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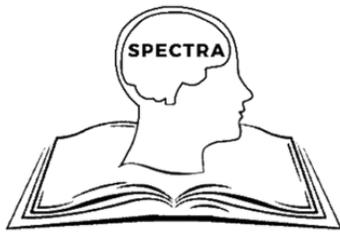
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Welcoming Assistants: Changing Perspectives of Jewish Workers in the Holocaust
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Welcoming Assistants: Changing Perspectives of Jewish Workers in the Holocaust

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Abstract

This article examines how the Jewish community redeveloped its perspective towards Jews that assisted the Nazis in the Holocaust. These ‘assistants’ include those the Nazis either forced or coerced into helping complete their genocide. It argues that in the time since the Holocaust, survivors moved from a negative opinion of these Jewish workers to understanding their situation and allowing the recording of their survival stories along with other victims of the Holocaust. In examining contemporary works such as diaries or journals and the memoirs survivors published years later, these changed emotions reveal themselves as the victims began to write about workers of the ghettos and the camps in lighter tones. These changes in perspective towards Jewish assistants reveal the community’s willingness to expand the historical recording of their experiences and concentrate on Nazi Germany as the singular perpetrators of the Holocaust. In recognizing this change, historians can perform more research into the overall Jewish experience of the Holocaust as other survivors no longer silence these important voices.

Keywords: Holocaust, Jewish workers, Ghetto, Camp, Nazi Germany, Genocide

“But to have the slightest inkling of what happened in that man’s heart you cannot. Rather, from time to time you may turn your eyes heavenward as if reflecting, ‘And what would you have done?’”

-Günther Anders (Graif, 2005, p. 2)

Shortly after Adolf Hitler’s Nazi troops stormed into Poland, the Jewish people began to feel the wrath of what they eventually called the Shoah. In the years prior to Germany’s mobilization, the nation already passed numerous antisemitic legislations, known as the Nuremberg laws, within the bounds of their own country and illegal annexations. Due to these legislations, the Jewish people of Poland, and

eventually the other nations conquered, expected antisemitic treatment from the Nazis. However, many of the Jews failed to expect their own people to involve themselves in the scheme entitled “The Final Solution to the Jewish Question” ([Reitlinger, 1961, p. 7](#)). While the full outline of this plan was a few years away from creation, the preliminary steps of the Shoah started almost immediately after the outbreak of World War II. The Nazis brought in legislation that diminished the rights of anyone with Jewish lineage and forced them into ghettos. Within the barbed wire of these city sections, the Germans took away more of their rights and made a practice of beating and killing those who stepped out of line. Eventually the Nazis finished developing their Final Solution and the people of the

ghettos unwillingly boarded trains where they asked themselves “Where are we going? What awaited us?” ([Willenberg, 1989, p. 37](#)). The Nazis never told them that these trains led to concentration and extermination camps. The deportation to death accounted for the largest aspect of the six million count Jewish murder known as the Holocaust.

Historians commonly examine the various steps of the Final Solution, but the way that Jewish people themselves aided the Nazis in perpetuating their genocide remains an underexplored aspect. These “Jewish assistants,” or those who were forced or coerced into collaborating with the Nazis, only recently started telling their stories of the Holocaust and adding their personal accounts to the several others that already existed. These assistants include the Jewish Police, Jewish Council, Sonderkommandos, and Kapos. With more evidence of how these people acted arising, many of their surviving victims spend more time evaluating their emotions towards those that placed them in their dire situations. This is not to say that the Jewish community turned a blind eye to this issue for all this time, but more to comment on how the more years that pass allow a greater opportunity for surviving victims to consider the stark contrasts of how they felt towards Jewish assistants at the time of the Holocaust compared to the decades after. This article examines contemporaries of the Holocaust and the memoirs that the few survivors wrote years after to argue that there is a positive change in how Holocaust victims viewed Jewish workers during and after the Shoah. The organization of this article is chronological, with sections two and three focusing on how contemporaries viewed assistants in the ghettos and camps respectively. By contrast, sections four and five focus on how postwar memoirs of life inside and outside of the camps depicted these workers. In following this structure, the changes in emotional themes of these victims are more evident.

In order to understand the complexities of survivor emotion towards Jewish assistants, the various roles of Jewish assistants require an explanation first, beginning with those inside of Jewish ghettos. Within the Nazi created sections of the city, the Jewish Council, or *Judenrat*, and the Jewish Police functioned as the largest occupiers of Jewish collaborationists. Upon the decision to create ghettos, Nazi leaders called upon Jewish community leaders and established them

as the Jewish Council, responsible for all functions of the ghetto, as if they were their own city. Shortly after, Reichskommissar Hinrich Lohse gave the directive that “Jews can be enrolled in a police force to maintain internal order” ([Mikhman, 2011, p. 107](#)). From the beginning, Nazi officials ensured they held control over who could serve on the Jewish Council and all operations of the police, including their responsibilities and allowed use of equipment. Other Jews trapped within the walls of the ghetto quickly recognized the two groups “[carried] out the criminal orders” of the Nazis and labeled them as “subservient” ([Birenbaum, 1996, p. 6](#)). This included the handling of deportations, spreading anti-Semitic legislation, and carrying out of punishment for those who broke Nazi law. Abraham Lewin documented that these tasks “persuaded a lot of Jewish policemen to request to be released from duty,” demonstrating the questionability of their responsibilities ([Lewin, 1989, p. 112-3](#)). Soon after, Lewin called those that failed to request leave “lawless” and “bandits.” The control the Nazis exerted over the forces and the tasks they needed to complete created ample contention within the ghetto, as demonstrated with these remarks. This created the set-up for the highly documented relationship between ghetto assistants and Holocaust victims.

