney and Melbourne directly sponsored some of the refugees such as Grossman and Fischer who had no relatives living in Australia and required assistance to emigrate.²⁹⁹

The Welfare Societies took on the responsibility of meeting newly arrived Jewish emigrants when they arrived in Australia and finding them accommodation.³⁰⁰ However, what this meant was that survivors like Grossman and Fischer were not greeted by family but by strangers. They were often placed in hostels or hotels where they had to wait until they could find employment. In her account, Grossman recalls that when she and her family arrived in Sydney harbour:

Jewish volunteers were lined up in their cars to take people off the ships and drive them to hostels or hotels. When our name was called we went down the gangway and met our volunteer...We were taken to a hotel which I hated and knew we could not stay there.³⁰¹

When Fischer and her family arrived in Sydney, they too had a similar experience. However, Fischer's account of arrival also sheds light on the kinds of

²⁹⁷ Rutland, *Resettling Survivors of the Holocaust in Australia*, 39.

²⁹⁸ Ibid

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 41-42. Lacking the sufficient funds that were needed, the absorption of Jewish immigrants into Australia in the post-war period became a collaborative effort, between both local and overseas Jewish organisations. Under a scheme called 'The Australian Immigration Project', overseas funding for Jewish emigration to Australia was supplied by the 'American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), The Refugee Economic Corporation, and the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society.'²⁹⁹ See; Rutland, *Resettling Survivors of the Holocaust in Australia*, 42-46.

³⁰⁰ Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, 307.

³⁰¹ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 59.

people in the Australian Jewish community who were actively assisting and helping European Holocaust survivors immigrate to Australia. When they arrived, Fischer and her family were greeted by a Jewish man from Romania who had lost his family during the Holocaust. She recalls that:

When we arrived in Sydney we were met by a man named Siegelek. He had sent us our papers to come to Australia. I don't know what connection we had to him. He then took us straight to a boarding house near Central Station. He asked if I had any money and when I replied no he gave me 10 pounds...He was a very good man, like a saint. He sent permits for Australia to many people even before he knew them.³⁰²

Rebuilding a life in Australia

Today there is a very limited amount of scholarship which examines Holocaust survivor history in the Australian context. Most of this literature largely focuses on the Australian government's immigration policies regarding Jewish DPs and the Australian public's responses to these policies.³⁰³ Therefore, at present there is little scholarship available which examines and addresses the types of experiences Jewish DPs had when they arrived and attempted to rebuild their lives in post-war Australia. This oversight is not unique to the Australian context. In general, there is very little scholarship which examines Holocaust survivor's experiences of resettlement in countries outside of Europe in the post-war period.

³⁰² Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 48.

³⁰³ See; Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees, 1933-1948* (Sydney: Croom Helm Australia, 1985). W. D. Rubinstein. *The Jews in Australia* (Australia: Australasian Educa Press Pty Ltd, 1986). Suzanne D. Rutland, "Australian Responses to Jewish Refugee Migration Before and After World War II," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 31, no. 1 (1985): 29-48. Suzanne D. Rutland, "Subtle Exclusions: Postwar Jewish Emigration to Australia and the Impact of the IRO Scheme," *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 10, no. 1 (2001): 50-66. Suzanne D. Rutland, "Resettling the Survivors of the Holocaust in Australia," *Holocaust Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 33-56.

The historian William B. Helmreich has argued that our knowledge about the post-war lives of survivors is truly at a low level.³⁰⁴ In 1998, Helmreich attempted to address this gap by examining how survivors adapted to American society both economically and socially. In 2006, the historian Beth Cohen attempted to shed light on the more difficult and challenging aspects of Holocaust survivor's experiences of resettlement in America in the post-war period in her book *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America*.³⁰⁵ Although these two scholars work has focused on the resettlement experiences of Holocaust survivors in the American context, there are areas of this research which overlap with the Australian context.

In her discussion of Holocaust survivor's experiences of arrival in America in the post-war period, Cohen argues that that the process of settling in a new land was multilayered and complicated, and not always a narrative of triumph.³⁰⁶ Similarly, and more recently, the Australian historian Nina Fischer has argued that it is a commonly held notion that the Holocaust survivor experience in Australia in the post-war period was a positive one.³⁰⁷ However, like Cohen, she suggests that is important that we examine survivor accounts which challenge this assumption and provide us with a more complex understanding of the survivor experience in Australia.

