

WEEKEND

The invincible 'group of 10'

Ten women risked their lives to keep each other safe from Nazi 'selections,' endured three concentration camps together and held each other up during death marches. Writer Michal Govrin only discovered this amazing story after her mother died. It was thanks to them that she survived the Holocaust



Above left: A photo smuggled into Auschwitz in a piece of soap, of Haredi women including two from the Zehnerschaft – standing, upper right, Pearl Benisch, and Rivka Horowitz, second from left. Above right: Rega Laub (later Rina Govrin) with son Marek.

Photos from "To Vanquish the Dragon" by Pearl Benisch, and courtesy of Michal Govrin

Michal Aharony

Michal Govrin didn't understand what drew her parents to Bnei Brak. She knew her mother had friends there, because her parents sometimes celebrated social occasions with them, but she couldn't figure out what the connection was between her secular parents, who lived in Tel Aviv, and their Haredi – ultra-Orthodox – friends in the neighboring city. For her, it was the most puzzling thing in the world. "I was a snobby Tel Aviv kid, anti-religious by definition," she recalls, "and that was a whole other world for me. Like they were traveling to another country." Her mother didn't really explain it. Indeed, there were a great many things her mother didn't explain.

"Until I was 10 or 12, I didn't know consciously that my mother had been in the Holocaust," Govrin, a writer, poet and stage director, tells Haaretz. Her mother, Regina (Rega) Laub (née Poser), later Rina Govrin, had surgery to remove the number tattooed on her arm as soon as she arrived in Israel in 1948, and like many survivors in 1960s' Israel, she was silent about her past. Prof. Govrin, who was born in 1950, recalls a moment at the age of 11 when a friend of her mother told her that Rega was a Holocaust survivor. "The sky fell on my head," she says. "I was in total denial – as far as I was concerned, my mother didn't belong to that story."

The pieces began to come together after her mother died, in 1986, when a Haredi woman, Rachel Shantzer, from Bnei Brak, came to the shivah. From her, Govrin heard for the first time about the women of the "Zehnerschaft" – Yiddish for "group of 10." She learned that her mother had been part of an extraordinary group of women who survived three concentration camps together and supported one another over a period of more than two years, even risking their lives to save each other. The women acted as a single unit, as a mutual aid group, and thanks to their connection, almost all of them survived the war. And as if that weren't enough, Govrin discovered that nine of the 10 women were ultra-Orthodox – her mother was the only nonreligious one in the group.

Another 25 years passed from the time Govrin first heard the story until she decided to look for the women. From 2003 until 2006 she interviewed the five who were still alive. With their help, she learned about her mother's incredible life and about the women with whom her fate was inextricably linked.

The women from the group greeted her with "amazing warmth," she relates. "Through them I understood the great love and esteem they had for my mother. And then, when I met them – it took me a lifetime to grasp this – I actually saw them as additional mothers of mine. After all, my mother might not have survived had it not been for this group." Govrin has been working on a book about her mother for many years; in the interim she has published five volumes in Hebrew and an anthology in English. Her book "The Silence of My Mother" is due for publication next year (in Hebrew).

The annals of the Zehnerschaft provide a singular example of Jewish resistance to the Nazis. It didn't take the form of an armed revolt, but rather constituted a sanctification of life by means of what historians call *amidah*, "standing up against" – a term that refers to all the actions aimed at preventing the Nazis from achieving their goal: depriving camp inmates of their humanity before annihilating them physically.

A central aspect of such spiritual resistance was mutual aid between prisoners. Although life in the Nazi concentration camps is often perceived as being little more than an animalistic struggle of "all against all" that ruled out any possibility of solidarity, many testimonies of survivors indicate that the opposite could be true. Even under the most difficult conditions, in both the camps and in the death marches, too, the inmates displayed concern for the other. In fact, in most studies in which survivors were asked how they managed to keep alive, they cited mutual help as an essential element.

The story of the Zehnerschaft brings home the fact that in situations of extreme distress, life depends on solidarity. In addition, it sheds light on a mode of survival unique to women in the camps, who banded together in large groups. Within that framework, faith and religious observance became a manifestation of resistance.

Three bonds

The group took shape in the Plaszow labor camp in Krakow, in occupied Poland, sometime during the spring of 1943. Other camp inmates gave them the nickname "Zehnerschaft," and the name stuck when they were transported afterward to Auschwitz and force-marched to Bergen-Belsen. Together they survived the three camps until the end of the war; one of them died of typhoid fever several days after the liberation.