As the Nazis deported Jews to concentration and extermination camps, they needed new types of assistants, which led to the creation of Kapos and Sonderkommandos who fell under the control of the Schutzstaffel, or SS. Upon arrival to an extermination camp, the Nazis forced all Jews to line up and participate in a *Selektion*, where the camp doctor determined those permitted to live and those sent to the gas chambers ([Graif, 2005, p. 92-4](#)). A section of the living group dealt with another *Selektion* at which the Nazis chose them to enter the Sonderkommando Block, where they spent their days guiding other prisoners to their deaths in the chambers. These days consisted of twelve-hour shifts where they convinced other Jews to enter gas chambers disguised as showers, then cleaned the bodies by removing all valuables from them and transporting them to various crematoriums to dispose of the evidence. Survivors with memories of interacting with the Sonderkommandos recognized how “experienced” and “robotic” they acted as they rushed those not chosen for death away from the crematoria. Kapos, on the other hand, possessed the

most power a Jew could within the camps. Often the most senior prisoners of the camp, the Kapos took charge over other prisoners and forced them to continue their work. This position oversaw groups of “thirty to forty men,” divided up their tasks, and made sure they “did their work properly” ([Rubinstein, 1983, p. 120](#)). While many of the Jews within a concentration or extermination camp completed only busy work for the Nazis, the Sonderkommandos and Kapos completed the duties necessary for the Final Solution to work.

Considering the atrocities committed by Jewish assistants, it comes as no surprise that Jewish people refused to hear their stories for years after the Holocaust. Why is it that after all this time, the community now listens to these stories as much as they listen to those who existed entirely as victims in the Final Solution? As Abraham Dragon describes, many of those who worked as a Jewish assistant “didn’t” and could not “tell a soul” ([Graif, 2005, p. 178](#)). For years, the narrative of these people remained silent due to the resistance of Jews wanting to open themselves to the subject. The recognition of silence in Holocaust survivors has often been studied as one author discusses recovered case files from the Holocaust that show “how little anyone listened” ([Cohen, 2006, p. 117](#)). While this phenomenon has been taken into account for the community as a whole, historians have not acknowledged the change towards Jewish assistants specifically. Regardless, Jewish assistants eventually told their story and the perceptions towards them developed into broader ideas as the community moved further from this tragedy and saw the potential for repetition all around the world. Focusing on a selection of Holocaust accounts, both by the assistants and those who fought for their lives under them, this article offers an evolutionary timeline depicting these complex emotions. By providing a moment in the time passing since the devastation of the Final Solution, each of these stories allow for the Jewish community to remember the true narrative of the Jewish assistant among the rest. With each present emotional theme this article examines from these writings, one must ask themselves, “And what would you have done?” ([Graif, 2005, p. 178](#)).

Jewish Contemporaries in Ghettos

Many Jewish contemporaries harbored deep hatred for those Jews who assisted the Nazis in carrying out the Final Solution. The few diaries and journals that survived the Holocaust often characterize the Jews who assisted the Nazis in executing their plans as below the rest of the community. Six Jewish diarists were chosen for this section based on their regular engagement in discussing Jewish assistants through their writings. Recorded by these diarists, assistants in the ghettos received vilification through gossip, public labeling, and, most damagingly, record writing. Within the Warsaw Ghetto, the head of the Jewish Council, also considered the ghetto mayor, Adam Czerniakow, described the community’s outlook towards him in mentioning that “extraordinary rumors” circulated the ghetto claiming his “suicide” whenever the Nazis arrested him or other members of the *Judenrat* for a short time ([Czerniaków, 1982, p. 199](#)). Czerniakow often wrote about the evident convictions the community held against his acts in his diary entries. These first bits of contemporary documentation from the Warsaw Ghetto mayor demonstrate how clearly the community displayed their sentiment. Further, Stanislaw Adler, a member of the council, discussed how people treated him as a lawyer, mentioning that “there was hostility in the Jewish Council” towards people of his position considering they “had suffered the greatest deprivation from the war” ([Adler, 1982, p. 14](#)). As practitioners of the law, the Nuremberg Laws targeted these types of people primarily as it ensured their ability to lawfully execute the situation. Due to this, many lawyers had little place to turn other than the Jewish Council as it was the closest they could come to practicing law. Together, the vilification of these two assistants establishes the rather evident views that Jews held towards their neighbors during the Holocaust.

As the Nazis thrust Jews into controlling positions within various ghetto governments, other Jews in the ghetto quickly wrote about their perception of the Jewish Council’s abuse of their powers. The council themselves recognized their incredible amounts of power in the ghetto as Czerniakow wrote in his diary, “The *Judenrat* is going to be the sole self-governing authority with the *Obmann* as a mayor,” just before acknowledging he would take the *Obmann* role himself ([Czerniaków, 1982, p. 206](#)). Whenever a leader finds that they possess too much power, it is likely the people underneath them thought this much earlier in

time. As the sole governing authority, one diary entry describes how the council profited immensely from their positions as “everyone had to report to them” ([Grynberg, 2002, p. 33](#)). The referrals to doctors and the exams doctors of the council performed for people cost immense amounts of money. However, due to their carrying out of Nazi orders, the Germans only permitted them to perform these practices. This gave them all the autonomy to decide the cost of their services and who could receive it. The community did not hesitate to call this an abuse of power. The largest form of power abuse by the council, however, remains their control over the Jewish Police. This organization held responsibility for the most crimes against the community, at the direction of the council as they had “absolute subordination” to them ([Adler, 1982, p. 30](#)). The council positioned the police as guards for the ghetto, as Czerniakow created the 1,000-man force, tasked with closing the borders at the Nazis’ and the council’s discretion. As the council forced Jews to remain in the ghetto and move homes whenever the borders grew tighter, the community continued to document the abuse.

