

INTIMACY IMPRISONED:
INTIMATE HUMAN RELATIONS IN THE HOLOCAUST CAMPS

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Each person surviving the Holocaust has their own personal narrative. A great number of these narratives have been written; many have been published. It is important for personal accounts to be told by each survivor, as each narrative brings a different perspective to the combined history. Knowing this, I dedicate my research to the narratives I was unable to read, whether they were simply unavailable or, unfortunately, unwritten. More importantly, this research is dedicated to those whose stories will never be told.

In his book Man's Search for Meaning, Viktor Frankl states that a human being is able to withstand any condition if there is sufficient meaning to his existence, a theme which permeates the entire work.¹ For a significant number of people, the right to this search for meaning was denied by a Holocaust which took the lives of an undetermined number of European Jews, war criminals, homosexuals, Gypsies, children, and mentally or physically handicapped persons. This denial of humanness was an essential component of Adolph Hitler's plan to elevate the Aryan nation and rid the world of undesirables. In spite of laws which dictated human associations, through the triumph of the human spirit, certain prisoners of the Nazi ghettos, labor camps, and death camps were able to survive. Many of these survivors have graced the academic and public world with a written account of their experiences as prisoners of the Nazis. In these narratives, it is possible to isolate and examine one aspect of life which might have been a tool of survival. Intimate relationships are revealed and described with great clarity in these narratives, and provide the reader with a broad and enlightening snapshot of the human spirit, both positive and negative.

Human intimacy can be defined in a number of ways. Intimacy is first described as a close or warm friendship

¹ Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, 4th ed. (Boston:

which is a result of familiarity or physical closeness. The definition implies that this closeness arises from a sharing of similar circumstances or physical space. A second definition is a feeling of being loved and belonging together. A further definition is a usually secretive or illicit sexual relationship.² In the Holocaust narratives, it is possible to discover powerful examples of each of the above-mentioned forms of intimacy. The range of human intimacy is great: from sexual abuse, rape, and unlawful affairs to sexual desire or activity, physical closeness, love for family, and friendship. In some cases, this intimate behavior led to the death of the prisoners, but in many more cases such intimacy gave hope for the future and reason to believe in one's own survival.

The image of forced intimacy is perhaps most consistent with the widespread image of the deplorable conditions under which the Nazi's prisoners lived. While a number of authors have speculated that rape was fairly uncommon in the camps, actual instances of abuse and rape are mentioned frequently in the narratives. In addition, the fear of sexual abuse or rape was certainly apparent in the dialogue of the female prisoners and survivors.

Beacon Press, 1992),113.

² Princeton University WordNet, "Dictionary.com," [http://www.dictionary.com/cgi-bin/dict.pl?term=intimacy], 1997.

Sexual abuse by the German occupiers has been documented by a great many survivors. In the early days of the Warsaw ghetto, survivor Mary Berg described the cruelty of the Germans. She wrote, "They are beginning to kidnap young boys and girls to use in their nightmarish 'entertainments.'" She also described the body searches which were conducted, stating, "the women were kept naked for more than two hours while the Nazis put their revolvers to their breasts and private parts and threatened to shoot them if they did not disgorge dollars or diamonds."³

A similar, and more definitive, account from the Warsaw ghetto is related by Abraham Lewin. He recalls an early afternoon when approximately two hundred Germans, airforce, and other officers came into the ghetto and gathered a large number of Jewish men and women. In a nearby small courtyard, those chosen were forced to strip. They were paired off by the Germans, matching "young girls to old men, and conversely, young boys with old women" and were forced to commit sexual acts. These acts were filmed by the Nazis.⁴

Occasionally the abuse was designed merely to humiliate the prisoner. One such instance involved a German male

³ S. L. Shneiderman, ed., Warsaw Ghetto: A Diary by Mary Berg (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1945), 23, 46.

⁴ Abraham Lewin, A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto, ed. by Antony Polonsky, trans. by Christopher

political prisoner in a death camp who was caught sending love letters to a female prisoner. The *Schutzstaffel* (SS), elite Nazi German troops, intercepted one of the letters and at evening roll call the man was forced to "strip naked and run around the parade ground, stopping every fifty yards to masturbate at gunpoint."⁵

Often this forced intimacy was more violent in nature. A number of authors maintain that rape of the prisoners was rather uncommon, as German law forbade racial defilement through inter-racial coupling, especially with persons of the Jewish race.⁶ In spite of such laws, instances of rape were numerous, and not limited to women. It is also possible that many more rapes occurred than are reported, as many of the victims were murdered after the sexual assault to cover the crime. Also, some survivors indicated a hesitation to discuss these brutal occurrences.

These sexual assaults occurred in each level of occupation and imprisonment, and took place even among those who were in hiding. In an oral interview, a Jewish survivor named Pauline described being molested by the male members of the family who were hiding her and her family. She was

Hutton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell in association with the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, 1988), 71-72.

⁵ Eugene Aroneanu, compiler, Inside the Concentration Camps: Eyewitness Accounts of Life in Hitler's Death Camps, trans. by Thomas Whissen (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1996), 35.

⁶ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, eds., Women in the Holocaust (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 8.

only eleven years old at the time, and feared the threat of exposure if she related the incidents to her family.⁷ The uncle of another survivor told his young niece that he "had witnessed the mass raping of Jewish girls who were buried alive in mass graves that they had dug."⁸ This occurred in a forested area near their small village which was occupied by the Germans. Rape by the Gestapo was also documented in the Grodno ghetto,⁹ by German commanders in the Skarzysko camp,¹⁰ and by the SS in the death camps.

In the ammunition work camps at Skarzysko, one survivor relates that the German commanders "were reluctant to deprive themselves of any of life's pleasures" and individually and collectively raped Jewish inmates. Fritz Bartenschlaer, *Werkschutz* commander, frequently attended selections to choose women to serve at his dinners and be raped by the guests, including SS district commander Herbert

⁷ Joan Ringelheim, "The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust," chap. in Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 342.

⁸ Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender," chap. in Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 336.

⁹ Liza Chapnik, "The Grodno Ghetto and its Underground: A Personal Narrative," chap. in Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 113.

¹⁰ Ofer and Weitzman, 8.

Boettcher and Radom SS commander Franz Shippers. These women were then murdered.¹¹

In a 1946 oral interview with a survivor, it was apparent that the woman was uncomfortable discussing the rape of fellow prisoners. She did describe a German civilian foreman who occasionally raped Jewish workers and then shot them so there would be no evidence of race defilement. She also stated that rape was officially prohibited in the work camp, but many girls disappeared.¹²

Auschwitz survivor Ruth Elias stated her belief that the SS did not consider rape of Jewish women to be *Rassenschande* (race defilement), as the women were to die before the possibility of procreation. She described hiding in the upper tier of her bunk to avoid selection by drunken SS men who came into the block seeking sexual partners. To her knowledge, no woman offered resistance as the threat of being severely beaten was well known to the prisoners.¹³

Catholic priest Joseph Tyl described one SS guard at Auschwitz as a pervert and sex maniac who raped young Jewish

¹¹ Felicja Karay, "Women in the Forced-Labor Camps," chap. in Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 291.

¹² Donald L. Niewyk, Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 221.