Their story was told in "To Vanquish the Dragon" (English; Feldheim Publishers, 1991), by Pearl Benisch, one of the members of the group. The first historian to research their story was Judy Baumel-Schwartz, who in a 1995 article about the group noted that the women were connected by

three factors: geographical origin, family ties and a common religious-educational background. All the women were natives of Galicia, in southern Poland, a number of them had grown up in the same city, and three were from the same family (two sisters and their sister-in-law). Nine members of the group had studied in the ultra-Orthodox Beth Jacob girls' school system, and five of them had attended the Beth Jacob teachers' seminary in Krakow prior to the war.

Within the group were three subgroups, each of which had its own leader. At first, each subgroup looked after its members. But within a short time the divisions blurred and everyone looked after everyone else. The leaders, all in their twenties, were Rivka England, Rivka Horowitz and Rachel (Ruchka) Shantzer. The trio had been born into large, petit-bourgeois, relatively liberal Hasidic families. Until World War II, they taught in the Beth Jacob school system and were group leaders in the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Israel girls' youth movement. They had studied together in the Krakow seminary, where they were students of Sarah Schenirer, who founded the Beth Jacob system. Schenirer, who educated religiously observant women to be independent, take initiative and strive for excellence, played a central role in shaping the character and spiritual world of thousands of Jewish women in Poland in the interwar period.

Laub faced a 'choiceless choice.' Was the choice made by Ruchka and Sarah to save her from death a moral one? What moral authority did they possess to act against Laub's will?

The exception among the Zehnerschaft was Rega Laub. She had been born in Krakow in 1913 to a well-off Zionist, modern-religious family. Though her parents were religiously observant, she herself was not thus inclined. A member of the Zionist youth movement Gordonia and a graduate of Krakow's Hebrew gymnasium, Laub was fluent in Hebrew as well as in Polish and German. She studied law at the Jagiellonian University of Krakow and during the Russian occupation (1938-1941) worked in a kindergarten in Przemysl, in southeastern Poland. Her husband, Gabriel (Gutek) Laub, a well-to-do man, was hanged publicly by the Nazis in the summer of 1941 near the sawmill he owned in a town called Hovniki.

After her husband's killing, Laub hastened to her parents' home in the Krakow Ghetto with her 5-year-old son, Marek (Mordechai), where she created a place for the two of them to hide, in the attic. At the end of 1941, during an Aktion campaign to liquidate the ghetto, she hid her son in a knapsack and carried him on her back on the march to nearby Plaszow. She succeeded to hide him in the camp, together with 300 more children who had been smuggled in by their mothers (typically children caught during the Aktions in the ghettos ended up in extermination camps). After some time, the hundreds of children were caught and transferred to a Kinderheim (children's house) in the camp.

In 1944, Plaszow, under the command of SS officer Amon

Goeth, known for his brutal sadism, became a concentration camp where the Jews were exploited as a workforce. About half the inmates worked in outside enterprises, such as at industrialist Oskar Schindler's enamel factory in Krakow. More than 10,000 others worked in factories in the camp, such as the tailor shop of Julius Madritsch, one of the largest enterprises in Plaszow, which made army uniforms (like Schindler, Madritsch also showed sympathy toward his Jewish forced laborers, e.g., providing them extra food).

Seven of the Zehnerschaft women worked in Madritsch's sewing workshop, in 1944. One of them was Laub. Despite her different background, she had become friendly with the women in the group, especially with Rachel Shantzer and Sarah Blaugrund, who helped care for her young son.

All the women interviewed by Michal Govrin remembered the boy. "I can still see the delight that spread across Rega Laub's face whenever she managed to acquire an egg for her 8-year-old son Marek, whom she had smuggled into the camp by a stroke of luck," Pearl Benisch wrote in her book. "With the egg and a bit of sugar she had procured, she would make a confection we called 'gogel-mogel' for the boy."

Weeping mothers

May 14, 1944 was the Mother's Day celebration in Germany, the occasion for a large-scale Aktion against the elderly, the sick and the children of Plaszow camp. The children were piled into trucks covered with black tarpaulins in the presence of their weeping mothers, accompanied by the cruel amplification of happy melodies. Laub tried to join her son Marek in the truck, but Rachel Shantzer and Sarah Blaugrund prevented her by force from getting to him.

