

# Muted narratives of traumatic experiences of the Lithuanian Jewish women in the anti-Nazi Partisan Resistance

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This article is based on the international research project ‘Identity on the Line’, conducted by the Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University together with partners from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Slovenia and Croatia memory institutions, from 2019 to 2023. The research undertaken by the Faculty of Communication deals with the traumatic experiences, wounded past and muted memories of women who survived the Holocaust and how these influenced the lives of their children and grandchildren, even when being kept silent. The article represents only part of the project and analysis of the traumatic experiences of the Jewish women who were fighting in the anti-Nazi partisan resistance by joining the combat units in the forests, as well as consequences and intergenerational transmission of a traumatic past.

The purpose of this article is to show the muted stories of traumatic experiences, and how psychological scars of the war and the Holocaust are reflected in the daily life of women and their family members. What happens when the surrounding environment becomes dangerous and life-threatening? How does that challenge a person’s identity and narratives? How do these traumatic experiences affect the lives of the second and third generations in the family? This article tries to answer these complicated questions by interviewing Jewish women partisans, referring to their diaries, memoirs and testimonies as well as by interviewing the daughters of the survivors.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, silent memory, traumatic past, women, survivors, partisans, resistance.

## Introduction

The Holocaust has been called a massive trauma and is considered one of the most significant events in human history.<sup>1</sup> The Holocaust caused six million Jews, who were victims of the Nazis and their collaborators, to be disrupted and it changed people's lives, values, goals and self-perception. The trauma of the Holocaust did not end with the end of the war. The survivors experienced the loss of loved ones, physical and psychological violence, starvation and sickness after the war. They also had to deal with the survivor's syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic memories, a sense of guilt, hidden emotions, issues with adaptation and self-realisation that led to long-term psychological and mental health problems. The Holocaust has fundamentally changed people's identities as well.

Since the 1990s the Holocaust in Lithuania has been researched mostly from the factual and historical perspective, but in the last few decades studies on Holocaust trauma and collective memory<sup>2</sup> have been published as well. Topics include the influence of Holocaust trauma on the identity of survivors<sup>3</sup>, dealing with the unspoken sexual violence against Jewish women during the Nazi occupation<sup>4</sup> and mediated memories of the Jewish women survivors<sup>5</sup>. There have also been books about the position and adaptation of the women in the family and society in the Soviet era.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most completed studies that analyses the anti-Nazi resistance in Lithuania highlights the importance of the Jewish anti-Nazi resistance in the ghettos and the units of the Soviet partisans' squads. It is written by Rimantas Zizas<sup>7</sup>, and provides a lot of im-

<sup>1</sup> Adah Sachs, "Intergenerational Transmission of Massive Trauma: The Holocaust", in: *Terror Within and Without Attachment and Disintegration*, edited by Orit Badouk-Epstein, Judy Yellin, London: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Danutė Gailienė, *Sunkių traumų psichologija: Politinių represijų padariniai*, Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 2004; D. Gailienė, *Gyvenimas po lūžio. Kultūrinių traumų psichologiniai padariniai*, Vilnius: Eugrimas, 2015; D. Gailienė, *Ką jie mums padarė. Lietuvos gyvenimas traumų psichologijos žvilgsniu*, Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2021, pp. 33, 53; Irena Šutinienė, "Trauma ir kolektyvinė atmintis: sociokultūrinis aspektas", in: *Filosofija. Sociologija*, no. 1, 2002, pp. 57–62; I. Šutinienė, "Daugiakultūrinio miesto istorija komunikacinėje tautinių grupių atmintyje: Klaipėdos ir Vilniaus atvejai", in: *Nuo Basanavičiaus, Vytauto Didžiojo iki Molotovo ir Ribbentropo: atminties ir atminimo kultūrų transformacijos XX–XXI amžiuje*: straipsnių rinkinys, edited by Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2011, pp. 225–284; I. Šutinienė, *Adaptacija istorinių lūžių sąlygomis: sovietmečio pradžia ir pabaiga Panemunėlio žmonių autobiografiniuose pasakojimuose*, 2011, [online], in: [http://www.llt.lt/pdf/panemunelis/Panemunelis\\_adaptacija.pdf](http://www.llt.lt/pdf/panemunelis/Panemunelis_adaptacija.pdf). (30-01-2023).

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Reches, *Holokaustą patyrusių asmenų tapatumo išgyvenimas [Holocaust Survivors' Experiences of Identity]*, Vilnius: Slinktys, 2020, p. 46, 118.

<sup>4</sup> Violeta Davoliūtė, "Local Testimony and the (Un)Silencing of Sexual Violence in Lithuania under German Occupation during WWII", in: *Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2021, p. 129, [online], in: <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040129> (30-01-2023),

<sup>5</sup> Gintarė Malinauskaitė, *Mediated Memories: Narratives and Iconographies of the Holocaust in Lithuania*, Marburg: Verlag Herder Institute, 2019; Laimutė Žilinskienė, Sigita Kraniauskienė, Irena Šutinienė, *Gimę socializme: pirmoji sovietmečio karta*, edited by Laimutė Žilinskienė, Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Dalia Leinartė [et al.], *Sovietmečio atmintis gyvenimo istorijose*, edited by Laima Žilinskienė, Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2014; Dalia Leinartė, *Neplanuotas gyvenimas. Šeima sovietmečio Lietuvoje*, Vilnius: Aukso žuvis, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Rimantas Zizas, *Sovietiniai partizanai Lietuvoje 1941–1944 m.*, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2014, p. 207.