In their accounts, Grossman, Lowbeer and Fischer all discuss the difficulties they faced when they first tried to establish themselves in Australia, and they frame this time in their lives as challenging. After Grossman and her family arrived in

³⁰⁴ William B. Helmreich, "Against All Odds: Survivors of the Holocaust and the American Experience," in *The Holocaust and History: the known, the unknown, the disputed and the re-examined*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (US: Indiana University Press, 1998), 760.

³⁰⁵ Beth Cohen, *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America* (US: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁰⁷ Fischer, "Writing a Whole Life," 402.

Australia, they were housed by the Australian Jewish Welfare Society in a hostel. However, Grossman soon set out trying to find her family more permanent accommodation. Cohen has argued that although the Jewish relief organisations tried to take control over the immigrant's destination once they arrived in America, some newly arrived immigrants would not allow the organisations to control their fate.³⁰⁸ Like in the American context, some newly arrived survivors in Australia like Grossman, were also determined to be in control of what happened when they arrived, however, this was not always an easy task.

The second night after they arrived in Australia, Lowbeer and her family were eating at a restaurant, and the waiter told them that a local taxi driver was looking to rent out his house.³⁰⁹ Grossman went by herself to inspect the accommodation, however, when she did the taxi driver also demanded that she pay him a large sum for the furniture in the house, which she did.³¹⁰ However, when she tried to sell the furniture to a secondhand dealer, she found out that it was worthless, and discovered that the house needed urgent repairs.³¹¹ In her account, she recalls that:

I realised that we had no hot water as the pipes were old and no gas was coming through them and the water was dirty. I needed a plumber who told me he could only work Saturdays and Sundays. Of course I did not know that you had to pay more for these days and we paid dearly for our inexperience.³¹²

Similarly, for Fischer, the first difficulty she faced upon arrival was also finding permanent accommodation. Soon after their arrival, she and her family began renting a house in Sydney. However, they could not afford to pay the rent which was required and therefore were forced to sublet the other rooms in the house, and she

³⁰⁸ Cohen, *Case Closed*, 44.

³⁰⁹ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 60.

³¹⁰ Ibid

³¹¹ Ibid

³¹² Ibid., 61.

and her husband and their daughter all lived in one small bedroom.³¹³ She writes that: ‘we lived there for about a year. There were four families and only one bathroom, one kitchen, and one toilet which was outside. I don’t know how we did it.’³¹⁴

Unlike Grossman and Fischer, Lowbeer already had family members living in Australia who helped her and her family to establish themselves when they arrived. For Lowbeer, the first major challenge which she was faced with was adapting to a new way of life. She writes that:

That first year was very difficult indeed. We had to overcome a lot of problems. For instance, back home I had been very spoilt, and when my first baby arrived it wasn’t necessary for me to do a single thing...Here in Sydney, I had to become a cleaner, a cook, a washerwoman, a mother, a wife, a daughter, and I had to be good at everything as well. So, it really was a challenge.³¹⁵

Cohen has argued one recurring theme in the documents of the American Jewish relief organisations is that many Holocaust survivors who arrived in America in the post-war period expressed a lack of purpose and had trouble finding meaning in their life after what they had been through.³¹⁶ However, the common thread that binds these survivors together is that they were people who had lost their families during the Holocaust and were on their own when they immigrated to America. Despite the challenges which they initially faced upon arrival none of the three women whose accounts I have examined in this thesis ever express that they felt a lack of purpose. However, it could well be that this was because all three women had managed to rebuild their families to some extent in Europe after the war. Therefore, when they immigrated they were all accompanied by their husbands and newborn

³¹³ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 49.

³¹⁴ Ibid

³¹⁵ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 54.

³¹⁶ Cohen, *Case Closed*, 119.

children, and when they arrived, they were determined to continue the rebuilding of their lives and families which they had started in post-war Europe in the Australian context.