Michal Govrin heard firsthand testimonies about the event from women in the group, and Benisch describes the harrowing minutes in her book. Rega struggled with the two women, saying she wanted to share "my Marek's... last moments," Benisch writes. Shantzer and Blaugrund tried reasoning with her, pointing out that there was no guarantee she would even find him in the truck. Seeing that their words were falling on deaf ears, the two held her back by force. Where did they muster that boldness, Benisch wonders. In the end, Rega Laub remained with them.

Laub faced what the scholar of Holocaust literature Lawrence Langer called a "choiceless choice." If her friends had not restrained her by force, would she have run to the truck to join her son? Was the choice made by Ruchka and Sarah to save her from death a moral one? What moral authority did they possess to act against Laub's will and keep her from joining her child? These sorts of questions are generally not asked in the context of the choices made by women and mothers in the concentration and death camps.

As an observer, and at a remove of decades, one's expectation might be that any mother would choose to die with her child. But that was not to be in this case. Eight-year-old Marek was transported to Auschwitz, where he met his death in the gas chambers that same day, together with the other children from Plaszow. His mother survived thanks to her friends.

In the wake of the searing experience, Laub drew even closer to her two friends, and with their encouragement she was adopted by the other women, becoming a full-fledged member of the Zehnerschaft.

"She had no one," Benisch told Govrin, after her mother's death. "She had only us, and we had her." From that moment

until their liberation in April 1945, the 10 women became one another's alternative family.

The women's collective solidarity was expressed above all by their relentless effort to keep each other alive and to stay together at all cost. They were able to arrange for all of them to work in one place that was comparatively safe, like Madritsch's sewing factory in Plaszow. They also managed to stay together when they were deported to Auschwitz in November 1944, and were held for a whole night outside the gas chambers. Certain they were about to die, Laub and another member of the group wandered into the birch grove behind the gas chambers – Laub conjectured that her son had been there just before his death. "Let's look," she said and scrutinized the tree trunks. "Maybe Marek has left me a sign. Maybe he wrote something to me."

The women were able to hold on to one another during the incarceration in Auschwitz, even during the "selection" process. There were cases in which one of the weaker women in the group was sent to the line of those destined to die. The others took the risk and managed to pull her back into the other column.

They also shared equally whatever food they were able to get their hands on. Rivka Horowitz, for example, knew inmates who worked in the kitchen, the bakery and the camp depot in Plaszow. With their help she was able to arrange night shifts in the depot for some of her friends. From there it was possible to get additional food and clothing for the whole group, without doing so at the expense of other inmates.

Mutual help on occasion morphed into genuine heroism. Benisch describes a scene in the sewing factory in which an inmate (not a member of the Zehnerschaft) was sitting lost in her thoughts, indifferent to her surroundings, and did not notice that the SS foreman entered the room. As he aimed his pistol at her forehead, for not standing to attention, Rivka Horowitz positioned herself between the two and explained to the SS officer that the inmate was insane, saying, according to Benisch, "Sie is nicht schuldig, Sie is doch meshugeh." Rivka had wanted to say, 'she is not responsible for her deeds, she is insane,' but, unable in her desperation to remember the German word, she had used the Yiddish word *meshugeh*. The officer, stunned by the sudden intervention of another inmate, holstered his pistol and continued his rounds.

The physical and mental support among the group's members did not cease even during the three-week, 50-kilometer death march they endured in January, 1945. Sarah Blaugrund told Michal Govrin about a moment when she felt she could no longer continue to walk, and collapsed. Ruchka Shantzer pulled her to her feet and encouraged her to go on by mentioning her older sister, who was in Palestine. "Then she told me: Do you want to see Raiska again?" Blaugrund related. "I looked at her like some ... [word missing] from another world – What is she saying to me, here in the snow?" At that moment it sounded totally fantastic, but that was what finally induced Sarah to get up and keep walking.

The Zehnerschaft was not the only group of women that crystallized under such circumstances. In Auschwitz and in other concentration camps, a phenomenon known as "camp sisters" developed, and similar "alternative families" were formed. Unrelated female inmates who formed quasi-family links adopted one another and promoted mutual survival by sharing food, encouraging one another, and offering other physical and emotional support. The members of these alternative families felt responsible for and committed to each other, to the point of putting their lives at risk in order to assist each other. Men in the camps also formed similar alternative families.

It was only 30 years ago that historical studies dealing with the singularity of women's experience in the Holocaust began to appear. Before feminist research on the subject was published, historians, most of them men, attached little importance to gender and did not distinguish between the experiences and memories of men and women. The assumption was that no substantive difference existed between the suffering of men and women in the Holocaust.