portant contextual information. Rich Cohen's book<sup>8</sup> presents the anthology and importance of 'The Avenger' squad's activities in the anti-Nazi resistance. The memoirs of the former Jewish partisan men<sup>9</sup> gives an opportunity to have a look at the historical events from the witness and active fighter point of view. Unfortunately, the memoirs of the Jewish partisan men do not find it important to present the input of the Jewish women to the anti-Nazi resistance. In contrast to men's memoirs, the memoirs of three Jewish women members of the anti-Nazi partisan resistance showed what choices and challenges women were facing – fighting not only the enemy, but for their rights in the partisan squads as well.<sup>10</sup> One of the most detailed studies on this topic was undertaken by Judy Batalion, who represents Jewish women as members of the underground resistance from different angles and shows how much effort they needed for this double fight.<sup>11</sup>

### **Anti-Nazi underground resistance in the main ghettos in Lithuania**

Underground resistance organisations appeared in the ghettos of Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai and Švenčionys at the end of 1941 to the beginning of 1942.

On 21 January 1942, during the stabilisation period of the Vilnius ghetto, the underground United Partisan Organisation (Yiddish: Fareinigte Partizaner Organizacie, FPO) with up to 350 members led by Yitzhak Wittenberg was established in the ghetto. Their purpose was to organise armed resistance to defend the honour and life of the Jews remaining in the ghetto, and to harm the enemy in every possible way. Among the leaders of the FPO organisation there were two women – Sonia Madeisker and Chiena Borovskaya. When the commander of the FPO Wittenberg was betrayed and forced to surrender to the Gestapo on 15 July 1943, Abba Kovner was appointed the FPO leader. The unsuccessful resistance against the Nazis in the Vilnius ghetto on 1 September was organised by the leader of the 'Dror' underground group, Yehiel Sheinboim. After this, the FPO decided that it was necessary to retreat to the Narutis and Rūdninkai forests and fight the enemy there, and at least 340 members of the ghetto underground resistance went there. It appears that women made up a small percentage of combatants. Four squads ('Avenger', 'For Victory', 'Death to Fascism', 'Fight') were formed mostly from the Jews of the Vilnius ghetto

<sup>8</sup> Rich Cohen, *The Avengers*, Washington DC: Compass Press, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, New York: Holocaust Library, 1982; Icchakas Aradas, *Iš mirties slėnio į Siono kalną*. Vilnius: Margi raštai, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Рахиль Марголис, Немного света во мраке, Вильнюс: Государственный Еврейский музей имени Вильнюсского Гаона, 2006, pp. 126–127, 297–298, 300–302, 359, 389 [Rachil Margolis, Nemnogo sveta vo mrake, Vilnius: Gosudarstvenniy evreyskiy muzeiy imeni Vilniuskogo Gaona, 2006]; Ружка Корчак, Пламя под пеплом, Тель-Авив: Библиотека Алия, 1977, pp. 277, 324 [Ruzhka Korchak, Plamy pod pepлом, Tel-Aviv: Biblioteka Alya, 1977]; Sara Ginaitė-Rubinsonienė, *Atminimo knyga: Kauno žydų bendruomenė 1941–1944 metais*, Vilnius: Margi raštai, 1999, pp. 126–127, 148, 162–164.

<sup>11</sup> Judy Batalion, *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos*, New York: William Morrow, 2021.

in Rūdninkai Forest in autumn 1943; out of 108 Jewish fighters in the 'Avenger' squad, 34 were women.<sup>12</sup> Almost all the 119 fighters were Jews from the Vilnius ghetto as well as in the squad 'For Victory' in the winter of 1944. Chiena Borovskaya was appointed as the commissar of this squad.<sup>13</sup>

At the end of 1941, the Anti-Fascist Struggle Organisation (Yiddish: Antifashistishe Kampf Organizacie, AKO) was founded in the Kaunas ghetto on the initiative of Chaim Yelin. The goal was an active armed resistance against the Nazis. The organisation, with about 500 members, sought to liberate as many Jews as possible and send them for active armed resistance to the Soviet partisan units. Among the leaders of the FPO organisation there were two women – Mera Lan and Riva (Alta) Boruchowich-Teper (Alte Borochovitch Tepper: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1176965>; in Lithuanian version: Riva (Alta) Boruchovičiūtė-Teperienė). The Anti-Fascist Struggle Organisation cooperated with the Kaunas ghetto Jewish police, which helped organise military training and the purchase of weapons, and maintained contact and shared information with representatives of the Council of Elders (Yiddish: Altestenrat). Some members of the underground resistance managed to escape the ghetto but not all of them reached the partisan units. In the summer of 1943, a group of people were killed in the vicinity of Vilnius as well as most of those who were sent to the Augustavas Forest. The members of the Kaunas ghetto underground resistance established the squad 'Death to Fascism' in Rūdninkai Forest. The squad consist of 278 fighters at the end of the Nazi occupation, and the majority of the fighters were Jews.<sup>14</sup>

The underground organisation in the Švenčionys ghetto formed by 13 young men was established on 16 February 1942. It aimed to make contact with the partisan squads in Eastern Lithuania and Belarus as well as to find the way to obtain guns<sup>15</sup>, and its members reached Kazėnai Forest and joined the squads 'Spartakas'<sup>16</sup> and 'Vilnius'.<sup>17</sup> The activists from the Zionist youth movement established an underground organisation in the Šiauliai ghetto in late 1941; another underground organisation led by the engineer Yosel Leibovitch emerged in 1942, with both Zionist and Communist membership. They acquired and kept weapons, although no armed actions were undertaken; a small number of underground newspapers – 'Masada', 'Hatechiya' and 'Mimamakin' – were issued.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Rimantas Zizas, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>15</sup> Icchakas Aradas, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>18</sup> Arūnas Bubnys, "The Fate of Šiauliai and the Šiauliai Region", in: Šiaulių Ghetto: Lists of Prisoners. 1942, supplement to the almanac "The Jewish Museum", edited by Irina Guzenberg, Jevgenija Sedova, Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2002, p. 235.

