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Miscellaneous

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Open Forum Gender Studies and the Holocaust - Reactions by Sue Vice

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Although my interests lie in Holocaust literature and film, I have frequently turned to Andrea Pető's work for her analytical insights. As Dalia Ofer puts it in her contribution to this forum, Pető's methodology is distinctive in following the dual path of 'positivist history and memory studies'. In this way, Pető's article of 2019 on the 'non-remembering' of Holocaust history in Hungary and Poland (Pető 2019) has been crucial to my study of Claude Lanzmann's never-released film interviews with Holocaust eyewitnesses, including that with the Jewish activist Hansi Brand from Hungary (Vice 2021).

This recourse to historical research for the sake of understanding fictional and cinematic texts and their context emphasizes the necessarily interdisciplinary and transnational nature of Holocaust studies and that of Pető's practice within it. Pető has analysed not only archival materials of wide-ranging kinds but also artefacts and representations, many of which are cited in the articles for this forum. These range from memoirs to film, with a focus on figures including the Auschwitz survivor and author Edith Bruck but also the right-wing Arrow Cross leader Piroska Dely.

Indeed, the role of Hansi Brand, as the colleague in Nazi-occupied Budapest of Rezső Kasztner and wife of Joel Brand, both better-known rescuers, typifies that of the occluded or misremembered woman. Such an individual, as Helga Embacher points out in her commentary on Julia Rajk, another such figure from Hungary, continues to be seen primarily in relation to a man. Embacher addresses the 'double discrimination' combining gender with 'ethnicity' or religion, and the politically motivated suppression of acknowledging resistant acts by, or crimes against, women like Rajk, but also Jews and Jewish women. In the widely repeated pattern Embacher identifies, Rajk's efforts to rehabilitate her late husband László and other anti-Soviet figures such as Imre Nagy, 'leader of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956', has succeeded, but at the expense of her own renown. In a parallel with Hannah Szenes,

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Rajk was effectively forgotten until 1989, as Embacher puts it, 'besides being a woman, [for] not being communist enough'.

As all the forum contributions testify, Pető's work is concerned with bringing to light occluded histories of just this kind. In addition, when such histories are acknowledged, Pető shows how they continue to be strategically misremembered, especially within illiberal regimes. Pető's focus lies on the history of women caught up in twentieth- and twenty-first century political upheavals, including their role as beneficiaries and perpetrators; that of Jewish individuals; and of the violent changes of regime and ideological practice that inform perspectives on the 'difficult past' in such locations as Hungary, Germany, Croatia and Poland. The enforced or unconsciously chosen silences about Jewish life and Holocaust-era persecution and murder demand their own interpretation, especially when intersecting with the suppression of women's experience. As Ofer argues here of the post-war conception of the Holocaust on the part of Jews and non-Jews in Hungary, 'the two seemingly opposing groups attempted, each for different reasons, to avoid the painful issues'.

While much of Pető's work focuses, as Embacher reminds us, on Hungarian-Jewish relations from the perspective of the latter, it also crucially addresses women's participation in right-wing movements. In her discussion of the Csengery Street massacre of October 1944, in which killing and looting was undertaken by women of the Arrow Cross, Ofer introduces the notion of the 'hidden text'. This responds to Pető's study of the atrocity and the motivation of these forgotten perpetrators, only one of whom, Piroska Dely, was prosecuted for her role. As Ofer argues, the transcripts of Dely's trial are important precisely because of what they conceal: 'one of the implicit issues was the antisemitic motivation of the rioters and their material gains', which 'gave meaning to the rioters' participation in the killing and looting' but went unstated. As Ofer concludes, Pető 'converses with the historiography' on female perpetration to enable 'a broader and more intense examination of the connection between gender and right-wing extremism'.

It is no coincidence that three of the four contributors to this forum address Pető's work on Hannah Szenes, and the latter's standing as an extreme example of this phenomenon of women's occluded history. Szenes is globally famous, yet selectively understood, as a progressive Zionist pioneer and writer whose audacious wartime actions led to her execution as a traitor back in her native Hungary. The qualified recall of these aspects of Szenes' short life – she was killed at the age of 23 – emerges in part from the conventional stress laid even within gender studies on 'women's suffering, sacrifice and victimhood', as Embacher claims. Such an emphasis bypasses questions of female 'agency and subjectivity' in a way that can be 'easily instrumentalized' for populist ends.

From Ofer's standpoint, Szenes' biography parallels that of her contemporaries in Israel, whose European-born parents hailed from families depleted by the

Holocaust. For Lori Weintrob, Pető's analysis is striking for showing that even – or especially – Szenes, 'the most famous of Hungarian-born Zionists', is 'invisible' in Hungary. Szenes' story lays bare what Weintrob describes as 'the difficulty of framing in Hungary a *Bildungsroman* – "coming of age" story – of a middle-class youth who was drawn to the left-wing Zionism of the Halutz movement'. Szenes' story fits none of the periods of post-war Hungarian history, since in the Soviet era her biography 'threatened the cult of communist martyrs like Anna Koltoi (1891–1944)', while in more recent times, her fate back in Hungary at Hungarian hands cannot be acknowledged. Weintrob places the occlusions of Szenes' history in the context of a wider reluctance to discuss women's resistance. She gives as a compelling example Zivia Lubetkin, the only female leader of the wartime ŻOB (Jewish Combat Organization) in Poland, whose role is screened out by recall of male resisters.

Weintrob outlines in extension forgotten aspects of the biography of Josephine Baker, the celebrated American-born Black singer and dancer who spent her artistic life in France. Baker's marriage to the Jewish resistance member Jean Lion exemplifies for Weintrob the 'entangled history' of Jewish and Black people. She thus 'reframes' the political potential of romantic or marital connections, in addition to the very notion of a canon of 'heroines', one that it is 'beneficial for feminist scholars to identify' (see Weintrob and Baumel-Schwartz 2025). This identification aims to retrieve the term 'heroine' from its misuse by governments of all kinds, 'democratic, communist, neo-liberal and illiberal'. As this forum demonstrates, the reclamation of strategically forgotten histories, including those of women, Jews and other minority groups, is vital within all kinds of political formations.

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