¹³ Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope: From Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to Israel, trans. from the German by Margot Bettauer Dembo (Washington, DC: in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1998), 120.

girls and then killed them with pleasure.¹⁴ An Auschwitz report of the Russian section contains testimony that women and young girls who were healthy and pretty were selected by the SS guards and taken "to a special barracks where the SS guards raped them until they were half dead" and were then sent to the ovens.¹⁵

One difficulty in establishing the frequency of such occurrences is the hesitancy of some victims to discuss their treatment. One interviewer relates that three years after her initial interview of Susan, she visited the former Auschwitz prisoner in her home. In the course of normal conversation, Susan suddenly stated that she had been raped at Auschwitz. Susan then returned to the previous topic of conversation and did not chose to offer more information regarding her sexual abuse.¹⁶

There are also accounts of forced homosexual intimacies. Although Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code defined homosexuality as a criminal act, German officials in the camps considered "opportunistic" homosexuality, or homosexual activity by heterosexual guards lacking the physical availability of women, to be legal.¹⁷ Auschwitz survivor and physician Samuel Steinberg indicated that

¹⁴ Aroneanu, 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁶ Ringelheim, 341.

selected young male Jews were held in the camp for the Kapos who "used them to gratify their lust."¹⁸ The German penal code had no such law regarding lesbian activity.¹⁹

Henriette Carrier-Worms, also a survivor of Auschwitz, described women officers who took "their pleasure with Gypsy women, who then received special treatment," which was not always a favorable outcome in the death camps.²⁰ A German survivor of camp Zillertal in Riesengebirge described similar occurrences: "I think one of the SS women was a lesbian. She liked to invite young girls to her room. She was a young stunning woman."²¹

Rumors of rape were widespread, and one Jewish girl whose home was occupied by Nazi soldiers told her mother that she "feared rape more than death and wanted to take poison with her" as they left their home.²² Another Jewish woman used her knowledge of the sexual abuse of prisoners to entrap SS Sergeant Josef Schillinger. The woman saw that Schillinger was watching her excitedly as she exited the selection ramp, and she returned his gaze provocatively. As the guard reached for her, she twisted towards him, causing

¹⁷ Anton Gill, The Journey Back From Hell: An Oral History Conversations with Concentration Camp Survivors (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1988), 34.

¹⁸ Aroneanu, 31.

¹⁹ Gill, fn 13, 34.

²⁰ Aroneanu, 30.

²¹ Brana Gurewitsch, ed., Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 69.

him to drop his pistol. She picked up the pistol and shot him several times. She was subdued by other guards and sent to the gas chamber. Schillinger died of his wounds.²³ In a similar case, an Eastern European, Jewish female dancer performed a very seductive strip tease as she undressed to enter the gas chamber. Two SS guards drew close to her. She hit one guard with her shoe, dislodging his gun, and then fatally shot the other guard. In this case, the body of the dancer was left on display in the dissecting room for other SS men to view as a warning.²⁴

While it is impossible to determine the frequency of abuse and rape of Nazi prisoners, it can be assumed that another type of forced intimacy was much more common. Many prisoners chose to provide sexual intimacy for guards, or other privileged prisoners, who would then provide them some level of protection. Often this was a choice in word only, as the prisoners were generally unable to refuse. It should be clearly understood that this was not a question of morality, but a hope for survival.

Perhaps the best example of this type of forced intimacy can be seen in the accounts relating to the camp

²² Goldenberg, 336.

²³ Otto Friedrich, The Kingdom of Auschwitz (New York: Harper Perennial, 1982), 27-28.

²⁴ Filip Muller with literary collaboration by Helmut Freitag, Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chamber, ed. and trans. by Susanne Flatauer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1979), 87.

and ghetto brothels. Many of the women who lived in the camp brothels were selected upon arrival at the camp. Some were branded above their breasts as *feld-hure*, or field whores. Women who refused were occasionally given to the Ukrainian guards, who convinced the women through sexual torture that they should comply with the wishes of the SS.²⁵ Italian Jewish survivor Primo Levi described Block 29 *Frauenblock*, or camp brothel at Auschwitz, as being served by Polish Haftling women.²⁶ In Auschwitz, the camp brothel was known as the "puff" and was primarily reserved for the SS and select prisoners who had "earned chits for good behavior."²⁷ Survivor and physician Charles Cliquet described an Auschwitz brothel reserved for prisoners who had survived three years or more. With a note from a doctor, the prisoner was allowed to go to the brothel after roll call to purchase intimacy.²⁸

In some cases, these prostitutes were given not only protection from death, but other niceties and privileges as well. These women were allowed to grow their hair to longer lengths and dress in handsome clothes. French survivor, Fania Fenelon, describes a party the prostitutes at

²⁵ Donald Grey Brownlow and John Eleuthere du Pont, Hell Was My Home: Arnold Shay, Survivor of the Holocaust (West Hanover, MA: The Christopher Publishing House, 1983), 118.

²⁶ Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity, trans. from the Italian by Stuart Wolfe (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²⁷ Friedrich, 28.

Auschwitz gave for themselves. An orchestra was hired to play for the party, and the women, some dressed as men, danced, drank, and "pawed at each other" long into the night.²⁹ Although many women were spared death in the gas chambers through such behaviors, and some even granted their freedom, there was a price to pay after the liberation.³⁰ One such "collaborator" who earned her privileged position at Auschwitz by fraternizing with a ghetto commandant "won't talk about the camp because she survived the wrong way there, and for years afterwards she lived in mortal fear of reprisals against her, even though she was relatively innocent."³¹

Men were also forced into intimate behaviors in exchange for protection. Male Kapos and Block Chiefs often saved young boys from extermination for their own sexual pleasure. These boys, known as *Piepels*, were aware that their status was tenuous but were thankful for the prestige and freedom such status afforded them.³² Occasionally a prisoner was able to reject homosexual advances due to his own status in the camp. Rudolf Vrba, Slovak Jew who later escaped from Auschwitz, described his rejection of Block

²⁸ Aroneanu, 30.

²⁹ Friedrich, 44-45.

³⁰ Roy D. Tannenbaum as told to him by Sigmund Sobolewski, Prisoner 88: The Man in Stripes (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1998), 44.

³¹ Gill, 150.

³² Brownlow and duPont, 109.

Senior, Ivan the Terrible. Ivan tempted Vrba with food and drink, then suggested that Vrba should sleep in his large room. After Vrba declined, he attempted to protect himself from Ivan's anger by placing tin cans around his bunk. He wrote, "I knew he would not dare to murder me during the day because he realized I had powerful friends and would not be easy to handle anyway; but at night it was different...I was determined that I was not going to die in bed at the hands of a homosexual murderer."³³

Males were chosen not only for homosexual intimacy. Arnold Shay described his selection as a sexual partner for Lisa, a twenty-two year old, attractive SS warden. Shay was taken to Lisa's home, bathed and fed, and required to "satisfy Lisa's sexual desires." For a period of time, Shay was assigned work duties close to the camp so he would be available for such service. This occurred four or five times. He was then given the privilege of having sexual relations with women prisoners. His status was so high that he violently rejected the homosexual advances of Kapo Otto Locke without impunity.³⁴

Frequently the choice to barter one's sexuality was less institutionalized. In the Warsaw ghetto, Café Hirschfeld was a gathering place for members of the Gestapo

³³ Rudolf Vrba with Alan Bestic, I Cannot Forgive (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1997), 179.

who would purchase food for young girls who would pay with sexual favors.³⁵ In the Plaszow Concentration Camp, young girls used an empty barrack designated as a workshop during the day to provide sexual services to Jewish policemen with bread or sugar to trade. When asked why they prostituted themselves, the girls replied, "I don't want to die a virgin. If you knew what fun we have, you would do the same, what difference does it make what we do as long as we get extra food?"³⁶ Similar transactions are recorded for inmates at Bergen-Belsen.³⁷ This practice was so widespread among the prisoners that a couplet was sang about the girls behavior:

For soup, for soup
For a piece of bread
Girls will spread their ...
Just between you and me,
They'll do it even
When there's no need.³⁸

This practice was not limited to female prisoners, as one male prisoner at Auschwitz stated that he "made love to a Gypsy woman in order to get some food."³⁹ From a gender standpoint, his choice of words is interesting.