In both Grossman and Lowbeer's accounts, their purchase of a house appears to signify a turning point in their resettlement in Australia. It is also accompanied by the women's integration into their local communities and appears to represent the start of the 'new beginning' which they had travelled to Australia for. Each of the women frames this experience in their accounts as an important moment which for them represented their transition from newly arrived immigrants to 'New Australians'. For example, after Grossman and her husband purchased their first house, she recalls that:

I was very happy and things were going well for us. I had another son, Gary, and was beginning to enjoy a wonderful social life. We were going on picnics and having barbecues with friends.³¹⁷

Similarly, when reflecting on her and her husband's purchase of a brick house on a corner block in Leichhardt in Sydney, Lowbeer writes that:

Life had really begun for us now. We made friends with our neighbours, and used our English daily...the children adopted the new culture quickly and were introduced to vegemite and peanut butter.³¹⁸

Sharon Cohen has argued that for many survivors who chose to emigrate to countries outside of Israel and live in the diaspora, their sense of 'rebirth' could also be derived from their achievements in their personal lives.³¹⁹ These could include the creation of families, professional success, achieving financial security, strengthening the diaspora, or engaging in activities that they believed made a difference in the

³¹⁷ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 63.

³¹⁸ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 58.

³¹⁹ Cohen, "Choosing a Heim: Survivors of the Holocaust and Post-War Immigration," 51-52.

world.³²⁰ This was true for Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer. Despite some of the initial challenges which the three women had to overcome upon arriving in Australia, they do not dwell on memories of struggle or hardship but instead, devote the end of their life narratives to celebrating and highlighting the successes they had in Australia and the contributions which they believe they made to Australian society.

All three of the women ran successful Australian businesses in the post-war period. After her first husband's death, Grossman remarried in 1960 and together with her second husband they owned and ran a successful grocery store in Sydney.³²¹ When Lowbeer and her family moved to Leichhardt after their arrival, they established a broom-making factory at the rear of their house, and when they moved to Strathfield in Sydney in the 1960s, they closed the broom factory and purchased two grocery stores which they operated together.³²²

Not long after Fischer arrived in Australia, she began sewing and selling clothes at Paddy's Market in Sydney and later at Wollongong markets.³²³ Her business became so successful that she later opened a children's wear shop in Bondi Junction and later sold her handmade children's clothes to major Australian department stores including David Jones and Grace Bros.³²⁴ In the early 1970s, after leaving her husband, Fischer remarried, and with her second husband, they purchased land in the countryside, where they lived for the next thirty-two years and owned and operated an extremely successful pub in the centre of town.³²⁵

³²⁰ Ibid

³²¹ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 66.

³²² Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 69.

³²³ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 61.

³²⁴ Ibid., 63.

³²⁵ Ibid., 74-78.

In their accounts, Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer all depict the Holocaust as an important and life-changing event in their lives. However, they choose not to end their accounts with their liberation but to show how they overcame the difficulties of the Holocaust survivor experience and rebuilt their families, homes and lives in Australia in the post-war period. By doing so, they bear witness not just to the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War but also to the full and successful lives which they led in its aftermath.

Therefore, it is within this context of 'rebirth' that all three women authored these accounts of their lives and as such all three of them also end them with moments of self-reflection during which they attempt to make meaning of the horrors which they have both been witness to and have overcome. Grossman writes that: 'I did my very best in the most difficult of circumstances and I hope to be remembered as an honest, independent woman who loves my family above all.'³²⁶ Whereas, both Lowbeer and Fischer finish their accounts by attributing their lives and their past experiences to forces outside of themselves. Lowbeer writes that:

The saddest thing in my life is the acceptance of who perished and who survived the Holocaust. The way I thought about it was that they were destined to die and I was destined to live.³²⁷

Fischer has the most positive outlook of all three women and ends her account by concluding that:

I just wish to say that looking back, reliving the past whilst writing my book, I feel honoured to have lived through and survived the many things I did. I wouldn't wish to have changed anything it was bitter, sweet and beautiful. I believe and it is comforting to believe that we have a path which we each have to follow. Don't fight it, let the current take you with it. Have peace within yourself. When it is my time to give a bow, I will say "Ha ha...that was fun."³²⁸

³²⁶ Grossman, *Survival: My Destiny*, 68.

³²⁷ Lowbeer, *My Pink Glasses*, 108.

³²⁸ Fischer, *The Seed that was Sown*, 113.

Conclusion

In 1998, the historian Sarah Horowitz authored the article ‘Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma’ and argued that ‘the rarity of women’s voices is striking in contemporary discourse about the Holocaust’.³²⁹ However, she went on to note that this is not because female survivors of the Holocaust have failed to produce diaries, memoirs, journals, novels and vignettes.³³⁰ During the Holocaust, women wrote in ghettos, and in hiding, and some even managed to do so in Nazi concentration camps.³³¹ Since the end of the Second World War, women have continued to publish their recollections and reflections of the Holocaust, and many have made a deliberate and concerted effort to record their experiences by partaking in programs like the Sydney Jewish Museum’s ‘Community Stories’ program.

