**An Unexpected but Fruitful Academic Journey**

By: Lisa Pine, London South Bank University, London, UK

**Introduction:**

It is indeed an honour and a privilege to be part of this project, among the pioneering scholars in the field who have influenced my own research and among colleagues whose tireless and important work has forged a significant place in the development of Holocaust historiography. It is an excellent opportunity for me to reflect upon both my personal and my professional identities, to look back on the path that led me to where I am today, to recollect from childhood and family experiences, and to consider where my future research and writing may take me.

**Family History and Education:**

To begin with my family history, I was born in London in 1966 and grew up in a suburb of London within a strong Jewish community. However, among Anglo Jews my interest in the Holocaust and the development of my writing in this and related areas, is perhaps not the most likely or expected, as I come from the community of Bukharian Jews. My father was born in Tashkent in the USSR, now Uzbekistan, and my mother though born in the UK, was of the same ethnic and religious background. Not only was our community much, much smaller than the Ashkenazi community in Britain, but also my family - on both my parents’ sides - had no direct experience of the Holocaust. Fortunately, Hitler made it neither to Central Asia nor to Great Britain. Hence my personal and professional journey to Holocaust studies was not a direct result of my family’s history.

In terms of education, I went to a Jewish (and orthodox) primary school, which of course played a very important role in instilling Jewish religious traditions and values in me. In my home and family life too, I was imbued with this ethos and especially the concept of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world). I have no doubt that these early socialisation influences had a bearing on my eventual profession as a university lecturer and author, but I shall return to that later. My secondary education was at a leading private girls’ school, where the pupils came from a variety of different religious backgrounds. My university education consisted of three degrees, all at the London School of Economics and Political Science. My first degree was a BSc (Econ) Government and History. After this, I completed my MSc International History and my PhD, awarded in 1996, was on the subject of ‘The Family in Nazi Germany’. In all regards, together with my older brother David I had a privileged and fortunate education throughout and a happy childhood in which I knew my identity and had a strong sense of how I fitted into both the Bukharian Jewish community and British society.

My first introduction to the subject of the Holocaust growing up was a visit to Anne Frank’s house in Amsterdam in 1977. However, I was quite young and do not have much recollection of this. A key moment of exposure to the subject was the four-part television mini-series *Holocaust*, which was made in 1978. I think that my parents had made a conscious decision at that point to sit us down in front of the television to watch that series together. Of course, it was shocking and made me cry, but I suppose what it really did was to make me wonder, as I still do today,- what made people behave in that way. It was difficult to conceive and to understand. It still is. Whilst I do not recall all the details of the series, I do remember my shock and disbelief that the Jewish people of Europe were transported in cattle cars to camps where they were slaughtered en masse.

**My Academic Path to this Subject Area:**

In tracing my academic path to this subject, I make a jump from my early teenage years to the second year of my undergraduate degree to a course on ‘Fascism and National Socialism in Interwar Europe’. This was without doubt the course that most interested and inspired me as a student, so that when I did my Masters degree, I wrote a dissertation comparing Italian Fascist and Nazi Germany film propaganda, which I thought was a fascinating subject. When it came to trying to find an original topic for my PhD, I started with the idea of wanting to research on the subject of women and film in Nazi Germany.

My initial explorations of the historiography in the early 1990s led me to discover that a new field was emerging in women’s studies and women’s history, with some pioneering studies of women in Nazi Germany, especially by Jill Stephenson.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition, very influential to me at that time was the book *When Biology Became Destiny* (that I am now contributing to a book with some of its co-editors and writers is very pleasing to me).[[2]](#footnote-2) It became clear to me that whilst perhaps my initial idea was not as viable as I had hoped, there was certainly a gap in the historical literature on the subject of the family in Nazi Germany and that became the focus of my PhD research. I had a lot of support from my former MSc supervisor, the great Donald Cameron Watt (who passed away a few years ago and whose memorial service I attended in London in 2015) and benefitted from the intellectual eminence of Michael Burleigh, who supervised my PhD.