## Dilemma choices by the women members of the ghetto underground resistance

When analysing the subject of the armed underground and the resistance, authors tend to focus on the reconstruction of events, and the disclosure of facts and details. Meanwhile, the history of everyday life is completely forgotten, and traumatic experiences are overshadowed by analysing the anthology of the underground resistance, different strategies of maintenance and activities, heroic moments of struggle. Such a development of the choice of attitude pushes uncomfortable, psychologically and emotionally difficult issues into oblivion.

The young women – former ghetto prisoners – who were able to join the ghetto underground resistance movement, faced a dilemma: to escape the ghetto and fight the Nazis in the forests by joining the Soviet partisan battalions or to stay, waiting to be exterminated. Those women who made ‘choiceless’ choices<sup>19</sup> by joining partisans in the forests, faced constant danger and violence there not only from their enemies but from their fellow combatants as well. They remained silent for decades, naming traumatic experience as the price of their survival. What happens when the surrounding environment becomes dangerous and life-threatening? How does that challenge a person’s identity, and how do individuals integrate such new living conditions and life changes into their life stories? This article tries to answer these questions by interviewing the women who had survived the Holocaust by joining the anti-Nazi resistance and who remained in Lithuania or moved to Israel, as well as their family members.

Young, active Jews chose to fight against deadly enemies by joining the underground resistance organisations in the ghettos. Women were also among the founders and fighters of those secret organisations. When hopes that resistance was possible in the ghettos collapsed, members of underground organisations retreated into the forests for an armed guerrilla struggle, leaving their parents, children and other family members in the ghetto. For the women to make a choice to leave the forest for the active fight was especially difficult as they all faced the dilemma: what was the right decision in the face of death?

Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky is a former prisoner of the Vilna ghetto, a member of the underground organisation of the ghetto and a fighter of the Jewish partisan squad ‘Avenger’ in the Rūdninkai Forest. She talks about her dilemma and the choice she made, which was supported by her family:

I came home. I told my parents I would probably go to the partisans. [My morn] sewed the star [...] the way I could tear it off very easily. Mom still [prepared], I remember, a portfolio, which somehow remained later. A kind of a handbag. I had a friend who gave me a bottle of perfume or eau *de cologne* on my birthday as soon as we got into the ghetto because his family owned a perfume shop before the war. I also took a towel, a [blue] jumper I knitted myself and my mom had

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Langer, “The Dilemma of Choice in the Death Camps”, in: *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1980, pp. 53–59.

some [cooked] peas. And after about half an hour, Doba [Doveltov] came and said there was a chance to get out of the ghetto [...]. And I said goodbye to my parents, sister ... and we went out ...<sup>20</sup>

But even 76 years after saying goodbye to her family, the interviewee found it difficult to talk about her feelings; about how she felt that day, about her fear for the future and her anxiety about her family remaining in the ghetto.

Meanwhile, the experience of Rachel Margolis who was the prisoner of the Vilna ghetto, a member of the underground organisation of the ghetto and a fighter in Jewish partisan squads 'Avenger' and 'Vilnius' in the Rūdinkai Forest, was different. She had to leave her family secretly, not saying goodbye:

Only fear and sadness on my mind. It was awful to leave without saying goodbye to my family. It was harrowing to leave the [Vilna] ghetto where I had been living without hope for a year and a half although it seemed [like] for ten years [...] we left not in order to survive but in order to fight and lose our lives. We could not take our brothers, parents, adolescent children together. [...] I was tormented by the thought: I did not say goodbye! But how could I – after my father told me he would report it to the police? Later, when I was in the forest, I was told that my father had come to the library to look for me, and only when he saw that there was no [my] toothbrush, he realised that I had gone forever. I was under 22. I never saw my parents again. I became an orphan the moment I left, and I am still tormented by the thought that if I stayed there maybe we could survive [...], maybe we all could be alive.<sup>21</sup>

Sara Ginaitė-Rubinson, a prisoner of the Kaunas ghetto, a member of the underground organisation of the ghetto and a fighter in Jewish partisan squad 'Death to Occupants', was faced with a dilemma and had to take a decision as well:

[I planned] my escape with Misha from the [Kaunas] Ghetto to the Rūdinkai Forest in the beginning of December [1943], and told my mom about it. She cried but rejoiced in the hope that I would succeed in my plans. I considered myself a traitor for leaving my mother to fate. I was very confused in those days. It seemed that it is not fair that I would leave my loved ones, and that I had no moral right to leave them. Two conflicting feelings struggled in my soul. One demanded to go and fight the enemy, and the other that I should stay with the family, taking care of it and to die or survive together – what was destined. [...] Mom prepared the most needed things. She would give us not only more bags but also her heart, and her life experience. I took a few old photos and repeated so many times "I'll definitely be back, I'll find an opportunity to get back to the ghetto at least for a while, you'll see". Mom looked at me sadly and probably thought that I am still childish, and my mind full of illusions.<sup>22</sup>