³⁴ Ibid., 119-120.

³⁵ Shneiderman, 89.

³⁶ Erna F. Rubenstein, The Survivor in Us All: A Memoir of the Holocaust (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1983), 102.

³⁷ Hanna Levy-Hass, Inside Belsen, trans. from the German by Ronald Taylor (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 59.

³⁸ Karay, 296.

³⁹ Gill, 389.

The SS and guards themselves often had unforced intimate relationships with other guards or prisoners. At the Skarzysko work camp, many such relationships were described between German workers and Nazi prisoners. While many prisoners knew of these illicit affairs, they did not report them to the authorities.⁴⁰ During a transfer of prisoners to Breslau, a male and female SS guard, had intimate relations in a corner of the train car filled with prisoners.⁴¹ Another intimate affair led to marriage after the war. Lucille E. related that the Jewish Kapo in her barracks at Auschwitz was rumored to have an SS lover who visited her small cubicle every night. The inmates were unsure as to the truth of this rumor, as the barracks were very dark at night. After the war, Lucille happened to see and talk to the same woman at a department store in New York. The ex-Kapo told Lucille that she and the SS man had married after he followed her from camp to camp as the war neared its end. She said they married because they shared the same past.⁴²

It should come as no surprise that the highest echelon of camp administration, wielding great power, had illicit affairs as well. These administrators and SS officers were drafted for concentration camp duty early in the war, after

⁴⁰ Karay, 289-290.

⁴¹ Niewyk, 320.

meeting stringent requirements for racial purity and behaviors uplifting the Aryan nation.⁴³ As larger camps were created, SS members who had experience in the smaller camps were transferred to a position of greater power. Some of these men were cautious in breaking German and camp regulations, as they did not wish to risk transfer from their elevated positions. Others, however, seemed to be above the law and acted as they pleased.⁴⁴ Rudolf Hoess, commandant at Auschwitz, is reported to have had an affair with an Italian prisoner named Eleonore Hodys. Hoess eventually tired of his lover and sent her to Block 11, where female inmates awaited death. When Eleonore discovered she was pregnant, Hoess was notified, and he ordered her to be gassed. Although another, more sympathetic officer, Maximilian Grabner, saved Eleonore from the gas chamber, she was later murdered by the SS in Munich.⁴⁵ Grabner's sympathy stemmed perhaps from the fact that he was under investigation for his alleged affair with a female prisoner.⁴⁶ The punishment for such illicit affairs was frequently a transfer to a more dangerous duty

⁴² Holocaust Oral History Project, "Lucille E.," [http://remember.org/witness/wit.sur.luc.html].

⁴³ Dr. Elie A. Cohen, Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp, trans. from the Dutch by M. H. Braaksma (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1953), 214-216.

⁴⁴ Robert Lewis Koehl, The Black Corps: The Structure and Power Struggles of the Nazi SS (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 166-167.

⁴⁵ Friedrich, 50.

station. *Rapportfuhrer* Gerhard Pallitzsch, investigated for an unlawful sexual alliance, was transferred from a small sub-camp in Brno, Czechoslovakia to an SS unit in Hungary, where he was killed near Budapest.⁴⁷ Even for the SS, intimacy had its cost.

Perhaps more contradictory to the common conception of everyday camp life, and even more important to the quality of camp life and the inner desire to struggle for survival, were the intimate sexual relationships that occurred among the prisoners themselves. While a number of noted researchers and survivors have suggested that the drive for food and the resulting constant state of malnourishment overshadowed the desire for sexual fulfillment, the survivor narratives are filled with instances of intimate sexual thoughts and desires.⁴⁸ It is important to note that this sexual activity was not always positive, with some unusual sexual activity occurring perhaps as a result of the intolerable stress the majority of the prisoners were living with in the war time conditions. Even so, in most cases the intimate relationships between prisoners were loving and hopeful.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 26, 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 63

⁴⁸ See Dr. Elie A. Cohen, Human Behavior in the Concentration Camps. Also, this subject is explored in Anton Gill, The Journey Back From Hell: An Oral History Conversations with Concentration Camp Survivors.

In an examination of these intimate behaviors among Nazi prisoners, it is once again important to leave unquestioned the morality of those who chose to engage in such behaviors. This non-judgmental approach is best explained by the inmates themselves. One male inmate questioned, "What do I, barely twenty one, know of complex morality? Inside the camp, this love was very positive: gratitude in the midst of agony. ... In the abyss, our few seconds of love gave meaning to an existence otherwise lacking all purpose."⁴⁹ Another inmate stressed the desire to live life to the fullest, seizing every opportunity for human experiences. She wrote, "The desire for human closeness and touch, for physical love was especially strong. It was amazing that even in our state of constant malnourishment this longing for love was so powerful. Love meant life."⁵⁰ Physical intimacy was an attempt by some to reestablish their humanity in a very desperate situation.

This desire for physical intimacy is evidenced in every type of Nazi imprisonment, even in those who were forced into hiding by Nazi occupation of their villages or countries. Most people are familiar with the budding romance and sexual tension between Anne Frank and Peter which she tenderly described in her well known diary, Anne

⁴⁹ Tannenbaum, 47.

⁵⁰ Elais, 99.

Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl.⁵¹ Anne Franks' post-humus step-sister Eva related another story from hiding in Amsterdam, where she and her brother, Heinz, shared a small attic room. She wrote,

In the darkness I would creep over to his bed and climb in next to him for a cuddle. We started kissing and hugging with the joy of being together again, until all our suppressed energy and budding sexuality began to arouse us. The kissing and cuddling became more and more furtively pleasant. We would start to pet each other, feeling blissful surges of adolescent love. We did not really do anything wrong and we were very scared that our parents would find out what we were up to, but we could not help ourselves. We only had each other to love.⁵²

These were not ordinary times, and many other young people, unsure of their sexuality, probably had similar experiences which have not been committed to writing.

Another group who were not actual Nazi prisoners, but whose lives were significantly altered by the Nazi imprisonment of their states were those who joined partisan groups. Intimate relationships had special significance in these groups. The Russian partisan units roaming the Belorussian forests were comprised of only two to five percent women, most of whom were Jewish. Christian women generally joined the unit to remain with a man she loved.

⁵¹ These romantic feelings and desires are throughout the diary, Anne Frank, Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, trans. from the Dutch by B. M. Mooyaart-Doubleday (N.p.: Otto Frank (Anne's father), 1952, New York: Pocket Books, 1972.