After all, the council and Jewish Police controlling the borders was actually their first step in assisting the Nazis with the deportation process. This process acted as one of the largest causes of Jewish hate towards these groups. The Jewish Police, assisted by the “officials of the Jewish community wearing white armbands,” held responsibility over the “round-ups” of Jews to send on trains to the camps ([Lewin, 1989, p. 137](#)). The diary of Abraham Lewin discusses how they collected people “all day” and “[abused] those who [were] rounded up,” depicting the violent nature of how they chose Jews for deportation. Rather than simply loading them onto the cars, the people of the community wrote how they watched the police brutally force them into deportation. Some of the Jews hid from the police over fear of how they controlled this process, as Oskar Rosenfeld’s diary explains how “Police come again in the night, tearing people from their beds” if they are easily found ([Rosenfeld, 2002, p. 55](#)). While the community held a natural fear for the Nazis keeping them captive, they acted just as terrified of the Jewish Police – their own neighbors. The organization selected those placed on the trains, often in this manner of complete brutality. The diaries of those who survived in the ghetto long enough to watch what

happened to others built an easily identified fear that they wrote about. Perhaps some of the fear that they held was not only due to the brutality of the deportations, but from the secrecy of it as well.

As some victims spent longer amounts of time within the ghetto, they learned more of the secrets the council and police hid from them in regard to how the deportation process worked. Czerniakow knew that “6,000 people must be provided” to trains for deportation and that it would be the minimum “daily quota” for the council to reach ([Czerniaków, 1982, p. 384](#)). However, those who the police took in the first roundups lacked the knowledge of how many the police would take each day. Only as time went on could the remaining ghetto inhabitants discover the ubiquity of these evacuations. Among this, the council and police provided no information as to where the Jews headed on the trains. Rosenfeld asks, “People chased as they were found onto trucks holding three hundred people and taken away, whereto?” ([Rosenfeld, 2002, p. 142](#)). The mystery of the camps and where the trains went left a severe distrust for the Jewish Council and Jewish Police. Considering the lack of openness, the community held no reason to believe in the integrity of their leaders. Some diaries, such as Lewin’s, guessed the result of their deportation: “Jewish policemen (a few dozen) and a small number of Germans lead a crowd of 3,000 Jews to the slaughter” ([Lewin, 1989, p. 151](#)). However, this guessing only invoked more fear into the community as the truth remained shadowed from them until they arrived at the camps themselves. The amount of distrust created from the secrets of deportation reveals itself rather profoundly in the diaries, contributing to the idea of hatred towards Jewish assistants in the ghettos.

The control of the deportation process also led the Jewish Police into stealing from the community, creating another crime for others within the ghetto to document in their diaries. After sending their fellow community members on trains to their deaths, the police ransacked their homes, taking whatever they could for profit. Rosenfeld documented how “Jewish policemen took gold and jewelry, and ‘saved’ private children” ([Rosenfeld, 1982, p. 130](#)). By “saving” private children, Rosenfeld meant that the police took sums of money from the richer families in the ghetto in exchange for leaving their children out of the next round-up. They stole from the community members

not only by taking their belongings, but by making them pay for their lives. However, the police utilized the life purchasing for adults as well, as Rosenfeld's diary elaborates, "Jewish Police robbed [victims] during outsettlement and at the same time made it possible for many to be saved" (p. 196). As long as the police made their profit, the willingness to let a life survive another round of deportation existed. However, the theft eventually ended as these families ran out of money to provide in exchange for their lives. The people documented other aspects of crime in the community as well; after every round-up, while searching for objects of value, the police would destroy the homes of the people who just left. In the Lodz ghetto, Lewin describes how "The Jewish Police have been looting, breaking open flats, emptying cupboards, smashing crockery and destroying property, just for the fun of it" (Lewin, 1989, p. 156). While the assistants argued the need for objects of value to survive in the ghetto, those who watched the police destroy property for no purpose had their hate fueled by it. The diarists of the ghetto failed to come up with a decent reason as to why the police behaved in this manner.

As the Jewish people lived under the conditions that their own neighbors forced upon them, they expressed a deep hatred and confusion towards the members of their own community that they felt perpetrated the Nazis actions. The police held responsibility over the entire ghetto liquidation process. If they refused to round up their fellow Jews, some suppose that more lives might have survived the war. Without their assistants the Nazis lacked the time necessary to remove the same number of Jews entirely on their own. Ainsztein writes how "there can be no doubt about the hideous part played by the 2,000-strong ghetto police in facilitating the Nazis' Final Solution" as they made the deportation process' efficiency possible (Ainsztein, 1979, p. 6). Further, the council possessed complete control over the actions of the police, as Czerniakow admitted. While the police determined their own methods, the council provided the directive of beginning the deportation process. Regardless of blame for this most heinous crime, the recognition of the profit each of these groups made off of their fellow Jews contributed greatly to the reasons diarists wrote about their hate for them. This hate developed so far that eventually Lewin documented, "Today leaflets were distributed against the Jewish

Police, who have helped send 200,000 Jews to their death. The whole police force has been sentenced to death" (Lewin, 1989, p. 162). The community decided that rather than letting their own people sentence them to death, they would react against the police as if they were the Germans. In Lodz, it happened as just that. Those who had given up faith on the police "carried out a large-scale massacre in the streets" (p. 181). At the time of their assistance to the Nazis, Jews could not have hated the Jewish Police and Council more.