Other dilemmas led to hard decisions being made. Rachel Margolis mentions that her friend, Onia, did not want to go to the forest to fight without telling her mother. But her mother, appalled by this decision, did not let her go: 'What partisans? What fight? You are not going anywhere, you are staying with me. Where have you ever seen a girl shoot and

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky (18 November 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Рахиль Марголис (Rachil Margolis), *op. cit.*, pp. 300–302.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Ginaitė-Rubinsonienė, *op. cit.*, pp. 126–127.

kill? If you decide to leave, I will lie down on the doorstep. Then get over me and go.' And Onia did not dare, so she stayed. [...] She was killed during the liquidation of the ghetto, along with her entire extended family'.<sup>23</sup>

### Challenges for the women in the partisan units

The way from the ghetto to the partisan squads in the forest was not safe. For Jewish women in the circumstances of war, it was especially dangerous. Memories tell about the help and solidarity of the people they met, and about the constant danger. Not everyone who tried to reach the partisan squads in the Narutis Forest or Rūdninkai Forest did it successfully – many Jews were killed along the way.

Partisan squads fought in the Rūdninkai Forest, Kazėnai Forest and Narutis Forest in Lithuania and nowadays Belarus, until July 1944. As a result of anti-Semitism, the partisan squads were formed on an ethnic basis. Recruitment was carried out and priority was given to young men with weapons – staying in the forest had meant not an escape, but an active struggle against the Nazis. Women in the squads were not considered equal fighters to men and had to prove their courage and loyalty. The partisans were suffering from constant hunger and severe living conditions; they were plagued by parasites, and it was difficult to maintain personal hygiene. There were strict rules and military order in the squads, but nonetheless, some social relations and traditions were formed; women and men lived in the forests for almost two years. The situation of the women in the different squads was not the same. Women were often treated with contempt and subjected to sexual harassment or abuse by squad members. Women and the youth who fought in the forest had to earn the respect and equal treatment of men by being courageous and demonstrating a strong will.

Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky remembers: 'While in the forest, we felt like we were men ... But the commander of squad once said, "You're not men!" Every time I had to prove my truth ...'<sup>24</sup> Such attitude towards the women in the squad brought constant stress on the gender issue.

Rachel Margolis writes in her memory book how the squad commander told to her when she wanted to join the squad that for a woman, and even more a Jew, there is no place in the squad because a woman is a burden.<sup>25</sup>

Sara Ginaitė-Rubinson mentions the case when the commander of a squad refused to accept a group of underground members who reached the 'Death to the Occupiers' squad in Rūdninkai Forest. He said, 'they came without weapons, they brought too many women... they will have nothing to do.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Рахиль Марголис (Rachil Margolis), *op. cit.*, pp. 297–298.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky (18 November 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Рахиль Марголис (Rachil Margolis), *op. cit.*, p. 389.

<sup>26</sup> Sara Ginaitė-Rubinsonienė, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

The fact that women were not welcome in partisan units is also confirmed by Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky: 'Joining a squad means having weapons. We didn't have them. The attitude towards girls in the partisan squads was different.'<sup>27</sup> So women faced not only difficult survival conditions, but also discrimination and various forms of violence. The only way to survive was through the women's comradeship, their support, their warnings of impending danger and their consolation in times of difficulty.

Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky talks about the women's solidarity:

I remember the forest and a long log; an impressive tall man and a blonde woman were sitting there. Myself and Chaila Šapiro introduced ourselves. The man asked questions. He was Miceika. He asked how we came there, various things. And suddenly he said: "You girls are so energetic, and willing to fight! I want to take you to my squad". He mentioned the Adam Mickiewicz Squad. But suddenly the blonde woman said: "I'm not going to give you Jewish girls!" We, astonished, said: "How can it be?" We were shocked: "What? The Jewish girls are worse than the others? Is that a kind of anti-Semitism?"[...] I said to Chiena [Borovskaya], "We got out of the ghetto to [join] the partisans, and here we find anti-Semitism!" And she said to me, "Calm down". That [blonde] woman was Albina [Gessia Gleser]. Chiena explained to me: "You know, the situation in the partisan squads is different. Especially for the girls ... after all, different people have gathered". And Albina knew and understood that the moral attitudes in the Jewish group would be completely different from that in the gang of people of various kinds.<sup>28</sup>

Ruzka Korczak-Marla is a former prisoner of the Vilna ghetto, a member of the underground organisation of the ghetto and a fighter of Jewish partisan squad 'Avenger' in the Rūdninkai Forest. In her book, she mentions the sexual abuse in the partisan battalions:

The [Soviet] partisan squads were mostly formed from men. In some squads, women performed special tasks or worked in the kitchen. The situation of the girls in such squads was particularly difficult and sometimes unbearable. Among them, only few won the equivalent position of a fighter, and such women were respected by partisans. Most suffered contempt and disrespect as there was a widespread belief that the role of a woman in the forest was to satisfy men's sexual hunger. This put the Jewish girls in Soviet partisan units in a situation where they had to go through the most severe trials. They had not only to protect their right to fight but also to protect their dignity and female honour. They had to live in a constant nervous tension, be careful in every step, and continuously control what they [say] and their body language. Not everyone was ready to endure it. Rather often they had to succumb to the harassment of an "important" leader or a "hero", and it was rooted in the fear of revenge in the event of refusal. Some girls deliberately chose to have a relationship with one partisan in order to be protected from the harassment of others, and to be normally treated or have better living conditions. Those who did not give up – and there were many of them – lived particularly hard, both in moral and material senses. In the Jewish partisan squads, the situation was different.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky (18 November 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky (18 November 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Ружка Корчак (Ruzhka Korchak), *op. cit.*, p. 324.