Jewish women, however, attempted to join the group to avoid deportation and death. The only realistic means for joining the Russian partisan units was to provide sexual intimacy to the male partisan members. In most cases, the men 'married' these women, and the women gained status equal to the stature of their 'husband.' Unfairly, the men considered all these women to be whores, and expected sexual payment for any favors performed for them. For the most part, the women were not allowed to participate in any gainful activities, so they remained dependent on this sexual barter system.⁵³

In one special partisan group in the Belorussian forest, the Bielski *otriad*, women were admitted on the same basis as men. This unit was established by the Jewish Bielski brothers and operated much like a family camp. A woman entering the camp with no special skill was known as a *malbush*, a hanger-on, and remained such until she became attached to a male member of the group. Usually higher-class Jewish women found themselves attached to lower-class Jewish men. Occasionally a woman was allowed to join an established family unit without attachment to a specific male. Sulia Rubin, due to her pre-war elite social station,

⁵² Eva Schloss with Evelyn Julia Kent, Eva's Story: A Survivor's Tale by the Step-sister of Anne Frank (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 45-46.

did not attach herself to a male.⁵⁴ Even so, this was very difficult. Celia K., a Polish survivor, spent the war in a partisan camp unattached. In the post-war period, she was anxious to get married so someone could take care of her. Her energies had been spent in caring for herself in the partisan camp.⁵⁵

Approximately sixty percent of the adults in the Bielski *otriad* lived together as husband and wife, without benefit of an official wedding. While the men were the ones to chose the partnership, no women were forced into such relationships and there are no reported rapes.⁵⁶ Although these relationships were established based on a need for protection, many of these couples remained married after the war. The intimacy shared in the forest created a bond that was lasting.⁵⁷

In ghettos and transport camps, there was usually more opportunity for intimate relationships between prisoners than in the labor and death camps. This is perhaps due to less stringent separation of the sexes. Even so, the prisoners were faced with overcrowded conditions,

⁵³ Nechama Tec, "Women Among the Forest Partisans," chap. in Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 225-226.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁵ Joshua M. Greene and Shiva Kumar, eds., in consultation with Joanne Weiner Rudof, Witness: Voices From the Holocaust (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 228-229.

⁵⁶ Tec, "Women Among the Forest Partisans", 228-229.

restrictions, and threats from Nazi guards. Still, the desire for intimacy is obvious in the writings of Erna Rubenstien, Polish Jew and survivor. She wrote about Krakow ghetto, "However in spite of the life-denying influences affecting us daily, in spite of every outward assault divesting us of our humanity, a strange atmosphere was developing in the ghetto. More keenly than ever, everyone could feel the vital need for love, for friendship, for solace."⁵⁸ So the prisoners sought intimacy.

In the Lodz ghetto, there were eight to ten people per room, so intimate sexual relations between married couples was difficult.⁵⁹ However according to one survivor, because men and women were housed together, many couples continued sexual intimacy without embarrassment.⁶⁰ Frequently, young people in the Lodz ghetto found outlets for their budding sexuality in the youth movements. They did not have the same burdens as their parents, and had more freedom to join resistance movements, where perhaps their passions were ignited both for the movement and for one another.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Nechama Tec, "Women in the Forests,"
[<http://www.interlog.com/~mighty/forest.htm>].

⁵⁸ Rubenstein, 65.

⁵⁹ Michael Unger, "The Status and Plight of Women in the Lodz Ghetto," chap. in Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 138.

⁶⁰ Niewyk, 304.

⁶¹ Chapnik, 138

This passion was described by Gusta Draenger in her diary of the resistance movement to which she and her husband belonged while prisoners of the Krakow ghetto. She altered the names of people in her diary which she wrote in the third person. She wrote,

Their consciousness of the imminence of death intensified their emotions. Nearly everyone had lost home and family. The group had become the last refuge on their mortal journey, the last port for their innermost feelings, to which they now clung with all their might. The more their faith in humanity was diminished by the spreading violence and humiliation, the stronger their faith grew in each other, to the exclusion of all else. They loved one another with a unique devotion.⁶²

Gusta's sister-in-law was the youngest member of the resistance movement, but her emotions were intense, and she was "as decisive and determined in her relationship with Poldek [her boyfriend and member of the group] as she was in her work for the cause."⁶³ Gusta suggests that "all the love that would have been given to their murdered families had been displaced on their comrades," and was deepened by their knowledge of the seriousness of their situation.⁶⁴

Many new intimate relationships were established in the Warsaw ghetto. One survivor remembers, "Men and women are attracted to each other even more than in normal times, as

⁶² Gusta Davidson Draenger, Justyna's Narrative, edited with an Introduction by Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch, trans. by Roslyn Hirsch and David H. Hirsch (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 61.

⁶³ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 119.

though thirsty for protection and tenderness."⁶⁵ A frequent situation found an older man living with a younger girl. Both benefited from this relationship, with intimacy helping to ease both their fears and the drudgery of day to day life. One young girl described her relationship in light of her inability to marry without permission from her parents, "That doesn't matter. We're married anyway. No rabbi will ever be able to express in any document a union as strong as that which joins us, now and forever."⁶⁶ Looking forward to a future together perhaps increased the young couple's chance for survival.

Unfortunately, all intimate relationships were not sustained in the crowded conditions of the ghetto. American citizen, and Warsaw ghetto survivor, Mary Berg attended a play in the ghetto entitled *Love Looks for an Apartment*. The play was meant to bring humor to a situation which was a tragedy in real life. A young couple searches for an apartment, and finally decide to share a room with another couple. Both couples are having difficulties with their relationships, and the result is two illicit love affairs. Due to the lack of privacy, the couples all realize what has happened, and the husbands exchange wives for a while. Ultimately, the husbands begin to quarrel with their

⁶⁵ Shneiderman, 110.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 110, 139.

original partners and all four young people are evicted.⁶⁷ The theme of this play was certainly based on real life situations observed by its creator.

In Theresienstadt, men and women were housed in separate barracks, but the ghetto police sometimes allowed men into the women's barracks or served as couriers, carrying letters back and forth between the camps.⁶⁸ One female survivor, eighteen at the time of her imprisonment, stated that "young couples longed most of all for physical closeness, for an embrace, for warmth, for comfort."⁶⁹ Cultural activity was rampant in the transit camp, and the importance of intimate relationships was preserved in a song with the following chorus: "If we really want to, we'll make it through, hand in hand, joined as one."⁷⁰ Many weddings took place in the camp, especially in Fall 1941, as prisoners hoped that their marriage would ensure that they would be together in the ever escalating transports East.⁷¹ Ruth Elias was married to her pre-war friend, Koni, who was a policeman in the camp. She enjoyed his protection before

⁶⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁸ Elais, 69, 74.

⁶⁹ Ruth Bondy, "Women in Theresienstadt and the Family Camp in Birkenau," chap. in Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 320.

⁷⁰ Elias, 86.

⁷¹ Bondy, 316.

her transport to Auschwitz, where the couple became estranged.⁷²

After a period of time, the segregation of men and women relaxed somewhat. Even so, privacy was an issue for young lovers, who, when able, would lie together on a bunk and perform intimate sexual acts in the light of day. When the Theresienstadt barracks were overcrowded, many couples built wooden structures in the attics of vacated houses, where they might have some semblance of privacy for a brief time.⁷³ Young men who had skills valuable to the camp, such as baking or cooking, did not always have the above problems. They had their own private spaces and could offer protection to those under their care. For this reason, these men always had willing lovers.⁷⁴

In a number of camps, German Jews and other ethnic Jewish populations were isolated from one another both physically and emotionally, as the Germans often considered themselves Germans first and, therefore, more victimized by their imprisonment. In Riga, the Latvian Jews were housed in the Little Ghetto, while the German Jews were in separate quarters. The guards encouraged animosity between the two groups, who frequently worked together in nearby factories. Survivor Boris Kacel describes the positive influence of

⁷² Elias, 75, 118.