Jewish Contemporaries in Camps

Prisoners of the various camps also resented the actions of Jewish assistants, so much so that they labeled those working in the Sonderkommando as murderers despite their lack of choice. In each of their oral histories, six Jewish assistants from the camps described how their campmates treated them within the camps and shortly after their release. While the Jews were perhaps predisposed to hate anyone who followed a Nazi order due to their battles with the Jewish Police, it did not make the treatment of Sonderkommandos any less harsh. One Sonderkommando survivor, Josef Sackar, describes how he "avoided looking [his victims] in the eye" as "Everything [he] said was a lie" (Graif, 2005, p. 109). He sensed that the people he ushered into the gas chambers knew of their impending doom, causing his own guilt for actions beyond his choice. He knew they labeled him as a murderer. After all, those outside of the camps did not hesitate to provide the same label. Abraham and Shlomo Dragon mentioned that when they became liberated, no one would listen to their story as he tells, "They must have thought that we'd been the murderers, that we'd murdered those people with our own hands, that we are the guilty ones, and that we committed those crimes at our own initiative" (p. 179). In the first years after the Shoah, Jewish assistants found it nearly impossible to document their experiences as people labeled them as such immediately upon their release. Another survivor, Eliezer Eisenschmidt, discussed his inability to talk about the "murders" or "cremations" himself as the people around him found it to be "inconceivable" to discuss as they associated "murder" with him instead (p. 283). While the Holocaust was a fresh historical event, Sonderkommandos lacked ability to express their own pain as the people around them determined them as the criminals themselves.

Regardless of job within the camp, everyone adhered to the word of the Kapo, who Jewish people considered the most wicked during their time in the camps due to his abuse of power. From the beginning, even those in the Sonderkommando who had a different experience discussed how “the Kapo at the camp didn’t look out for anyone but himself. He beat and abused everyone” ([Graif, 2005, p. 204](#)). While the Sonderkommando acknowledged their Kapos kindness, they knew the camp Kapos treated their men much worse. Regardless, even Sonderkommandos recognized how much power a Kapo possessed, as Ya’akov Gabai explained, “The head Kapo, the *Oberkapo*, was Ya’akov Kaminski. He was in charge of dividing up the work, a real pro.” With one Jew in charge of deciding the work of all others, that Kapo held immense power, ripe for abuse. Even outside of dividing tasks, they controlled how prisoners completed each task. In terms of Sonderkommandos moving people into gas chambers, the Kapos “told [them] what to say” (p. 100). Not only did they control the work of the concentration camp, but they controlled how victims would actually be put to death. At the time of their work, the Sonderkommandos under them and the other coalitions in the camps all recognized the obscene amounts of power a Kapo held over them. As some of the few able to write within the camps, the Sonderkommandos documented the abuse on behalf of the rest of the prisoners.

As the Sonderkommandos and Kapos carried out their responsibilities, the other camp dwellers labeled them as “collaborators,” ignoring the fact that these people were imprisoned themselves. The Dragon brothers describe how outside of the “murderer” claims, people “didn’t understand that we hadn’t chosen this terrifying ‘job’ for ourselves” ([Graif, 2005, p. 179](#)). In those few years right after the Shoah ended, those that did not use the murderer title took their approach a step further to call them collaborators based on this idea that they “chose” the position of a Sonderkommando. The memoir of Halina Birenbaum takes a step back to consider her thoughts towards the Kapo at the time of the Holocaust and states, “I wanted the *kapo* to realize that despite everything, her situation was far better than ours” ([Birenbaum, 1996, p. 153](#)). She recognizes that during her time within the camp, she felt the Kapo was a conspirator and received better Nazi treatment because of it. While in the camp,

Birenbaum both resented and “envied” the Kapos status of a collaborator in the camp. These comments developed from the practices of the Jewish assistants as some Kapos and camp leaders went so far as to swear their allegiance to the Nazis. In Treblinka, a leader by the name of Galewski made a vow where “He promised to obey all orders and instructions faithfully, to ensure order, and to adjudicate all disputes among the prisoners” ([Willenberg, 1989, p. 130](#)). With a statement like this, victims in the Treblinka extermination camp lacked evidence for the idea that the camp elder was not a collaborator. During the period in which Kapos held their positions, their own words allowed the other prisoners to label them in this way.

Many Kapos and Sonderkommandos fostered the ill-will of other prisoners by employing violence in the conduct of their work. Sackar admitted that as they forced Jews into gas chambers, he often beat the victims “to speed them up” as several of the Jews sent to the chambers “could not undress by themselves” ([Graif, 2005, p. 103](#)). He used violent methods on those already sentenced to a violent death. However, the abuse the Sonderkommandos created existed due to what they received. Sackar recalled his own treatment at the time, stating, “The Kapo and the foreman hit people who didn’t work the way they liked” (p. 107). His decision to abuse the victims carried on from the abuse he received, depicting the never-ending cycle. This provides reasoning as to why the first few years after the Holocaust many other Jews refused to hear the stories of the Kapo and Sonderkommando. Regardless of their defense, the groups chose violent methods to execute their tasks. This provided all the reasoning necessary for survivors of the Holocaust to dismiss their narratives from the more contemporary writings and wait to introduce them until long after in memoirs. It also did not help the Jewish assistant’s case that other survivors of the camp endured Kapo abuse as well. Almost every memoir from a camp survivor includes an example of a violent Kapo, including Samuel Willenberg’s, where he recalls the foreman telling him, “Now, get to work fast before I whip you” ([Willenberg, 1989, p. 50](#)). As memoirs began to discuss the actions of the Kapos and foremen more often, their quotes from the actual event regularly portray them in a negative light as these actions come from the actual period of the Holocaust.