The course of my PhD research led me to examine not only what the Nazis considered to be ‘valuable’ families, but also the extremes of German family policy, between the promotion of "Aryan" German families on the one hand, and the destruction of those who did not fit in to the Nazis’ "national community" on the other. I looked at "asocial" families in one chapter, as an example of people who did not conform, but I also had a chapter on Jewish families, to further explore this seed in my mind from my early teenage years and my finding out about the Holocaust, to discover what happened to "racially inferior" families in German society. My doctoral research took me on many visits to a variety of German archives, including the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archive), which was then at Koblenz, but subsequently moved to Berlin. As I researched the chapter on Jewish families, however, I also visited Jerusalem, where I spent valuable time at the Yad Vashem archive, reading testimonies, as well as to New York, where I did the same at the Leo Baeck Institute. Once again, I was very fortunate to have been awarded research funding both in the form of a grant for my doctoral research as a whole, as well as additional funding for some of these archival research trips. My PhD research provided me with the material for my first book, which was published in 1997.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Writing in the Area of Holocaust Studies:**

My first foray into writing anything at all directly in the area of Holocaust studies was the outcome of a request from Dan Stone to write a chapter for his edited book *The Historiography of the Holocaust* on the subject of ‘Gender and the Family’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of course, this was a very new and emerging area of study at the time, with just a few scholars having written on this topic previously. The chapter was a discussion of the state of the academic literature in the field of Holocaust Studies. The main points to be made were that the perspectives of gender, children and the family were becoming established within the broader field of Holocaust studies, which added an entirely new dimension to the historiography and to our understanding of the subject as a whole. I was subsequently invited by the editor of the *Journal of Jewish Identities* to write an article on ‘Gender and Holocaust Victims’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Over the years, my main research and writing has centred on my abiding interest in the social history of the Third Reich, in particular, women and the family, education and youth groups, the "national community" and the themes of inclusion and exclusion in Nazi society. I am primarily a social historian and have always been interested in how the Nazi dictatorship functioned and in the complexities of the relationship between the regime and the German people. In the burgeoning historiography of the Third Reich, this too was an area that needed to be developed beyond the earlier historical interest in the politics of the Nazi regime and the mechanisms of the dictatorship. But, of course, these studies of the Third Reich could not preclude analysis of aspects of Nazi anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, because these formed an intrinsic part of what Nazism was about and the consequences of its government.

**Researching and Writing on Gender and the Holocaust:**

And so, at the same time, I continued to give some attention to looking more at gender and the Holocaust and came to consider a need to explore female Holocaust narratives, which I did over the course of a number of years. My work in this field has focused on the importance of the social construction of female identities and roles in the history of the Holocaust. It has analysed the structural sources of gender difference in relation to Nazi persecution before the war and then the distinctions between the ways in which Jewish men and women experienced the Holocaust, using significant examples from both male and female survivors’ accounts to underline and illustrate the key points. In particular, it has discussed gender-related experiences at Auschwitz. It has examined female behaviour that conformed to traditional gender norms, such as adaptation and coping mechanisms and social bonding among female victims.

My work additionally considered female behaviour that differed from the expected female type. While this is an uncomfortable topic, it is nevertheless an important one. The literature had tended to overlook the desperate actions taken by Holocaust victims in order to survive under the appalling conditions in which they found themselves. But this does not mean that they did not occur. The purpose of such discussion is not to judge, but to offer a more complete picture of Holocaust experiences and to try to establish a greater historical understanding of the subject.

The lens of gender provides a useful tool for interpreting the behaviour and experiences of Holocaust victims. Gender is a characteristic of all human experience. Both masculinity and femininity have been socially constructed and shaped by historical circumstances and expectations. Moving away from universal interpretations, both women’s experiences as specifically female and men’s experiences as specifically male, are significant to our understanding of the Holocaust. The field of Holocaust studies that was gender neutral until the 1980s now includes a substantial literature on gender. Furthermore, a comparatively recent, yet substantial output of memoirs and testimonies by female Holocaust survivors has ensured that women’s voices are no longer unheard. These developments in the historiography have meant that scholars are now in a much better position to understand the diversity and complexity of the experiences of Holocaust victims.

My work has contributed to this field by analysing survivor narratives from the perspective of gender. In many ways, women were placed in a position of "double jeopardy". They were in a position of blame not only for behaving in a particular manner or for carrying out an act or deed, but also because by doing so, they contravened the social construction of femininity that they should not prostitute themselves or kill their babies in order to survive.[[6]](#footnote-6) During their imprisonment at Auschwitz, women had to opt for agency and make choices in a variety of ways that were distinctive from those made by men. Survivor Viktor Frankl notes that for men too, the "choice of action" existed even in the face of the terrible privations they faced at Auschwitz.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the end, all Jews were equally destined for death, but there were differences on the road to that destination for men and women. Women’s and men’s experiences of the Holocaust were not identical, but as Myrna Goldenberg has suggested, they were "different horrors" within the "same hell".[[8]](#footnote-8) Hence, an analysis of gender-based distinctions in Holocaust experiences and the ways in which they have been narrated by female (and male) survivors, adds an important angle to our knowledge and understanding of this dark chapter in modern history.