⁷³ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁴ Bondy, 320.

intimate relations which eventually developed between the two groups as they worked side by side: "The relationship between the two groups improved considerably, and our men began to visit the other ghetto regularly...In time, love affairs even took place between some of our men and the female *yekes* [German Jews]. Some couples were so madly in love that they supported each other as husband and wife in their daily struggle for food and survival."⁷⁵

In the Plaszow Camp, the girls would hide in the boy's barracks before the curfew. Hidden in the beds, the girls spent the night making love to these boys, "pretending no one could see them or hear them."⁷⁶ One survivor states that "the line between life and death was extremely thin, and one could only cross it with a determination to live, to survive, with the inner power drawn by some from love or the tremendous power of faith and infinite prayer. Wherever this power came from, it helped many to survive and to take from life whatever there was left to take."⁷⁷ For these young girls and boys, deprived of a normal courtship, it is possible that these intimate moments gave them new strength for survival.

⁷⁵ Boris Kacel, From Hell to Redemption: A Memoir of the Holocaust (Niwot, CO: University of Colorado Press, 1998), 55-56.

⁷⁶ Rubenstein, 102.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

An elaborate culture evolved concerning intimate relationships between prisoners at the forced-labor camp Skarzysko. During the initial phases of the camp, rations were low, and lesser inmates sought the protection and assistance of local "prominents." Relationships, with male lovers called *kuzyns* (cousins), were widespread and were not always limited to fellow inmates, but also included Polish co-workers. Later in the course of the war when camp officials realized that the flow of incoming labor was to continue to slow, camp conditions improved. This allowed the average prisoner to seek a *kuzynka*, or female lover. On occasion, a female prisoner who had a high position was able to choose her own *kuzyn*. When a prisoner found an appropriate partner, they were faced with the problem of privacy. Partitions could be seen around individual bunks, leading to the term "bunk romances." While some prisoners rejected these intimate relationships, they eventually became accustomed to the camp culture. This acceptance did not prevent worried parents from intervening to protect the virtue of a young daughter. Jewish worker Marilka's parents arranged for their daughter to marry her fiance in the camp to avoid the depravity of the *kuzyn* relationships. It should be noted that these relationships were seen as "an

important manifestation of the will to survive," and often led to marriage after the war.⁷⁸

Some married couples also fell prey to this camp culture, and love triangles were not uncommon. A camp song brings humor to the situation:

Come, I have a secret to tell
The "cousin here don't go so well!
They dance on two fronts in their life
They have a "cousin" and a wife!⁷⁹

Occasionally this love triangle was a result of a strong intimate relationship with a spouse. One woman, whose husband fell gravely ill, became a *kuzynka* to provide needed food and money to help her husband regain his health. As a result of her sacrifice, her husband recovered, but had difficulty forgiving his wife for her infidelity.⁸⁰

Another example shows that not every intimate relationship was positive. The transit camp Westerbork, in Holland, was described by Aryan officer Wohl as having an extraordinary erotic atmosphere. Many marriages were destroyed by infidelity, or by the lack of privacy for normal intimate relations. The barracks reserved for unmarried adults of both sexes "was the scene of unbridled sex."⁸¹ Couples performed the sex act without regard for onlookers, even young children. While it cannot be proven,

⁷⁸ Karay, 297.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 296-298.

it is possible that the camp prisoners sensed their destruction and sought to seek pleasure before it was too late.⁸² Of the 104,000 Jews who passed through Westerbork, only 909 survived.⁸³

Other prisoners, who might have been inexperienced in human intimacy, or perhaps unable to mingle with persons of the opposite sex, turned to other forms of sexuality. Jezyk, a thirteen year old boy, who arrived at Treblinka from the Warsaw ghetto, was alone as his parents were imprisoned elsewhere, was heard masturbating each night. His bunk mate told survivor Samuel Willenberg of this sexual activity, which was cause for punishment if discovered. Willenberg replied "that if it gave the boy pleasure, he might as well continue - it was one of the few pleasures left to him."⁸⁴ A survivor from a satellite camp of Buchenwald described the disheartened condition of the women who suddenly found themselves alone without their spouses. She remembered that the women who had been in the camp only for a short time, would naturally try to "comfort one another with caresses and physical closeness."⁸⁵ The

⁸¹ Jacob Boas, Boulevard des Miseres: The Story of Transit Camp Westerbork (Hamden, CN.: Archon Books, 1985), 71-72.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁴ Samuel Willenberg, Surviving Treblinka, ed. by Wladyslaw T. Bartoszewski, trans. by Naftali Greenwood (Oxford: Basil Blackwell in association with the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, 1989), 58-59.

⁸⁵ Elias, 168.

inmates ultimately realized that some of the women were lesbians, but did not condemn the women for this type of intimacy. Ruth stated that, "Living in such unnatural circumstances, we did not feel that we had the right to pass judgement. Each of us yearned for closeness, belonging, and love."⁸⁶ While lesbianism was not documented in the narratives to the same degree as homosexuality, it was common enough for prison jargon to create terms for describing these women. The male partner in the lesbian relationship was called a *Jule*. The *Jules* would carve crosses, called *croix des vaches*, on the foreheads of their female partners to identify their relationships.⁸⁷

Perhaps the most poignant instances of intimacy between prisoners are described by the inmates at the death camp, Auschwitz. Shortly after arriving at Auschwitz, if not before, the prisoners realized the possibility of death by gassing as their ultimate fate. It also became evident that any deviation from acceptable behavior might result in immediate death. For some prisoners intimacy served as solace in a hostile environment; a focus on the future rather than the present. For others, intimacy was a final gesture of love in the face of death. In each instance, this intimacy was a reminder of the prisoners' humanity.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Gill, 327.

The reality of their situation often began for the prisoners as they were packed into rail cars for their transport to Auschwitz. The conditions of these transports are commonly known. Even in these conditions, intimacy was allowed and honored. Slovak Jew Rudolf Vrba, wrote of a young couple, the Tomasovs, who were married the evening before the transport. The young couple had married hoping that Monsignor Tiso's promise of keeping families together would be true. Vrba knew the young male, as they came from the same village. As word of the marriage passed through the overcrowded car, the other prisoners joined Vrba in toasting the bride and groom, showering them with gifts from their meager personal possessions. Later, the group arranged a private "bridal suite" for the couple, who were then able to consummate their marriage.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, the young couple was separated at selection ramp at Auschwitz, and there is no indication that they survived.⁸⁹

French Jew, Dr. Jacques Pach, had a similar experience. His wife was Aryan, and although she attempted to join her husband on the transport to Auschwitz, she was physically removed from the train by the SS. Once at the camp, Pach found great comfort in the pictures of his wife which he had smuggled into the camp. He was observed commemorating his wedding anniversary, gazing at the photograph of his wife by

⁸⁸ Vrba, 47-48.

the light of a candle. The hope of returning to his loved one undoubtedly gave him reason to struggle for survival.⁹⁰

Once imprisoned at Auschwitz, a number of factors affected sexual intimacy, including hunger, stress, and unavailability of the opposite sex. While these factors definitely affected the desire for sexual intimacy, many narratives contain touching references to intimate thoughts and desires toward loved ones or fellow prisoners. It is in these references that one can discern the true beauty of the intimate acts among men and women who refused to lose that spark of humanity deep within their hearts and souls.