Despite the Nazi camp guards forcing and determining the roles of camp Jewish assistants on complete chance, the Jewish people who told their stories made their disgust toward the assistants a centerfold of their narratives. While the control of the SS made diaries from the camps rare in existence, the testimonies from Sonderkommandos in regard to their daily practice and perception from after the war reveal the original sentiment towards them. Additionally, earlier memoirs' resistance to discuss these Jewish assistants, as well as the material they introduce as fact in regard to the assistants, work to demonstrate the negative emotions held towards them. Whenever a diarist quotes an assistant, they usually portray them in a much dimmer light, as seen with Willenberg's recollection of oaths to the Nazis and work orders from the Kapos. The resistance to listen to Sonderkommando and Kapo stories still exists as Sackar mentions, "Even today, they don't believe it when you say you worked in the Sonderkommando and came out of it alive" ([Graif, 2005, p. 119](#)). The Jewish community largely ignores the narrative of Jewish assistants within the camps due to the discomfort of their memories. The Dragon brothers recalled that no one even asked for their story until the 1960's. While expressed in a different way than those who took on the role of a Jewish assistant in the ghettos, the sentiment towards those within the camps remained rather dark during the Holocaust and the first few years after.

Jewish Memoirs on Ghettos

As the Shoah ended, the survivor memoirs that poured out revealed a much more complex relationship between victims and Jewish assistants than previously described with the contemporaries from the actual event. Rather than quickly identifying these people as collaborationists with the Nazis, memoirs offer a softer approach to these people. In regard to Mayor Czerniakow, Stanislaw Adler's memoir, *In the Warsaw Ghetto*, called him "a man of crystal clear character but weak convictions" rather than labeling him as a tyrant ([Adler, 1982, p. 14](#)). In her memoir, *Hope is the Last to Die*, Halina Birenbaum references the entire Jewish Council, recognizing that the Nazis "made the *Judenrat* responsible for the ghetto" and that they were "totally subservient" to the Nazis' demands ([Birenbaum, 1989, p. 6](#)). Each of these people made earlier recognitions of the awful position that Nazis

placed Jewish assistants in. As they distance themselves from the Holocaust, survivors refocus their blame away from their fellow Jews and onto the creators of the Final Solution themselves. The decent acts of the Jewish assistants are also a present within the memoirs, despite the ignorance contemporary works possess of this. Adler describes how "A few Jewish policemen try to treat the evacuees 'humanely'" ([Adler, 1982, p. 32](#)) Diarists almost never wrote of instances such as this one. From their start, the differences within how memoirs approach the subject of Jewish assistants compared to contemporaries is incredibly stark.

Survivors beginning to appreciate how the Jewish Police and Jewish Council acted as a buffer between them and the Nazis reveals itself as one of the primary themes of change in perception that the memoirs introduce. Adler's memoir describes the thought process of the Jewish Police from his perspective: "The consensus of opinion in the Jewish organization was that it was better to carry out the Germans' orders by ourselves and thus blunt the impact than to give Security Service men a free hand" ([Adler, 1982, p. 85](#)). Adler continues to characterize his reasoning for joining the assistants in the ghetto for a time himself, as he states they "exercised an influence on the selection of candidates and the militia's orientation." He held onto the philosophy that perhaps from the inside he could ensure the police remained just and righteous. After all, the Jewish people did recognize a need for a police force within the ghetto as the original job was to "keep order in the ghetto" similarly to how police function elsewhere ([Willenberg, 1989, p. 130](#)). In his memoir, *My Father's Testament*, Edward Gastfriend writes, "Some members of the *Judenrat* were well meaning at the beginning of the German occupation," displaying his new openness towards the council, and continuing, "They sincerely felt that the council could be a buffer between the Nazis and the Jews and perhaps alleviate some of the suffering" ([Gastfriend, 2000, p. 29](#)). However, the memoirs examine this part of their history where the police acted righteously, not only tyrannically as contemporaries represent.

Survivors' memoirs recognize how the Nazis began this dehumanization process incredibly early on, allowing those who thought of themselves as protectors of the other Jews to actually become the first victims.

Gastfriend's memoir recognizes how the Jewish Council was among the "first to become demoralized and dehumanized," especially considering their positions gave them the knowledge to learn the early results of Nazis winning the war ([Gastfriend, 2000, p. 29](#)). Their positions of knowledge led to a faster process of giving up that Jews did not recognize during the Holocaust due to the focus of their own suffering. Regardless of the knowledge, Jewish Police received direct beatings from the Nazis for "[treating] evacuees too well" as people moved into the ghetto during initial resettlement ([Rosenfeld, 2002, p. 32](#)). With the recognition of dehumanization present in the memoirs, reinterpretation of the few examples that are present in the diaries allows understanding of how the wickedness of the Jewish Police and Council grew from their dehumanization, not their actual malice. Adler's memoir traces other sources of dehumanization as he interprets, they were "motivated by an overwhelming desire to survive" and the benefits or "immunities" they received as Jewish assistants ([Adler, 1989, p. 85](#)). The Nazis offered them a better life than most in the ghetto, which quickly dehumanized them in the first period of the ghetto. With their lives used as bait to complete their work, survivors now see how the Nazis dehumanized the Jewish assistants in the ghetto faster than anyone else. Considering the ways in which many Jewish people reached their own survival, Jewish memoirs also reflect on how most Jewish assistants accepted their roles as a means of self-preservation. While many assistants suffered from dehumanization brought on by the Germans, these Jews still attempted to preserve themselves as well, unknowingly contributing to their own peril. Their work "[released] them from forced labour and from the overwhelming fear of the labour camps," creating the first benefit Jewish assistants from the ghettos received ([Adler, 1989, p. 11](#)). Adler's recognition of this first benefit in his memoir contributes immensely to understanding reasonings of becoming a Jewish assistant. The diaries of inhabitants of the ghetto failed to see these benefits as they concerned themselves more with their choice not to join the Jewish Police or the *Judenrat*. The escaping of deportation became an additional benefit despite how the assistants lacked choice in receiving it once it began. Gastfriend recognized the options that Jewish Police and Councilmembers, stating they could

"[refuse] to cooperate and face deportation and death or [refuse] to cooperate and commit suicide" ([Gastfriend, 2000, p. 89](#)) Even if Jewish assistants attempted to follow the path of arrest and deportation, the Gestapo often prohibited them, just as the Gestapo "instructed" Czerniakow "to stay in the office" during his attempt to leave with those arrested ([Czerniaków, 1982, p. 383](#)). However, the public lacked the knowledge of these instances of attempt to resist some of their benefits until the publishing of Czerniakow's diary. This allowed those who had yet to write their memoirs to adjust their view before publishing. The memoirists learned that the benefits to hopefully survive the war strongly motivated most assistants, creating a key aspect of sympathy in their work.