**The Impact of the Subject on me as the Researcher:**

It has not been an easy subject area to work on, but it is one I regard as significant and compelling. In seeking to understand the enormity of the Holocaust, an examination of survivor memoirs and testimonies is essential. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the fact that survivors, male or female, are unable to bear witness to the suffering of the six million Jewish victims of Nazi policy who did not survive. As Primo Levi has written: ‘we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses’.[[9]](#footnote-9) This point is underlined in the memoir of Henry Wermuth, who wrote: ‘How could I even attempt to describe all the wretched misery, the death cries of millions of innocent people? … Being in these camps does not, contrary to the assumptions of many, imply that I knew all and everything there was to know about them’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Each and every aspect was either experienced or remembered differently. In the end, the examples that historians and other scholars use from memoirs and testimonies are illustrative, not comprehensive.

Not only the narrative, but also the concept of the survivor and what the survivor represents to us, is very significant. Survivors have a special, although unenviable, status characterised by what Robert Lifton has called "the death imprint", an imprint formed by having survived death or having witnessed the deaths of others and still remained alive. Lifton suggests that we should not glorify survivors though, as doing so, "diminishes the survivor and interferes with our understanding of both what is particular to his or her ordeal and what insight it might reveal about our own psychological and historical condition".[[11]](#footnote-11) Yet, we do feel distinct from them. They have lived through an experience we can only try to imagine. We feel overwhelmed by their recollections and we tend to see them as ‘different’ precisely because of what they have experienced and survived.

What was the impact of researching this "hell" upon me as a researcher? I think that the most important thing to be said is that is that it is harrowing work to read survivor memoirs and testimonies, especially when I was going about the business of reading many of them over a sustained amount of time and became immersed in the world of the concentration camps and the death camps, in particular, Auschwitz. Researching a subject like this certainly put my routine concerns and problems into context, making them seem very trivial by comparison. It is very difficult to read the details of victims’ experiences. Accounts of the barbarity and the brutality can be very graphic and disturbing. Furthermore, accounts of betrayal and unkindness on the part of fellow victims towards each other, even former friends or family members, make unpleasant reading. What are the lessons to be learnt about human nature? The human capacity for cruelty, violence and betrayal is still shocking to me, however many accounts I read. There has been comparatively little written about emotions and stress on researchers of traumatic subjects. Yet, exposure to the traumatic experiences of victims can have a profound impact upon us. We internalise their words. They change us. We almost inevitably take in some of the emotional pain through reading traumatic survivor accounts. A recognition that is usual to feel an array of emotions, such as outrage, sadness, horror or vulnerability is a significant part of the mechanism for coping with the impact of such work.

The accounts of Holocaust survivors also have made me feel sad, have made me cry, have made me angry, and have made me feel vulnerable and anxious. They are made up of very painful and difficult material. Whilst survivor accounts are a testament to the endurance of the human body and spirit, they are also a testament to the worst type of evil that human beings are capable of inflicting. Hatred, discrimination, prejudice and violence are a part of humanity, the darker side, which must also be acknowledged. It is unpleasant to keep returning to this fact. I am forced to re-examine my cognitive schema. It has been important to acknowledge all of this and to have in place some support system for myself at times when I am immersed in working on such painful and emotive material. This has usually taken the form of personal support from close family members and friends, as well as the practice of yoga and meditation. However, I supplement this whenever possible, with a "work" support system, in the form of discussions with colleagues working on the same or similar types of subjects. This particular project has been very beneficial in this regard, giving me a sense that I am not alone in my endeavours and of camaraderie with other scholars in this field. It has been important to me to tell the stories of survivors whenever I have an opportunity – to my students, at talks at secondary schools and at academic conferences. I have been fortunate to present aspects of this work at conferences in the UK, Denmark, Poland and the USA, and not only at history conferences, but also at multi-disciplinary ones.

**Auschwitz:**

During the course of undertaking my research on gender and Holocaust victims, I was invited to present my findings at an international conference on "The Legacy of the Holocaust" at the Jagellonian University in Krakow in 2009. Whilst in Poland, I took the opportunity to visit the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The site of Auschwitz is one whose public perception has largely been shaped by second-hand accounts and images from films and documentary programmes. A personal visit to Auschwitz, and hence a first-hand opportunity to see the site, was a very unsettling, odd and emotional experience. Images that had been constructed from films, memoirs and testimonies suddenly became concrete and real. They were not constructs any longer. I had read many accounts and memoirs of survivors bearing witness to the horrific events that took place here, but my physical presence on the site itself added a different dimension to my perception and understanding of the place and its part in modern history.