Among those prisoners who were isolated from members of the opposite sex, survivors described a longing for intimacy. Judith, an Auschwitz survivor, stated, "Toward winter, as they were fed thicker soup and occasional pieces of meat, some of the women resumed menstruating, and their fantasies turned to thoughts of men. Sharing such dreams linked them to each other and to the future."⁹¹ Male survivors related similar experiences. After receiving extra rations in their work areas, a group of male inmates felt satiated, and one remarked that "at least for a few hours, no quarrels arise, we feel good, the Kapo feels no urge to hit us, and we are able to think of our mothers and

⁸⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁹⁰ Muller, 63-64.

⁹¹ Goldenberg, 334.

wives, which usually does not happen. For a few hours, we can be unhappy in the manner of free men."⁹² It is probable, and supported by examples found in other narratives, that when the two sexes had more contact, lack of food did not cause quite the diminishment of the libido.

One survivor stated that "love makes you inventive," and this was especially true in the death camps where many prisoners found a way to engage in intimate relationships.⁹³ Auschwitz survivor Ruth Elias wrote of the strength of their desires,

We were young, and we wanted to live. We wanted to talk with our loved ones and give them courage, to hold each other tight, to be as close as we could to each other, and to prove that we weren't alone. Who knew how much longer we would be able to express these feelings. Life and love are intricately intertwined. We longed for love, for an embrace, for physical closeness, for a long desperate kiss that was often mixed with tears.⁹⁴

Rudolf Vrba described his personal experience at Birkenau. There was a wire fence dividing the males and the area of the Czech family camp where the women were housed. Many of the male prisoners began to have conversations with the young Czech women who lingered near the fence, and "suddenly romance began to flourish gently in the heart of a private hell."⁹⁵ The men sought for a means to get even

⁹² Levi, 76.

⁹³ Elias, 99.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁵ Vrba, 182.

closer to their new love interests, and a gang installing new drains managed to dig a tunnel to the other side of the wire. The men then slipped through this "tunnel of love" and visited the women. Rudi himself fell in love with a Czech girl named Alice, and sweetly described their budding relationship, "Neither of us noticed anything except each other. . . .Awkwardness melted away to be replaced by a gentle intimacy."⁹⁶ Both were involved with the resistance movement in the camp, and with the knowledge that the family camp was soon to be exterminated, the passage of time became more important, more real. Alice slipped through the tunnel to spend the night with Rudi, and they made love, with both losing their virginity at Auschwitz. The next morning, they were told that the day had come for the extermination of Alice's camp, and while they attempted to muster a resistance in the family camp, they failed. The young girl went to her death that day.⁹⁷

Catholic survivor, Sigmund Sobolewski, also lost his virginity in the camp. Remembering March 1942 when the first women were brought to Auschwitz, Sobolewski stated that he became obsessed with the idea of making love to a woman, afraid that he "might die without discovering the ecstasy of physically loving a woman."⁹⁸ He arranged to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 183.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 187-189.

⁹⁸ Tannenbaum, 35-37.

visit the camp brothel, consisting at that time of thirteen women, and made love to a Polish woman named Irka. He fell in love with her, and the two planned to meet after the war. Unfortunately, Irka was moved to Bergen-Belsen, where she wrote long letters to Sobolewski's family. Although the relationship provided both with human emotions that had been silenced by the Nazis, the two did not meet again.⁹⁹

An unusual experience which took place in the death camp was described by one survivor. An Austrian political prisoner had impregnated a French woman prior to his arrest and transport to Auschwitz. The SS arranged for the woman and her newborn son to travel to Auschwitz, where a priest was found to marry the two. They were allowed to spend one evening in the camp brothel, which had been emptied for the night. The French woman was then sent home.¹⁰⁰ This was of course against camp rules, but must have been satisfying for all who knew that at least one wedding was performed in this hell.

Another occurrence which provided hope for all who heard it was the legend of Mala. She was a Belgian Jew, who fell in love with a Polish Jew named Edek. The two escaped from Auschwitz on 24 June 1944. As with any legend, there were many different accounts of their journey on the outside, but it is said that they walked to the nearby town

⁹⁹ Ibid., 37-40.

of Kozy, where "they found themselves a room and made love." Unfortunately, the two were captured, returned to camp, then tortured and killed. Their story, although it ended so sadly, gave hope and dreams to those who were witnesses to or heard of their brief love affair.¹⁰¹

A number of prisoners were selected to witness, through their work assignments, the brutal results of the extermination of hundreds of thousands. The men and women assigned to work place Canada were to separate the clothing and other belongings of those who had been sent directly to the gas chambers. It is difficult to imagine how one withstood this brutal assignment, but there were advantages to this labor. The prisoners were often able to steal valuable foods and personal items as they worked. The men and women who carried out these tasks often engaged in innocent flirtations. For many, the motive in "seeking these relationships was not so much sexual, but simply the need to have someone to care for."¹⁰² In addition, some of the men served as messengers, bringing tokens of love from prisoners who did not have access to these women. Gifts included chocolates, perfumes, and other gifts gathered from the suitcases of those who died. One survivor stated that

¹⁰⁰ Friedrich, 48-49.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰² Muller, 63.

the Slovak girls "brought a ray of sunshine into my life," and in exchange for his gifts, they gave him smiles.¹⁰³

A group of men who had an even more daunting task were the *Sonderkommando*, chosen to move the dead from the gas chambers. Their own lives were at risk, and few survived at the end of the war. They had witnessed too much. Filip Muller, Slovak Jew, worked in the *Sonderkommando* for three years and survived. While it may not have been enough to overcome the horror of events they witnessed, he and other workers were eyewitnesses to final intimacies between men and women who knew their death was imminent. In one account by Muller, a group of Polish Jews, who most recently had lived near the gates of Auschwitz, were gathered outside the crematoria. Husbands and wives embraced as they undressed to enter the chambers. Many were crying as they embraced, trying to comfort one another.¹⁰⁴ On another occasion, Muller described witnessing the death of fellow Czechs and Slovaks from the family camp. Once again, husbands and wives embraced tightly, and mothers caressed their children. Muller longed to die with his countrymen, and actually entered the gas chamber with them. Yana, a young Czech girl, spoke to him, urging him to live on to tell her lover that her last thoughts were of him. She gave Muller a gold chain from her neck and asked that he present it to Sasha, a

¹⁰³ Vrba, 133-134.

political prisoner from Odessa. They had planned to marry if they survived. Muller left the gas chamber, and was able to fulfill Yana's final wish. He gave the chain and the message to Sasha, who mourned for his lover and stated that "now nothing matters anymore."¹⁰⁵ Although the intimacy that had sustained both Yana and Sasha was exterminated, their love, as expressed by Yana, was the impetus for Muller to survive another day.

In another unusual occurrence, Muller witnessed the death of a group of Gypsies. Unlike many other groups, these men and women begged for their lives. When pressed into the gas chamber, Muller related that "numerous men were holding their wives in a tight embrace, pressed convulsively against them as if merged into one, passionately but despairingly making love for the last time."¹⁰⁶ While it is not possible to know, perhaps these final moments of intimacy eased the pain and fear of imminent death.

In one case, a survivor who escaped from Treblinka described one of his first human experiences outside the camp. He came upon the cottage home of a local peasant, and with great courage, he entered the home finding a young woman and her small son. The woman was at first frightened, realizing by his appearance that he was an escapee. With

¹⁰⁴ Muller, 70.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 108, 113, 118.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 151.

little conversation, she fed him, and then asked if he came from Treblinka. He answered that he had, and described her response: "She approached me. I stood up, and our bodies drew close. I felt the touch of her firm breasts and I embraced her gratefully. Our mouths met in a passionate kiss. She put out the kerosene lamp; darkness closed in."¹⁰⁷ This intimate encounter, offered willingly, restored the humanity of the young escapee, and surely gave him strength to continue his stressful journey home.