While the Jewish people thought little of it then, their memoirs reflect on how council members sometimes resisted the Nazis plans, choosing the path of suicide. This was the fate of the Warsaw Ghetto mayor, Adam Czerniakow. In Adler's memoir, he assumes that once Czerniakow learned the true plans of ghetto deportation, "the chairman of the Jewish Council swallowed a fatal dose of poison" ([Adler, 1989, p. 270](#)). While Czerniakow's diary provides no evidence into his final reasoning for committing suicide, survivors write about their suspicions, including this one. Birenbaum provides the same suspicion, stating that his suicide was a protest "against the deportations" ([Birenbaum, 1989, p. 54](#)). The act of speculation into his suicide underscores some of the sympathy that survivors hold towards him. Diarists, on the contrary, merely mention his suicide without ever interpreting meaning. While his suicide remains the most shocking, Czerniakow's was not an isolated incident. One diary entry from Lewin tracked eight different Jewish Police suicides ([Lewin, 1989, p. 141](#)). Regardless of counting, however, only the memoirs thought to consider the horrible situation Jewish assistants faced that forced them into taking their own lives. For many, once they fell too far into the process of the Final Solution, suicide existed as the only escape from their Hell on Earth. After all, if they did not take their own lives, many eventually discovered that the Gestapo already sealed their fates of deporting to a camp. Eventually, the Nazis only needed to deport the Jewish assistants to fully liquidate the ghettos.

The major mark of sympathy for Jewish assistants that arose within memoirs occurred due to

the realization that the Jewish Police and Council members eventually turned into victims as well. As Jewish assistants reached the camps, Gastfriend hesitates to describe their fates: "I later found out how members of the *Judenrat* were treated by the condemned inmates, but I would rather not reveal it" ([Gastfriend, 2000, p. 89](#)). Not only did the *Judenrat* become camp victims from the Nazis, but the people they sent to the camps took their turns and exacted revenge, making their experience harsher than others in the camps. Non-assistant Jews harmed them in many of the same ways. By the time the Gestapo nearly finished liquidating the ghettos, memoirists noticed that "the Jewish Council became deprived of nearly all its authority" and no longer served their purpose of a Jewish assistant ([Adler, 1989, p. 277](#)). Instead, the Gestapo began rounding council members up with every other Jew by the same Jewish Police they originally controlled. Regardless of status in the ghetto, every Jew took their turn as a victim within the camps. Birenbaum reflected and mentioned how the Jewish assistants lost their "willingness to carry out the Nazis' orders" and instead began to hate them and "wish to rebel and be revenged" just as the other Jews wished ([Birenbaum, 1989, p. 54](#)). While diarists ignore that the Jewish assistants of the ghettos eventually turned and tried to rebel as much as the other Jews, memoirists wrote about the change in their behavior and joining of the anti-Nazi movement. Unfortunately, however, it was often too late as the assistants already evacuated so many Jews.

While the survivor memoirs often acknowledge the crimes on humanity that the Jewish Police and Council committed, they recognize more of the situation the Nazis placed on ghetto assistants. These themes of recognizing the barrier the Jewish assistants provided, psychological determination of survival that led to self-preservation acts and dehumanization, and instances of their own deaths via suicide or by becoming victims themselves all present themselves in the reflected works of the Holocaust. The survivors re-examine the perception of the ghetto Jewish assistant to notice that while they made questionable choices, more of the narrative exists. Adler reflects on his position in one of the bureaus of the council to acknowledge his own wrongs, as well as evaluate the others, stating, "I do suffer with the others, I am sensitive to each wrong, but some kind of padding

softens the blow" ([Adler, 1989, p. 182](#)). His memoir, as many others do, look back to re-examine how even in the ghettos, the Nazis held responsibility of the true terror of the Holocaust. After all, in the end, the Gestapo left the *Judenrat* with few choices in their actions, as some suggest no other way existed. Gastfriend reveals, "I do not believe that it would have altered the outcome" had the members of the *Judenrat* refused to obey that Nazis orders ([Gastfriend, 2000, p. 89](#)). The deportation to concentration and extermination camps was inevitable, regardless of the role Jewish assistants played within the ghettos. Those who survived to write about it later provide a far different understanding of these groups than those who wrote their narratives at the time.

Jewish Memoirs on Camps

Turning towards assistants within camps, memoirs of the Holocaust recognize the methods that Nazis used to make the assistants victims themselves. Often the prison sentence of a Sonderkommando began with the threat of their lives. The memoir of Daniel Bennahmias recalls following a camp guard to the gas chamber after the slaughter of several thousand Jews where the Nazi told the group, "That's what I can do to you," followed with the command to "clear the cadavers" ([Fromer, 1993, p. 39](#)). As Bennahmias, as well as others, joined the Sonderkommando, Nazis left them with the threat that if they did not work, the SS would kill them using the same methods they used on the other Jews. This threat towards the Sonderkommandos left them as scared for their lives as much as every other prisoner of the camp, making them just as much of a victim. Erna Rubinstein's memoir, *The Survivor in Us All*, further characterizes the torture that Kapos underwent, describing how her specific Kapo "had been chosen to dig a grave for her parents and her sisters," a punishment emotionally worse than what most prisoners experienced ([Rubinstein, 1983, p. 125](#)). Her memoir recognized that this Kapo underwent intense victimization as she experienced terrible treatment just as everyone else. The Dragon brothers testimony adds to the victimization undergone by camp Jewish assistants in explaining, "Those who didn't want to work would be beaten and dogs would be set on them" ([Graif, 2005, p. 133](#)). Every other prisoner of the camp endured these threats of punishment, which placed Sonderkommandos and Kapos on the same

inferior level of the them. However, due to their silencing in the first years after the Holocaust, the community failed to hear these memories until much later.