Rachel Margolis writes in her book: 'there was an unwritten rule: if a girl has a boyfriend, no one harasses her.'<sup>30</sup>

Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky remembers:

There were just a few women in the squad. Girls acted as liaisons, especially those whose appearance was not typically Jewish – they were sent to a city to bring those who remained there to the partisans. It was very risky. Some women were doing intelligence tasks, communicating with locals. Some had different tasks, and others worked in the kitchen. While in the forest, we felt like we were men ... But the commander of squad once said, "You're not men!" Every time I had to prove my truth ...<sup>31</sup>

Ruzka Korczak-Marla mentions that women often had to take not only a great deal of personal responsibility, but also collective responsibility for shaping attitudes towards women in the squad:

For the first operation, I was selected [as] the only one from all our women fighters; we felt that the fate of all the female part of the squad depended on me. If I accomplished the task entrusted to me, it would pave the way for other girls.<sup>32</sup>

Femininity in partisan units was quite dangerous. Rachel Margolis mentions that the gun was a guarantee of femininity and that the combat boots symbolised the will to fight<sup>33</sup>. Sara Ginaitė-Rubinson also writes about the importance of guns in her memoirs:

The most pleasant surprise of that holiday [March 8] was the moment when our commander Kostas solemnly handed me a gun. Out of joy and surprise, I didn't even thank him for the gift, but just started kissing and hugging the gun that was new and never used before. I was one of the first women in our squad who received her personal gun.<sup>34</sup>

Living by the order of the squad posed a moral dilemma for young women: how to adapt to difficult living conditions and preserve the female identity.

Sara Ginaitė-Rubinson remembers:

On 8 March, all the women of the squad were free from any work and duties. All work, even the most 'feminine', was done by men. [...] We washed ourselves, took care of our hair, and helped each other to dress nicely. Some of the girls wanted to look specifically "feminine". They wore skirts, were dressed in colourful blouses, and painted their lips. Others wanted their clothing to prove girls' equality with men. They wore trousers and jackets, and put on belts. I put on the new brown pants sewn for me by partisan T. Friedman right here at the base, a warm brown shirt, polished shoes and two belts.<sup>35</sup>

It should be noted that in the struggle to be equal to men in combat tasks, women were

<sup>30</sup> Рахиль Марголис (Rachil Margolis), *op. cit.*, p. 359.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky (18 November 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Ружка Корчак (Ruzhka Korchak), *op. cit.*, p. 277.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Rachil Margolis (21 April 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Sara Ginaitė-Rubinsonienė, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

also responsible for the entire household and daily chores, along with their struggle for honour, dignity, femininity and efforts to prove their worth.

Sara Ginaitė-Rubinson writes in her memory book:

Nobody in the squad taught the women how to fight, how to use weapons, nobody provided them with clothes and hygiene products. The partisan women had to learn everything and take care of everything themselves. [...] The days were devoted to short breaks, to guard duty, to “women’s work” on the base. [...] Our women’s lives were extremely difficult. [...] We women had to do a lot of so-called women’s work. We all peeled potatoes and cleaned the kitchen in our free time between combat tasks and guard duty. Our girls washed “their” and “foreign” men’s underwear, with hands that were swollen and red from the cold and damp.<sup>36</sup>

### **The power imbalance and a cycle of power and control**

Different kinds of violence that women used to face daily<sup>37</sup> explain the theory of the power imbalance that consisted of a cycle of power and control.<sup>38</sup> It is a scheme used by the stronger (men) to take away the power to resist from the weaker (women). What does this mean? It means intimidation with a look, gesture, showing weapons, and voice (raising, cursing, insulting). It is not yet physical violence, but it already clearly shows that if a man gets angry, the consequences will be terrible, so a woman must control her behaviour. This is clear psychological violence – humiliating, belittling, saying that ‘you are worthless’, ‘you will not make it’, ‘you are only a woman’, and so on. An abused woman then puts in a lot of effort for proving herself but this really does not help. As the psychological violence is an intentional act by which the abuser takes control of the abused person’s life, denigrating her as a person, her physical and mental abilities<sup>39</sup>, the suspension of abuse is only in the hands of the abuser.

Demonstrating male power privileges (‘I’m a man so the guns are mine and the power is mine, and I can decide when to start and when to stop the violence’, and ‘you are nobody – just a woman, a handmaiden, a weakling who has to obey my demands’) is one of the signs of psychological abuse. The isolation of the social environment (war, loss of loved ones, new environment without the support of friends, colleagues, neighbours) is an extremely favourable medium for the development of violence. Psychologically traumatic daily behav-

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163.

<sup>37</sup> Sara Ginaitė-Rubinsonienė, *Atminimo knyga: Kauno žydų bendruomenė 1941–1944 metais*, Vilnius: Margi raštai, 1999 pp. 126–127, 148, 162–164; Ружка Корчак, *Пламя под пеплом*, Тель-Авив: Библиотека Алия, 1977, pp. 277, 324. [Ruzhka Korchak, *Пламя под пеплом*, Тель-Авив: Библиотека Алия, 1977]; Рахиль Марголис, *Немного света во мраке*, Вильнюс: Государственный Еврейский музей имени Вильнюсского Гаона, 2006, pp. 126–127, 297–298, 300–302, 359, 389. [Rachil Margolis, *Nemnogo sveta vo mrake*, Vilnius: Gosudarstvenniiy evreyskiy muzeiy imeni Vilniuskogo Gaona, 2006].