Auschwitz represents the epitome of an event in history that has shaped and impacted not only Jewish, Polish and German history, but also that of Europe as a whole and indeed has had global ramifications. It has disturbing and chilling associations. It symbolises evil. Here, the worst type of atrocities that human beings are capable of perpetrating upon others took place. As a museum and a memorial site, Auschwitz-Birkenau stands as a highly significant point in European society, culture and history. It generates controversy, elicits strong emotions and evokes horrific images. It is a bleak and grim representation and reminder of some of the most heinous acts and events in our history. It makes us question humanity and consider issues of morality.

At Auschwitz, extermination and the Nazi conquest of *Lebensraum* ("living space") came together, conceptually, temporally and spatially. The site of Auschwitz comprises the original forced labour camp (Auschwitz I), Birkenau, the death camp (Auschwitz II) and the sub-camp, Monowitz (Auschwitz III). The remnants of barracks and other buildings, barbed wire fences, chimneys and railway lines stand as a stark reminder of the history of this place. The scope and barbarity of the events that occurred here have left their mark on the site. It is nowadays visited by large numbers of tourist groups, scholars, students and school groups. In fact, it feels very much like a tourist site, even "attraction", on the Polish map, with trips to Auschwitz amply advertised around the main square in Krakow, which seemed rather strange. It also felt odd to see so many tour buses arriving at the site itself, with large groups of tourists, equipped with their cameras and guidebooks. Nevertheless, on further reflection, it is better that the place is visited and remembered, rather than forgotten, even though it felt somehow rather incongruous to see tourist buses rolling up and coffee shops and bookshops trading in an everyday way at a place with such a horrific historical record.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As Duane Mezga has noted: "The overwhelming nature of the Auschwitz experience seems to require an opportunity to reflect on what has been seen in an attempt to comprehend its scope and meaning. The memorial provides such an opportunity".[[13]](#footnote-13) It also stands as a lasting monument to the victims of National Socialism who perished here. Auschwitz-Birkenau creates a profound impact on the visitor. A trip here is a highly emotional experience, as visitors try to comprehend the enormity and scale of what happened here and to grapple with its meaning. For me, the visit underlined and concretised, in a sense, all I had read in survivor accounts, but even so, it was and still remains very hard to accept man’s inhumanity to man. This is an aspect of working in this subject area with which I am unable to come to terms and which I still find hard to understand, however many accounts I read or however many times I teach the subject. The horror, terror, brutality and barbarity narrated by survivors of the Holocaust are incomprehensible.

**The Holocaust and Genocide from the perspective of gender:**

The study of this particular subject has had a bearing on the direction of my wider research and writing interests too. It has led me to reflect not only on the debate in terms of Holocaust studies, but also in genocide studies. I have been teaching an undergraduate course on genocide for more than a decade, and recently wrote a book on this subject for students.[[14]](#footnote-14) Here, too, I included a section on gender, because it is so crucial in this field of study as well. This is exemplified by many publications on this subject, in particular, Amy Randall’s edited volume on *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century*.[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed, the subject is growing with such speed that Randall is currently preparing a new edition of the book to encompass the most recent developments in the field.

My work has led me more recently to think that the time was ripe to reconsider men’s Holocaust narratives previously regarded as universal, but not so from work we have seen on women’s testimonies from the perspective of male gender. I became interested in masculinity and, in particular, in what male Holocaust survivors chose to relate in their narratives, and what made these distinctive from women’s narratives. My work in this area sheds light on the experiences that pertained to the gendered particularities of male victimisation. It interrogates men’s words, deeds and behaviour under extreme conditions, as well as the choices they made in relation to these circumstances.[[16]](#footnote-16) It also considers both male behaviour that reflected expected gender norms, such as egotism, strength, and identity through work, and male behaviour that deviated from these expectations, such as social bonding to enhance chances of survival. A revisiting of men’s testimonies, previously regarded as "universal", through the lens of gender allows us to understand them as the testimonies of men specifically.