It must be added that not all intimate behaviors among prisoners in the death camps, or on transports to the camps, were positive in nature, as some inmates attempted to force intimacy on others. One French survivor described his transport to Buchenwald, "Suddenly a scuffle. A man with a beard, aroused by the constant contact with the bare skin of a young man is trying to sodomize him. The bearded man is attacked by those nearest and [by] the boy, [who was] drunk with fury."¹⁰⁸ Sigmund Sobolewski, a Catholic survivor of Auschwitz described similar instances in the camp itself. The block hairdresser, "remarkable for his long, slender, feminine fingers," bunked on the same pallet as Sobolewski. One night the barber reached across and began to rub his hands suggestively over Sobolewski's leg. Sobolewski pushed

¹⁰⁷ Willenberg, 145.

him away, but noted that other prisoners did not.¹⁰⁹

Although many such incidents must have occurred, they were much less commonly mentioned in the narratives.

Throughout the narratives, the one form of intimacy which survivors most described as contributing to their own survival, and that of others, was friendship. In some cases, the love and friendship of family members was life sustaining. In other instances, people adopted new family members to take the place of families who were lost to them. Often, the friendship extended was brief, but memorable and definitive as a moment which changed the course of human life. For women, the first two forms of friendships were most common in the narratives, while men were more likely to experience the more brief expressions of friendship. That is not to say that any form of friendship was exclusive to either sex.¹¹⁰ Jakov, survivor of the Warsaw ghetto and Treblinka, proclaimed the true value of intimate friendships in a poem written to tell how he overcame apathy, despair and even death:

What did I eat?
How did I survive?
A miracle. I had a friend...¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Jean Michel written in assoc. with Louis Nucera, Dora, trans. by Jennifer Kidd (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 34.

¹⁰⁹ Tannenbaum, 34-35.

¹¹⁰ Gurewitsch, xiv.

¹¹¹ Eve Nussbaum Soumerai and Carol D. Schulz, Daily Life During the Holocaust, Daily Life Through History Series (Westport: CN: Greenwood Press, 1998), 114.

At the time of their imprisonment, family members tried to stay together, fearful of conditions they were to face in the unknown world of the ghettos or camps. This was more common with women, who were able to stay with their daughters. Men were more often separated, both from their female relatives and from the male members of their families, who might be sent to different work areas. Still, for all those snatched from their homes and transported to unknown camps, there was a common family, born of shared circumstances. Birkenau survivor, Marco Nahon, spoke of this community which developed as the prisoners traveled together on transports East. He wrote, "necessity and common misfortune have made them part of one and the same family."¹¹² These intimate relationships were born of closeness and familiarity with common emotions and fears.

At the Skarzysko work camp, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, sisters and brothers, fathers and sons bunked together whenever possible. If this were not possible, they sought the security of bunking with others from their own villages or cities. Women who were alone, without members of their immediate families, often developed new intimate

¹¹² Marco Nahon, Birkenau: The Camp of Death, trans. from the French by Jacqueline Havaux Bowers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 34.

relationships, or "camp families," sharing work, food, and possessions.¹¹³

Survivor Isabella Leitner wrote of her intimate, loving relationship with her siblings which sustained them through their imprisonment at Auschwitz. Her brother, Philip was held in the men's camp, quite a distance from his four sisters, and separated from them by electrified wire. He was determined to get word to his sisters, encouraging them to strive for survival. He acquired a knife and carved messages into small pieces of wood, which he threw over the fence in hopes that the wooden notes would reach his sisters. Isabella and her sisters received these messages, which always had the same directive: "You must survive. You must live. You simply must."¹¹⁴ While these words from her brother were inspirational, Isabella also depended on her sisters, as they did her. She wrote of this sibling relationship,

If you are sisterless, you do not have the pressure, the absolute responsibility to end the day alive. How many times did that responsibility keep us alive? I cannot tell. I can only say that many times when I was caught in a selection, I knew I had to get back to my sisters, even when I was too tired to fight my way back, when going the way of the smoke would have been easier, when I wanted to, when it almost seemed desirable. But at those times, I knew also that my sisters, aware that I was caught up in a selection, not only wanted me to get back to them - they expected me

¹¹³ Karay, 295.

¹¹⁴ Isabella Leitner, Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz, edited with an Epilogue by Irving A. Leitner (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers, 1978), 29.

to get back. The burden to live up to that expectation was mine, and it was awesome.¹¹⁵

Another pair of sisters described the importance of their love for each other. Mina and Ceciie Klein were able to stay together throughout their imprisonment. After Mina lost her infant son, she was prepared to kill herself by throwing herself against the electric wire fence. Ceciie threatened to kill herself as well. Ceciie stated that her sister reconsidered, choosing life, and that "she held herself back, out of love for my life, not hers."¹¹⁶ For six months, Ceciie watched her sister carefully, protecting her both from herself and from her surroundings. At that point, it was Ceciie who lost her will to live. Mina switched roles and cared for her sister. Both sisters survived, helping one another to endure the inhumanity of the camps.¹¹⁷

Lithuanian Jew, Rachel Silberman, described the intimate relationships she, her mother, and her younger sister developed working together at a farm near Stutthof. There were five other women working with them, and Rachel stated that they all helped each other, and that "in bad times people didn't care, like my mother didn't care,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 35-36.

¹¹⁶ Goldenberg, 331.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

whether it was me or another girl."¹¹⁸ Her mother would care for any of the girls who were afraid or crying.

While they were not as numerous, there were accounts of male family members who were able to stay together. Hungarian survivor, Elie Wiesel, met two young Czech brothers at Buna. Yossi and Tibi's parents had been killed at Birkenau. According to Wiesel, "they lived, body and soul, for each other."¹¹⁹ Wiesel's well-known personal narrative, Night, is a testament to this type of familial intimacy. He and his father were deported from Hungary late in the war, and they moved quickly from Birkenau, to Auschwitz, to Buna, through a death march, and finally to Buchenwald. Their's is a story of mutual protection and love. During the death march, Elie was tempted to fall to the ground with fatigue. He wrote, "My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me. He was running at my side, out of breath, at the end of his strength, at his wit's end. I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his only support."¹²⁰ Sadly, Elie's father died lying near his son at Buchenwald, only months before the liberation of the camp. Elie described those month's after his father's death, "I had to stay at Buchenwald until April eleventh. I have nothing to say of

¹¹⁸ Gurewitsch, 82.

¹¹⁹ Elie Wiesel, Night, trans. from the French by Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), 48.

my life during this period. It no longer mattered. After my father's death, nothing could touch me any more."¹²¹ Elie Wiesel survived the Holocaust, being cared for by his father and, finally, caring for his dying father.

Women seemed to fare better in the camps, as a result of the development of *Lager Schwestern* or "camp sisters." While men may have developed similar friendships or bonds, there was no associated camp term.¹²² These women were able to overcome the tragic destruction of their natural families, and rebuild a trust in their new family. Through these intimate relationships, women were able to practice their instinctive nurturing skills, and maintain a sense of their prewar existence.¹²³

Kitty, Birkenau survivor, spoke of her friendship group which included her mother and a number of carefully chosen women in her camp. She said, "The friendships were dictated by what was practical. You formed a small interdependent group; each member worked in a different area and could therefore bring something different into the 'community.'"¹²⁴ While Kitty relied on this group for practical items as well as friendship, her continually stronger relationship with her mother provided her with the greatest will to live. She

¹²⁰ Ibid., 82.