<sup>38</sup> *The Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project – EuroPRO-Fem*, Duluth, Minnesota, USA, 1993.

<sup>39</sup> Evan Stark, “Rethinking Coercive Control”, in: *Violence Against Women*, vol. 15, no. 12, 2009, pp. 1509–1525, [online], in: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801209347452> (30-01-2023).

our establishes pathological patterns of behaviour. According to Kęstutis Miškinis, violence is not only physical, but also emotional suffering, which manifests itself in the demonstration of power and rough coercion. All this is done purposefully, gaining the victim's obedience and humility, forcing the object of violence to suffer, providing unpleasant experiences, injuring it.<sup>40</sup> The circle of power and control shows how the strong one limits or takes away the possibility of resistance. Therefore, it is very difficult to start talking about violence that is experienced in a close environment (partisan battalion, home). Women then usually experience feelings of shame, which is also shaped by the surrounding environment. It is very difficult to talk about the violence experienced, even after a few or even a dozen years. It is almost unreal. Abusers know this and control it, therefore they can abuse, manipulate and do whatever they want. Therefore, first of all there is psychological terror, and then there is already a much greater assumption that the woman is also sexually harassed. These are serious, complex crimes that affect people psychologically and it is extremely difficult to get out of it. It takes a long time to step back and realise that an abused person can function on their own. But society must take these crimes very seriously too. The response to violence after escaping the ghetto and fighting in the forests not only with the Nazis but for daily survival was impossible. Where do you run to and hide? How do you survive in the forest alone and being broken during the winter? The only supportive aspect facing such difficult life conditions was the solidarity of the women who were fighting the enemies as partisans as well as fighting a constant battle for their dignity and survival.

During the conversations with the survivors and also reading their diaries, it was possible to identify some of the toxic positivity as a consequence of the psychological violence. The toxic positivity could be described as an ignorance of the problems in a forced way (that helps to deal with trauma) of looking at any problems only positively, as if not recognising or naming the difficulties that have arisen. Such behaviour causes a lot of stress. Often, the survivors mention such words as: challenges, difficulties, troubled times or even 'this is the price that I had to pay for my survival'<sup>41</sup> (Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky), but this is manipulation of semantics or self-deception that also reveals deep consequences of trauma and difficulties dealing with the past.

### **The importance of storytelling for healing**

People construct identity through telling their stories.<sup>42</sup> Looking back to the past and projecting the future, they create life as a meaningful story in which events are inseparable from each other, proving a continuity to life. Identity is defined as a dynamic, mutable pro-

<sup>40</sup> Kęstutis Miškinis, *Šeima žmogaus gyvenime*, Kaunas: AB Aušra, 2003, p. 308.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky (18 November 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Dan P. McAdams, "What We Know When We Know a Person", in: *Journal of Personality*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2005, pp. 365–396; Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories", in: *Reviews of General Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2001, pp. 100–122.

cess expressed through the retelling of the life stories, and whose content is made up of personal identity (self-assessment, values, goals) and social identity (roles, membership in an ethnic, social or religious group) which are judged and change according to changes in the social context. Here, the muted stories also shape the identity of the survivors and have a huge potential to be inherited.

The goal of the project was to collect interviews and testimonies and to analyse the effect of traumatic events of the Holocaust on the survivors' daily life. In addition, we wanted to have a closer look at how trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next. We found that impossible mourning and wounds of the memory are frozen in silence<sup>43</sup> and have been transmitted from generation to generation. There is also a feeling of guilt due to the fact that family members had been left behind in the ghettos when individuals left to join the partisans in the forests. We believe that today, almost 80 years later, the survivors, their children and grandchildren are facing mainly the same struggles, even if nobody talks about what has happened; not in the public discourse and very often not within the families either.

To share the story means to put effort into building a bridge between past and present that would help to connect generations, and to heal the soul wounds. The term 'healing the soul wounds' was introduced by the psychologist Eduardo Duran, who highlighted the transfer of intergenerational trauma and introduced day-to-day tools for healing<sup>44</sup> that include commemorative and narration practices for both personal and communal healing. Many survivors were transformed by their experiences and suffered with symptoms that would now be described as post-traumatic stress disorder. Surprisingly, in the years that followed, children of survivors were also significantly affected because learned biological symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic behaviour could be passed directly from one generation to the next via an epigenetic mechanism.<sup>45</sup>

The storytelling, like healing practice, includes the need to discover the facts about the survivor themselves. This includes the family and other people, to testify personally what happened, to give some kind of evaluation, have the desire to pass the knowledge of the loss to children and grandchildren, and to remember their death. This is a long day-to-day process that includes not only personal but social aspects as well. The goal of narrating personal stories has a tendency to teach others to prevent intolerance, ignorance and violence and to show what might be the consequences of being indifferent. Thus, personal

<sup>43</sup> Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration*, Camden House, 2006, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counselling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Rachel Yehuda, Amy Lehrner, "Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects: Putative Role of Epigenetic Mechanisms", in: *World Psychiatry*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2018, pp. 243–257.

stories can help in adding details to the unknown past and can heal society from the prejudices and stereotypes. Willingness to know and to accept the pain of others, empathy and solidarity is required from society to treat psychological wounds which arose from traumatic experiences. The healing process is considered to be in progress, then the story that is shared includes emotions and becomes not only a collection of different facts but a personal evaluation of the events. The wound of trauma may have a scar, but it is no longer open and, metaphorically, bleeding. However, it does not mean the pain will not pop up when you try to share. The process of healing the soul wound is a long-term healing procedure full of challenges and setbacks, but in a long run it lets us ground traumas in a proper way and connects us to reality.

Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky, during the interview, says:

Many who survived in the ghetto and various [concentration] camps told nothing to their loved ones. ... stayed silent for a long time ... couldn't talk. And their children did not know what they were going through. And only in recent years many started coming to Paneriai. And they started talking. Myself to my family – also ... My children were born ... I started telling them from the first day.<sup>46</sup>

### **Influence of muted traumatic experiences on the daughters of the Holocaust survivors**

At the end of the war, squads of Jewish partisans that operated in the forests were demobilised, prisoners who survived returned from the concentration camps, and ghetto prisoners who escaped and were supported by the locals at their hiding places were freed. Female Holocaust survivors began to create a new life based on family and children. If there was an opportunity, some of them repatriated to Israel, keeping the most painful experiences to themselves. The women who survived the Holocaust by joining to the anti-Nazi resistance used to create their narratives based on the heroic combat memories. Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky, during the interview, says that 'all women who were in *partizanka* were heroines'<sup>47</sup> and 'all that happened good and bad was the price that we had to pay for our survival'.<sup>48</sup> According to Ruth Reches, the trauma caused by the Holocaust during the war changed people's identity – the struggle for survival forced them to adjust their goals, take on new roles and question established values.<sup>49</sup> Although the women seem to have adapted quite successfully in life and had professions and jobs, created families and gave birth, they could not avoid being haunted by post-traumatic memories that had influenced the second generation. It was not that the Holocaust was never discussed in the

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Fania Yocheles-Brantsovsky (18 November 2018).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Ruth Reches, *Holokaustą patyrusių asmenų tapatumo išgyvenimas [Holocaust Survivors' Experiences of Identity]*, Vilnius: Slinktys, 2020, p. 118.

families, but the second generation mentioned during the interviews that the stories told were fragmented and uncompleted on the way. It is noteworthy that the survivors wanted their family members to know what had happened to them but only up to a certain level.

Testimonies of the daughters of female survivors reveal that even muted traumatic experiences were passed down the generations, and had a negative impact on three generations. Even the daughters of the women who faced traumatic experiences are reluctant to talk about past events. This is demonstrated by the high number of interviewees who want to remain anonymous.

My mom ran a psychologically difficult marathon of life. It's so hard to talk ... it hurts so much...<sup>50</sup>

All my life I live with the story of my mother. I am tired of this.<sup>51</sup>

[What did your mother tell about her traumatic experiences?] I don't know what to highlight. There are not more important or less important accents. This is daily life. No. We don't ask [her] because then nervous tension appears.<sup>52</sup>

In general we talk about the present and remember only good things. We don't touch this topic. Yes, children used to ask ... We understand that it brings a lot of pain ... for all of us...<sup>53</sup>

My mother didn't tell me everything [...] She probably couldn't. After all she had lived through... She tried to cope with it, didn't blame anyone, kept in touch with other partisans who, in a way, represented her lost family.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the memories of the painful experiences being muted for decades, their daughters mention that opening up is not easy; it requires a lot of courage but can contribute to processing the healing of trauma:

Talking is better than keeping everything inside and silently trying to answer these questions. If I would be younger I look for someone to talk. Maybe even would find a bit of courage to ask more questions to my mother ... but now it is too late ... I hope my experience will help other women with the difficult childhood and past not to repeat the same mistakes.<sup>55</sup>

It is very good that you are asking these questions. But the problem is that I cannot answer them ... But I agree that people should know. For this we have to talk.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that the Holocaust happened almost 80 years ago, the trauma of the Holocaust survivors continues up until the present time. Bessel van der Kolk says that nobody can cure the wounds of war and violence because it is impossible to turn back time, although it is possible to overcome the footsteps of trauma and to liberate yourself from

<sup>50</sup> Interview with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor (8 January 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Interview with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor (13 March 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Interview with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor (21 February 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Interview with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor (8 January 2020).

<sup>54</sup> Interview with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor (13 March 2020).

<sup>55</sup> Interview with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor (2 May 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Interview with the daughter of a Holocaust survivor (8 January 2020).

the fear, anger, shame and collapse.<sup>57</sup> The project revealed that women who joined the anti-Nazi resistance units in the forests had to make choices from dilemmas that determined their future lives. Even if the choice was made with the support of their families, it is difficult for the women survivors to talk about it even the decades afterwards.

The nature of the event of the Holocaust was such that every day brought undefined life-threatening events during the war and later on. The adaptation process in the anti-Nazi resistance units was very difficult and complicated for the former ghetto women prisoners. Difficult living conditions was not the only issue. The biggest challenges were related to the gender discrimination that caused breaches with the female identity. Only a small percentage of women had weapons and the opportunity to participate in the active fights or sabotage activities. Nevertheless, they always had to prove their worth to be in the battle actions because this was not only personal responsibility but collective as well for shaping attitudes towards women in the squad. Women were also responsible for all the household and daily chores, along with their struggle for honour, dignity, femininity and efforts to prove their worth.