In regard to the Kapos and foremen of the camps, survivor memoirs mention these assistants only avoided punishment from the SS by following their cruel methods. While they chose more of their work than a Sonderkommando, Nazis expected Kapos to do their jobs well in order to preserve their own lives. As Sonderkommandos lived under a Kapo themselves, they reflected on the motivations of these people as Sackar explains that “they had to do something to prove themselves to the Germans. It doesn’t mean that they always wanted to be that way,” despite the contemporary thoughts of Jews deeming them as wicked ([Graif, 2005, p. 108](#)). While Sonderkommandos can reflect on their own treatment, they also lived as victims of a Kapo and redeveloped their perspectives on those Jewish assistants as well. Discussions of the need for Kapos to make the “correct impressions” and display “surrender” to the Nazis reveal themselves throughout several memoirs. Willenberg recalled how after the Nazis killed a young girl in front of a crowd in Treblinka, the Kapos yelled at the prisoners to begin their work and take their focus away from the sight. However, he clarifies, “The noise, we knew, was not meant for us. It was the only possible way of protesting at what we had just witnessed” ([Willenberg, 1989, p. 80](#)). This suggests that Willenberg, years later, recognized that the Kapos as not purely wicked, but simply doing their jobs to avoid punishment from the Nazis for themselves and the crowd beginning to protest. While this kind of assistant appears wicked on the surface, survivors instead remember how these actions were all in an attempt to self-preserve.

As the self-preservationist acts continued from the Kapos and foremen, the other Jewish people unfortunately watched them become dehumanized faster than anyone else. Memoirs credit this as the reason camp Jewish assistants developed so much cruelty. Rubinstein’s Kapo, a young girl, was “dehumanized to such an extent” that her cruelty came as a result of receiving “a little more food and a bed” to herself ([Rubinstein, 1983, p. 124](#)). These basic needs for survival that inmates often fought over persuaded Kapos to perform their jobs well according to Nazi

standards as a way of ensuring better treatment. Survivors recognize how the Kapos' own fight for survival persuaded a faster dehumanization. Turning to the Sonderkommandos, Bennahmias describes how the group saw themselves as “living corpses,” further describing how “they are alive, but they are consigned to death with no possibility of reprieve” ([Fromer, 1993, p. 47](#)). The work the Sonderkommando completed broke them faster than most other work of the camp as they took care of the bodies of their fellow community members. The memoirists and interviewers that discuss with these types of survivors recognize the complicated circumstances they underwent as many still fight off the dehumanization they underwent. Ya’akov Gabai explains, “we saw the most terrible things of all. We did the dirty work of the Holocaust,” which characterizes the lasting effect of their prison occupations ([Graif, 2005, p. 205](#)). This recognition of the faster dehumanization process the Jewish assistants underwent in the camps allowed for survivors to alter their views and accept their experience into the larger picture of the Holocaust.

Regardless of the dehumanization that resulted in cruelty, memoirs increasingly document the instances of when Jewish assistants gave mercy to the other Jews. As all of the people in the camp suffered prison together, the Jewish assistants often provided advice or assistance to those who needed help to survive. Some memoirs describe the “tender and sensitive looks” received from the Kapos whenever the guards turned away, while also hinting to others to take certain prisoners to “under their wings” ([Willenberg, 1989, p. 58/121](#)). Willenberg even describes how the camp elder of Treblinka hinted his loyalty to the rest of the camp with a wink at the end of one of his speeches after the SS left the area. While contemporary Holocaust writers thought of the process as everyone for themselves, those looking back instead noticed the inter-Jewish collaboration efforts to survive. Some Sonderkommandos, like Gabai, went as far as to describe their Kapo as a “true friend” in their recollections ([Graif, 2005, p. 204](#)). Additionally, those the Kapos liked sometimes received gifts, as Birenbaum mentions, “Once she brought me a piece of bread, on another occasion an apple,” further explaining her Kapo had her own children of Birenbaum’s age at the time ([Birenbaum, 1989, p. 102](#)). These mentions of not only benevolence and

mercy from the Kapos, but information about their personal lives, characterizing them as human, find their way into memoirs, despite their lack of attention in contemporary works. The vilification of Kapos evolved into a deeper relationship between the regular prisoner and Jewish assistant.

Jewish memoirs also discuss how Jewish assistants played major roles in creating revolts against the Nazis, establishing perhaps the most unifying characteristic between themselves and prisoners. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Sonderkommandos created a major revolt against the Nazis. Due to their lack of participation, survivors hardly mentioned this in more contemporary works of the Holocaust, but Birenbaum mentions how “the news of the revolt of the *Sonderkommando* against the SS filled us with admiration and pride” (Birenbaum, 1989, p. 144). Given the time to reflect on movement against the guards of the camp, memoirists learned to recognize these acts of resistance, displaying the Jewish assistants' own distaste for their situation. Eliezer Eisenschmidt explains this described uprising as he mentions they prepared over “half a year” for it, creating “homemade mines and hand grenades” while collaborating with the women from other sectors of the camp to get supplies (Graif, 2005, p. 252). They created an impressive plan to liberate themselves and the other prisoners of the camp. However, this became another story unheard of for years due to the silencing of Sonderkommandos after the Holocaust. These explanations remained out of history far longer than ever warranted. These revolts were not unique to Auschwitz as Willenberg tells of the revolt resulting in successful escape from Treblinka. Those in the Sonderkommando block held responsibility over beginning the rebellion through signaling the camp via a burst of smoke from the crematoria. Willenberg describes the “overwhelming desire” to “obliterate the death factory” that the Nazis forced each of them to contribute to (Willenberg, 1989, p. 139). Once again, the brave actions against the Nazis in Treblinka remained silenced for years due to the Jewish assistants inability to share their stories. Only now are they able to add themselves to history books.