Additionally, the memoirs of the *Sonderkommando* (special detachments) allow us to begin to comprehend the ambivalent position of these male victims at Auschwitz, who served the machinery of death. A fresh reading of these accounts enables us to understand aspects that have not been previously analysed in relation to the gendered experiences of male Holocaust victims. The accounts of *Sonderkommando* survivors are particularly revealing as expressions of male behaviour and choices. The *Sonderkommando* were engaged in the extremely gruesome task of working in the crematoria where the victims’ bodies were burned. Much discussion on the *Sonderkommando* has been concerned with the moral ambivalence of their positions, as they were living in more privileged circumstances in the camp and had a chance to survive longer, whilst carrying out this unenviable and grisly job for their captors. Revisiting their testimonies from the perspective of gender sheds light on the particularities of their experiences, as only male prisoners, selected for their strength, were *Sonderkommando*. A number of salient themes emerge from their testimonies, including their experiences upon arrival at Auschwitz; separation from their families; their attitudes to their work; their association with other workers; their relationship to their overseers; and their use of cigarettes and alcohol. These themes suggest important responses and reactions to their circumstances that were male-gendered.

My recent research has examined the experiences and conduct of male Holocaust victims at Auschwitz specifically in relation to their gender. It has shown the significance men placed on work as a means of dealing with their situation, trying to gain control of it (in a similar way to which women used home making skills to do the same) and surviving. As long as they could perform their work tasks, the chance of survival remained. Inability to work almost inevitably signalled selection and death. Men also chose to portray in their narratives the qualities of strength, courage, autonomy and independence as expected gender norms. Once separated from their wives and children, an obvious aspect of their familiar pattern of behaviour (responsibility for their family members) was taken away. This left them bereft and bewildered, along with the rest of the extreme circumstances in which they found themselves placed at Auschwitz. An analysis of gender-based distinctions in Holocaust experiences, and the ways they have been narrated by men (and women), adds an important angle to our knowledge and understanding of life and death at Auschwitz.

**Concluding thoughts:**

Working in this field has given me an appreciation of the courage and resilience of Holocaust survivors. The will to survive and to bear witness is an enduring part of the spirit of humanity and survivors are a testament to this. Despite their trauma and the horror that they experienced, they went on to start new lives and to make their narratives known in order to try to encourage toleration and a better world for the future through their presentation of their past experiences. In addition, my empathy, compassion and sensitivity towards others have been increased as a result of this work. I have a more heightened awareness of prejudice and discrimination. Reading survivor accounts and reading about the atrocities of the Nazi death camps, in particular, has made me appreciate my family and all the other good things in my own life. Furthermore, it has put into perspective difficulties that I face from time to time, and the mundane problems of everyday life. It has made me think harder about my life, my relationships and my priorities. Overall, this has been an illuminating journey for me. Analysing agency and choices made by both female and male victims and how these either conformed to or deviated from accepted gender norms has taken my research and knowledge in directions I had not expected when I started my academic career. It has been personally satisfying and intellectually rewarding and fruitful to engage in research that is meaningful to me. In terms of future research and writing, I still intend to do more work on the Holocaust, as well as on other aspects of the history of Nazi Germany, the Second World War and its impact on civilian populations.

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1. Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*, London: Croom Helm, 1975, and J. Stephenson, *The Nazi Organisation of Women*, London: Croom Helm, 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann and Marion Kaplan (eds.), *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany,* New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lisa Pine, *Nazi Family Policy, 1933-1945,* Oxford: Berg, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lisa Pine, ‘Gender and Holocaust Victims: A Reappraisal’, *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1 (2008): 121-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This concept of ‘double jeopardy’ features in the title of Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust,* London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2004: 74-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust." in R. Gottlieb (ed.), *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust,* New York: Paulist Press, 1991: 150-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* New York: Summit Books, 1988: 83-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Henry Wermuth, *Breathe Deeply My Son,* London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993: 1; 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robert J. Lifton, ‘The Concept of the Survivor’, in J. Dimsdale (ed.), *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust,* Washington: Taylor and Francis, 1980, pp. 115-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On this, see Daniel P. Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz: Holocaust Tourism and the Meaning of Remembrance,* New York: New York University Press, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Duane Mezga, ‘The Imagery of Auschwitz’, *Landscape Research* Vol. 15 (1990): 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lisa Pine, *Debating Genocide,* London: Bloomsbury, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Amy Randall (ed.), *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century,* London: Bloomsbury, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lisa Pine, ‘The Experiences and Behaviour of Male Holocaust Victims at Auschwitz’, in B. Krondorfer and O. Creanga (eds,), *The Holocaust and Masculinities: Critical Inquiries into the Presence and Absence of Men,* Albany: SUNY Press, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)