¹²¹ Ibid., 107.

¹²² Gurewitsch, xviii.

¹²³ Ibid., 100-102.

¹²⁴ Gill, 149.

believed that even though they were not always together, she knew her mother was near, and that gave her emotional sustenance and higher morale.¹²⁵

Rozalia Berke, Auschwitz survivor, states that she managed to "get through" the initial selection by "literally holding on to her sister, not letting go of her hand."¹²⁶ The sisters subsequently opened their hearts to a girl they knew in their village who had lost her entire family and was despondent. The three "camp sisters" remained together throughout Auschwitz, Stuffhof, a death march, and liberation. They maintained this intimate relationship even after the war.¹²⁷

These "camp sister" relationships were life sustaining even when there were no immediate family members in the group. Auschwitz survivor Miriam Rosenthal was married in Hungary in the spring of 1944. She was deported to Auschwitz shortly after her marriage, and separated from her husband. She was then transported to Plaszow, where she formed "camp sister" relationships with three distant cousins. When Miriam discovered she was pregnant, her camp sisters helped her through her pregnancy. They trusted each other and their mutual intimate relationships.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 150.

¹²⁶ Gurewitsch, 98.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

In perhaps the most random and unusual example of camp sisterhood, a number of authors describe a group of seven young women who were pregnant and gathered together by the Nazis at Landsberg. They were designated by the Germans as the *Schwanger Kommando*, pregnant commando. Strangely enough, these young women were allowed to give birth to and keep their babies. Although there were scarce resources for the seven pregnant women, they did not fight over provisions, but formed a very intimate group of "camp sisters." They helped one another give birth to their babies. After the birth, Boszi, who was the oldest of the women, nursed the babies whose mothers were too weak to feed their infants. A number of the women have kept in touch since their liberation, remembering their special intimate relationship in a time of great hardship.¹²⁸ Although this account was described by more than one survivor, no one offered the reason why the Nazis allowed these relationships to flourish, or why they allowed these babies to live when so many others were ruthlessly killed.

There were instances of intimacy in the form of friendships which were brief but equally important to survival. Polish Communist survivor, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk described numerous acts of friendship which reaffirmed her faith in humanity. After her arrival at Auschwitz and the

¹²⁸ Ibid., 99.

dehumanizing initial processing, she was despondent and intent on killing herself. A woman she had known briefly in the Bialystok ghetto befriended her and gave her food, warm boots, and a sweater. As Sara fell asleep, she stated that she "had hope in her heart,...and began to thaw from inner warmth."¹²⁹ Sara was lucky enough to have another similar experience during her January 1945 transport to Ravensbruck. She was very sick, and so cold that she could not stay awake. A woman she did not know, and never saw again, gave her a blanket and a few small bites of bread. Sara believes that this woman's offerings saved her life.¹³⁰

Survivor Mme. McAdam Clark described a friendship which developed between inmates who were kept in solitary confinement at Fresnes. These young women spoke to each other, without seeing one another, through grilles in the cells and through the water-pipes. Clark later met one of her "invisible friends" at Ravensbruck, stating "we thought it was heaven because we were all together again; we saw old friends, members of the resistance, and other people whom we'd known only by their voices at Fresnes."¹³¹ In honor of these friendships, they called the magazine of their post-war association *Voix et Visages* [Voice and Faces].¹³²

¹²⁹ Goldenberg, 328.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 329.

¹³¹ Gill, 326.

¹³² Ibid.

Another unnamed female survivor wrote that there were "momentary relationships" that still remain with her. One such brief encounter occurred in the camp hospital. A young Polish girl chosen for selection to be killed was placed in the bunk next to hers. Both were about seventeen years old. The survivor went to the next bunk and gave the selected girl her onion and garlic. They talked throughout the night and the survivor stated, "I had the need to be with her, and she responded."¹³³ Although the young Polish girl did not survive the Holocaust, she is alive in the memory of one survivor.

Male survivors expressed many of the same feelings regarding random intimate friendships. Italian survivor, Primo Levi, described the overtures of friendship which he believes saved his life. Levi met an Italian civilian worker named Lorenzo while toiling in the fields near Buna. Lorenzo brought Levi extra food every day for six months, and wrote messages to Levi's family. Amazingly, Lorenzo wanted nothing in return. While the extra rations were instrumental in Levi's survival, it was something of a more intimate nature that was of greater aid. Levi wrote that he is alive today..

not so much for his [Lorenzo's] material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own; something

¹³³ Gill, 364.

difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving.¹³⁴

Another survivor, Filip Muller, assigned to the *Sonderkommando*, found himself amazingly grateful for his assignment. He had been in isolation for almost fourteen months, deprived of all human intimacies. He wrote that "living together with my fellow prisoners gave me a feeling of solidarity because we shared the same fate. I no longer felt quite as forlorn and despondent as before."¹³⁵ He lived and worked with these men for three years, surviving what was perhaps the most difficult assignment in the camps.

Latvian Jew Boris Kacel also found friendship in an unusual circumstance. He was imprisoned in the Little Ghetto in Riga, and served as an apprentice to a non-Jewish Latvian civilian electrician. At this time, many Latvians joined with the Germans in their mistreatment of the Jews. When the electrician discovered that Kacel knew nothing of the trade as he had claimed, he did not report this to the German supervisor, instead choosing to teach Kacel what he himself knew. They became friends and had many intimate conversations in secluded spots to avoid detection by the Germans. Kacel wrote, "I admired this young Latvian man, who was not only my friend but also my teacher. The knowledge I gained of the electrical trade gave me the

¹³⁴ Levi, 119-121.

¹³⁵ Muller, 53.

strength and ability to survive my years of work."¹³⁶ Kacel was fortunate to have a support system outside of his work as well. He, his father, and his cousin Boris lived together in a small room forming what they called a *troika*, or threesome. The three shared household duties and decisions, devoting their energies to their mutual survival.¹³⁷

There are many common themes in the Holocaust narratives. One theme expressed by each survivor was a sense of both thankfulness and shame for their own survival. Almost all of the survivors believed that luck played a role in their survival; and but for that, they might have died as did so many of their family and friends. Another theme was of intimacies that helped them through the hell that was the Holocaust. A survivor who played in the orchestra at Auschwitz until December 1944 wrote, "I think it is impossible to define what makes a survivor. What helps survival per se is a group existence: companions who help you are more important than your own individual nature."¹³⁸ While the author was careful to state that she could not generalize, but only speak of her own experience, it is obvious from the many accounts of others that there were many instances of such intimacy among the Holocaust

¹³⁶ Kacel, 63.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹³⁸ Gill, 405.

prisoners. For many, these intimacies were, in fact, a means of survival. For some, these intimacies were precursors to their own death. Lucie Adelsberger, survivor and camp doctor at Auschwitz, spoke poignantly of the importance of intimacy, saying that even for those who did not survive the Holocaust, "the friendship and love of a camp family eased the horror of their miserable end."¹³⁹ For us all, the intimacies revealed in the Holocaust narratives are a reminder of the abuses of humanity, our own humanity, and our need for close relationships which may serve to sustain us through life's difficulties, great or small.

¹³⁹ Lucie Adelsberger, Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 100.