However, today survivor accounts of the Holocaust authored by women are still referred to less frequently than male-authored accounts, and they often fall out of print much sooner, making them much more difficult to obtain.³³² Women’s stories and experiences have yet to be completely incorporated into the historical narrative of the Holocaust and are still not central to the representation of the ‘typical’ Holocaust experience. Today, the most well-known survivor accounts of the Holocaust still tend to be those authored by men with the most notable examples being the survivor accounts of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi.

James Young has argued that ‘in regarding the pain of women, we often split these women off from their lives, deaths, stories and experiences.’³³³ According to

³²⁹ Horowitz, *Women in Holocaust Literature*, 369.

³³⁰ Ibid

³³¹ Ibid

³³² Ephgrave, “On Women’s Bodies,” 27.

³³³ James Young, “Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory,” *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (2009): 1778.

Young, women have become symbols of victimisation, innocence and resistance but he argues that these ultimately overshadow the stories women might wish to tell about themselves.³³⁴ By employing a life history approach to examining female-authored survivor accounts of this Holocaust this thesis aimed to give back a voice to a group of people whose accounts, experiences and stories have often been forgotten, fragmented and obscured in the historical narrative of the Holocaust.

By examining the accounts of Grossman, Fischer and Lowbeer as whole texts, this thesis could show the complex and varied ways in which these three women have constructed their memories of the past in the present, and how their Holocaust experiences and present role as a survivor of the Holocaust has shaped their life narratives. Examining these women's accounts of their childhoods in the pre-war period revealed how all three women have reflected on this time in their lives by employing a nostalgic mode of remembering. By doing so, each woman could both reconstruct a past which had been destroyed during the Holocaust and at the same time, reconstruct memories of this past which have since been tainted by their Holocaust experiences.

This thesis also showed the specific ways in which these women experienced and reflect upon their Holocaust experiences. In their accounts they convey that they not only experienced the Holocaust as Jews but also as Jewish women. The events which they choose to recall in their accounts shed light on the gendered nature of the Nazi persecution of the Jews during the Holocaust. However, examining these women's accounts of their wartime experiences also demonstrates the difficulties that these women face in retelling these traumatic experiences in the present. To do so, they must distance themselves from the emotions which they experienced during

³³⁴ Ibid

this period, and as a result, their accounts of this time in their lives are characterised by a striking emotional silence.

By examining these women's accounts of their experiences of liberation, this thesis demonstrated how these three women experienced the liberation period as a continuation of their Holocaust experience. The experience of liberation, along with their wartime experiences, were so rupturing that all three women decided to immigrate to Australia in the post-war period so that they could rebuild their lives far away from the shadow of the Holocaust. Analysing Grossman, Fischer, and Lowbeer's accounts of their experiences in Australia in the post-war period sheds light on an aspect of the Holocaust survivor experience which has largely been overlooked in historical scholarship. It reveals that the migration and resettlement experience could be experienced quite differently by each survivor and that survivors had to overcome considerable challenges before they could enjoy successes in their new home country.

There was no one universal Holocaust experience, and no two-people experienced or reflect back upon the Holocaust in the same way. Therefore, the three women whose accounts have been examined in this thesis cannot be representative of the experiences had by all Jewish female survivors of the Holocaust, nor are they representative of how all Jewish female Holocaust survivors have constructed their life narratives. However, by examining the life writing of these three women this thesis has been able to shed light on not only how they have reflected upon and constructed their wartime and Holocaust experiences but also showed how they have reflected upon and constructed their pre-war and post-war lives into one life narrative.

By examining these women's accounts as whole texts using a life history approach, this thesis has also demonstrated the importance and benefits of

examining Holocaust survivor history in the Australian context. By examining all three women's accounts of their post-war lives in their life writing, this thesis could shed light on an aspect of the Holocaust survivor experience which is generally overlooked. Doing so has added to our knowledge of how some Jewish Holocaust survivors experienced resettlement in countries outside of Europe in the post-war period and the challenges they faced in trying to rebuild their lives and families in a new and foreign country as both survivors of the Holocaust and as migrants.

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