Research has shown that the after-effect of trauma disabled the survivors from talking about very personal and sensitive events as feelings of shame and being 'guilty' of survival chased them all their life. In most cases, the survivors tried to protect their children from their traumatic experiences, by not talking about them. This shows a tremendous effort to normalise their life by choosing to live a double life. After analysing all collected material, several challenging aspects were identified. First, we have seen that even decades after the war has ended, it is still very difficult for the women survivors to share their personal traumatic experiences. This is because of the fear of becoming 'different' in the eyes of others and, consequently, not accepted by society because of not fitting expectations. Second, muted memories have a unique tendency to be inherited and leave deep psychological scars for the next generations, and contribute to shaping their behaviour and understanding of themselves. The women of the post-memory generation, the second generation, build up their identity based on the unspoken traumatic past of the mothers, who tried to protect their children by keeping their experiences in secret for decades.<sup>58</sup> But nevertheless, the children of the Holocaust survivors inherit their parents' marks of the wounds, the signifier for an experience not personally experienced – 'the scar without the wound'.<sup>59</sup>

The research showed that after the war ended, the Holocaust was continued in the

<sup>57</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *Kūnas mena viską. Kaip išgydyti kūno, proto ir sielos traumas*, Vilnius: Liūtai ne avys, 2020, pp. 324–325.

<sup>58</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012 (30-01-2023), [online], in: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/hirs15652>.

<sup>59</sup> Efraim Sicher, "The Burden of Memory: The Writings of the Post-Holocaust Generation", in: *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, edited by Efraim Sicher, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998, pp. 26–27.

memories<sup>60</sup> of survivors and even influenced memories of their children. During this research project, which asked the informants to talk about their former traumatic experiences, we recognised the importance of openness for healing processes – not only for the time they were witnesses themselves, but also for their children and grandchildren. If the individual can foresee the end of their suffering, they have a greater ability to deal with the trauma.<sup>61</sup> A few interviewees mentioned that they took the decision to talk because sharing feelings encourages the openness of others. When we open ourselves up, it becomes safer for the other person to talk about personal experiences. Women who nowadays face a different kind of violence that affects a person's identity also often become distant, live in fear, and remain alone with their feelings and experiences. They do not expect to receive help – for this reason they do not seek it, thus deepening the wounds of their soul. Open conversation helps to overcome psychological traumas and gives hope and encouragement.

The testimonies of the survivors and their daughters illustrate that wounds of the soul remain open through several generations. That it is still difficult to talk about what has happened, is demonstrated by the high number of interviewees who want to remain anonymous. Even the daughters and granddaughters of the women who faced traumatic experiences are reluctant to talk about past events. The interviews identified emotional tension within the second generation and confusion within the third generation, and revealed very clearly that traumatic experiences have a long-term tendency to remain, especially if being muted.

<sup>60</sup> Danutė Gailienė, *Ką jie mums padarė, Lietuvos gyvenimas traumų psichologijos žvilgsniu*, Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2021, p. 53.

<sup>61</sup> Ruth Reches, *Holokaustą patyrusių asmenų tapatumo išgyvenimas [Holocaust Survivors' Experiences of Identity]*, Vilnius: Slinktys, 2020, p. 46.

Neringa Latvytė

**Nutildyti pasakojimai apie trauminės Lietuvos žydžių, dalyvavusių partizaniniame pasipriešinime naciams, patirtis**

*Santrauka*

Straipsnyje analizuojamos skaudžios nutylėtos patirtys ir dilemos, su kuriomis susidūrė merginos ir jaunos moterys. Siekdamos nepasiduoti žiaurioms Antrojo pasaulinio karo ir Holokausto sąlygoms, jos prisijungė prie getų pogrindžio ir sugebėjo pasitraukti į miškus, kad tęstų antinacinę kovą partizanų daliniuose. Dėl antisemitizmo partizanų būriai formavosi etniniu pagrindu, į juos vykdavo atranka ir prioritetą buvo teikiamas jauniems vyrams, atsinešusiems ginklą: išėjimas į miškus reiškė ne išsigelbėjimą, bet aktyvią kovą su naciais. Į būrius atvykusios moterys nebuvo laikomos lygiavertėmis vyrams ir turėjo įrodyti savo drąsą bei lojalumą. Ilgą laiką nutylėtos partizanų patirtys, kurias jos įvardija kaip kainą už išgyvenimą, palieka sielos randus, kurie pasimiršta, bet neužgyja ir išlieka labai skaudūs. Prisiminimai šiuos randus atveria iš naujo, o baimė, gėdos jausmas, netikrumas ir stresas, net apie juos nekalbant, gali būti perduodami iš kartos į kartą. Holokaustą išgyvenusių moterų liudijimai atskleidžia psichologines traumas, sukeliančias tapatybės lūžius, ir pabrėžia moteriško solidarumo svarbą gyvybei pavojingų aplinkybių akivaizdoje. Karui pasibaigus, jis ir toliau tęsiasi moterų ir jų vaikų prisiminimuose tol, kol drąsa prabilti padėjo suprasti savo jausmus ir atsiverti pasauliui.

Kas nutinka, kai supanti aplinka tampa grėsminga ir pavojinga gyvybei? Kaip trauminės patirtys keičia tapatybę? Šiame straipsnyje bandoma atsakyti į šiuos sudėtingus klausimus, apklausiant žydes partizanes, remiantis jų dienoraščiais, atsiminimais ir liudijimais.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Holokaustas, tylioji atmintis, trauminė praeitis, moterys, išgyvenusieji, partizanai, pasipriešinimas.