WOMEN IN THE FOREST

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Whereas initially theoretical considerations lead me to believe gender would be insignificant during the Holocaust, empirical evidence about illegal life in the Belorussian forest points to significant gender differences which were particularly pronounced for Jewish women. This study examines the fate of Jewish women in the forests in different partisan groups and how it differed from that of other illegal forest dwellers. The findings call for an examination of the effects of gender during the Holocaust. Other suggestions are provided as to the meanings and implications of these differences.

As I grope for an understanding of the German destruction of European Jews I concentrate on compassion, mutual help, resistance, altruism, rescue, self-preservation and survival. Rare and easily overshadowed by the enormity of the Nazi crimes these expressions of human courage and human decency helped reduce the Jewish death toll. My study of the intricate connections between these special features of the Holocaust has a great deal of continuity. Even before I finish a research project it leads me into another one and then another one.

While following my research path, I have paid only casual attention to the differences in the fate of men and women. I knew, of course, that, here and there, the Germans halted the murder of Jewish men or women, particularly when they needed slave laborers for a special short lived goal. I also knew that these occasional interruptions in the murder of Jewish men or women did not affect the overall Nazi aim to totally annihilate all Jews. Similarly, I was aware that these occasional departures from the main Nazi policies of destruction failed to change the significant sub goal aiming at humiliating and degrading the Jews before putting them to death. As far as the Germans were concerned, in the end, all Jews were destined to die, regardless of any other characteristics, including their sex.

Joan Ringelheim, a philosopher and a feminist, was the first to advocate the study of the relationships between gender and the Holocaust. Sometimes referred to as the mother of this field, Ringelheim followed up her call for research with a special conference on women, and later, in 1983, with a publication, *Proceedings of the Conference, Women Surviving the Holocaust* (Katz and Reingelheim 1983). I was curious enough to read the papers which grew out of this conference and found them interesting. Yet,
familiarity with these papers failed to convince me that I should pay more attention to the topic. On the contrary, whenever the idea of gender and the Holocaust came up, I felt that since the Germans aimed at the total annihilation of Jews, regardless of sex, an examination of gender and the destruction of European Jews would yield only limited results. I assumed that in the devastating context of the Holocaust the effects of gender would be overshadowed by the Jewishness of the individuals and by the effects of other conditions such as cooperation, mutual help, resistance to evil, and other efforts of survival.

However, empirical findings from my (Tec 1993) most recent book, *Defiance*, alerted me to significant differences in the fate of men and women who refused to submit to the German terror by escaping into the forests. Findings about how different the life of Jewish women in the forest was from the life of Jewish men convinced me that it might be important to learn more about what happened to Jewish women during the Holocaust.2

Concentrating on the German occupation of Western Belorussia, now known as Belorus, findings from *Defiance* (Tec 1993) tell about women in the forest and about forest life in general. Much of Western Belorussia is covered by thick, jungle-like, partly inaccessible forests. Until 1939, the area belonged to Poland. By September 17, 1939, because of the German-Russian friendship treaty, it was transferred to the USSR. In less than two years, as a result of the German-Russian War, control over this territory switched hands. Under the German occupation these forests became a home for different kinds of fugitives and partisan groups. Eventually, Western Belorussia was known as an important center for the Soviet partisan movement. Women in general, and Jewish women in particular, fit in unusual ways into these forest environments.

The 1941 German attack upon Russia, a sudden massive onslaught, caused the collapse of the Red Army. Thousands of Russian soldiers escaped into the Belorussian woods. Many more surrendered to the enemy.3 Later, some of the Soviet POWS succeeded in fleeing into the Belorussian forests. There they met their comrades who had come earlier.

Referring to themselves as partisans, these former Russian soldiers operated as small splinter groups. Scattered throughout the forests, they lacked weapons, leaders and discipline. Rather than fight the enemy, these men would rob each other of anything they considered of value. Rivalry and greed would sometimes lead to murder. These early partisans rarely attacked the Germans. Whatever partisan attacks happened, these usually involved easy targets, one or two soldiers who might have strayed into partisan territory, or a single German truck that ventured into a deserted road. The inducement in such cases was the acquisition of arms and food. Partisan encounters with local peasants were usually limited to food collections and