Despite the cruelty that Jewish people received from assistants within the camps, their memoirs turn back to sympathize with the ways in which they endured the prison themselves. Memoirists recognize

the words of Josef Sackar that all Jewish assistants in the camps understood: “disobedience could cost you your life” (Graif, 2005, p. 88). While some rationalize the situation with dehumanization and the deadly positions they endured as Birenbaum mentions her Kapo “didn’t even know why she did what she did,” others express understanding and reflect on the question of what they would have done in the same position (Birenbaum, 1989, p. 125). In a crisis such as the Holocaust, many must reflect on the fact that anyone would do anything to “improve their chances of survival” (Willenberg, 1989, p. 130). Lying on the steps of Death’s door every day persuades action unexplainable and, as the memoirs reflection on Jewish assistants in the camps make, unblameable. The Jewish assistants who worked in concentration and extermination camps underwent a period after liberation where they remained silent due to the issues surrounding their methods of survival in the camp. These memoirs demonstrate the fortunate change that they made for them, allowing historians to take their experiences within the camps and add them among the stories of the average prisoner. While forced actions within the camps remain unbearable, the understanding of these assistants' victimhood finally exists.

Conclusion

Jewish people continue to adjust their general sentiment towards those who assisted the Nazis with carrying out the Final Solution. While contemporary works remain in a shared negative viewpoint of Jewish assistants in the Holocaust, survivors continue to produce in order to share their stories. With every memoir created further from the events of the Shoah, the Jewish community develops more understanding towards these people. In the end many share the same sentiments toward the genuine perpetrators of the Final Solution – Nazi Germany. In one of the final insurrections against Nazis, taking place in the Warsaw Ghetto, Willenberg describes, “Down to the last man we thirsted for revenge, harbouring rage and murderous hate in our hearts” (Willenberg, 1989, p. 140). Regardless of status in the end of the many of their unjust prison sentences, Jewish people came together to bring justice against Nazi Germany. Gastfriend shared his final thoughts on the subject, stating, “I believe in justice, not revenge” (Gastfriend, 2000, p. 89). This characterized the widespread belief

that those who contributed to the Final Solution maliciously would face their consequences eventually. Those requiring punishment by the upholders of natural law would receive it. Regardless of belief in either justice or revenge, however, the existence of this desire to share the history of the Holocaust binds the Jewish community together. The diary of a young girl named Renia Spiegel exemplifies this as her boyfriend completes the last entry after her death, writing, “My dearest Renusia, the last chapter of your diary is complete” ([Spiegel, 2019, p. 273](#)).

This diary of Renia Spiegel provides an interesting final examination for historians to consider in that survivors are the only people able to write about Jewish assistants after the Holocaust. This leaves a grey area in recognition of the guilt survivors potentially possess themselves. As she and the six million other Jews lay in their final resting place, do they, too, find the place to rationalize actions of Jewish assistants and allow them in the recording of the Jewish experience? Perhaps the Jews that survived the Holocaust eventually found both acceptance and empathy for these people due to both their lack of complete victimhood from them and survivor’s guilt. While Jewish assistants may have harmed them, the hands of other Jews allowed these survivors to live on. Assistants continue their argument that “This is the German’s great crime” with the blood on their hands, but no one will ever know if the lives lost would agree ([Gastfriend, 2000, p. 172](#)). In truth, continuing the work to ensure a tragedy such as this never occurs again is all that can be done for these people. A Final Solution to the Question of any people cannot be recreated. Each survivor remains “tending some deep bruises and scars,” attempting to come to terms with the events of the past ([Graif, 2005, p. 179](#)). All of these survivors have had to learn to live on and ignore the everlasting questions of why they survived, and others did not. To spend time focusing on such would be a disservice to the latter as the work of ensuring “Never Again” would be lost.

While Jewish people still try to come to terms with the horrific events of the Holocaust, the changing perspective of the community allows for a more complete telling of the Jewish experience. Despite the questions of how the viewpoints of those who did not survive would change the history, the impact of the Jewish assistants’ narratives creates a larger picture of

how the Holocaust happened. In order to understand the functionalities of the Final Solution and how the Nazis perpetrated this genocide, historians must examine all aspects to reach a full understanding. Every aspect ignored becomes an aspect that may eventually repeat due to the failure of recognition. With these types of experiences, the Jewish community needed to forgive their own people so that history could develop its retelling of the event. Jewish assistants have recognized that the community eventually forgave them, as the Dragon brothers state, “We felt that people had begun to look at us in a different light” ([Graif, 2005, p. 179](#)). As collections among the rest of the narratives, the Jewish community has genuinely evaluated these Jewish assistants and declared them victims of the Nazis as well, expressing further empathy. While each victim and the remainder of the Jewish community is entitled to their own emotion, making the views held towards Jewish assistants far from singular, this research provides evidence of the community’s broader perspectives over time. By doing so, they opened the door for further study and work to prevent another tragedy of the same caliber. Now that these Jewish workers have shared their actions and other victims changed their perceptions, the question for all remains: and what would you have done?

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