The earliest studies dealing with female experience during the Holocaust found that among women, different survival experiences were forged than among men. According to the researchers, these strategies were based on the cultivation of mutual concern characterized by more "moral" qualities, stemming from the fact that feminine and masculine cultures and socialization were of a different order (also the two sexes were always held in separate sections in the camps). "That picture is not necessarily faithful to reality, it constitutes an overly idyllic perception of the modes of feminine survival," says Na'ama Shik, a historian at Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies.

Dr. Shik, author of the book "Jewish Women in Auschwitz-Birkenau: 1942-1945" (Hebrew), thinks that the experience of women in Auschwitz bears a distinct character, as do their memories and their writings. The major difference she found between the "survival groups" that were formed is that among the women they tended to be larger than men's.

In the case of the Zehnerschaft, what made the group truly distinctive was that nine of its members were ultra-Orthodox.



Rega Laub in her office, as coordinator of the Bricha project – which helped Jews get to Palestine immediately after the Holocaust – in the British Zone in occupied Germany.

Courtesy of Michal Govrin

For them, upholding the tenets of the Jewish religion and observing *mitzvot* under the extreme conditions that prevailed in the camp were in themselves meaningful expressions of spiritual resistance.

The examples Benisch offers in her book defy the imagination. The Plaszow inmates secretly built a sukkah, and during Pesach of 1944, clandestinely baked matzoh. At Hanukkah, when they were already at Auschwitz, the inmates lit candles. Luba England-Lindenbaum, one of the members of the group, told Govrin how an inmate she knew threw her a package over a fence that held two small candles and two matches. All the women in the hut crowded around the stove in total silence, Benisch writes. Rivka England lit the first candle. With an uplifted voice, she recited the first blessing: "Blessed are you... ruler of the universe, who has made us holy through God's commandments, and commanded us to light the Hanukkah candles."

Benisch recounts many situations in which she and the other women succeeded in outwitting the inmate supervisors in order to avoid working on Shabbat and how they refrained at all cost from eating unkosher food, like soup with horse meat. In Bergen-Belsen, Benisch nearly died of starvation because she would not eat *chametz* (bread and other leavened foods) throughout the week of the Pesach festival.

Benisch's book appeared under the imprint of a Haredi publisher and there is no doubt that it was written for a particular audience and with a particular purpose: to strengthen religious faith. That agenda is readily discernible in the description on the book's title: "Armed with faith and lovingkindness, the daughters of Beth Jacob battle the Nazi scourge."

Mali Eisenberg, a historian who has researched Holocaust memory in Haredi society, explains that, like other texts of Haredi historiography on the period, Benisch shapes the past in accordance with the values of the present and her worldview.

"There is no significance to history as history, the prism is educational," Dr. Eisenberg states. "Haredi society seeks to perceive even an unprecedented crisis as a consciousness-shaping event of continuity: educating the future generation as the continuation of the Haredi world that existed before the Holocaust."

But attentiveness to what Benisch told Govrin in the interview reveals the trial of faith she faced: "Sarah Schenirer said: 'Wherever you go, look and see... in every place you will see the greatness of God,'" Benisch said. "And when I was in the camp, what did I see, my teacher? Where could I see the greatness of Hashem [God]? I saw only the green uniforms, the boots, the ugly, hate-filled faces - where could I see the greatness of God? But she [Sarah Schenirer, who died of illness in 1935] always told me: If you only look, you will see. I looked, and I saw the greatness of Hashem: how he created mankind, humanity so marvelous, with so much love, so much sacrifice for the other, so much inner beauty."

Spiritual resistance of the sort described by Benisch did not find a place in the post-Holocaust discourse in Israel. The dominant (albeit not exclusive) voice that was heard among Holocaust survivors during the first two decades after Israel's establishment was that of the ghetto fighters and the partisans. The story of the heroism of the Jews who fought the Nazis was consistent with the Zionist national ethos, and it dictated the narrative. In the years when Israel was fighting for its existence, armed resistance in the Holocaust was the only form of resistance that was comprehensible.

Govrin: 'When I met the women I actually saw them as additional mothers of mine. After all, my mother might not have survived had it not been for this group.'

Even though there were Haredim who supported the revolts and even took part in them, the Yishuv - the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine - attributed the heroic deeds to secular rebels from the pioneer youth movements.

In any event, the voice of survivors of the camps was barely heard. It is only natural that within that muted voice, that of Haredi spiritual resistance was also unheard. In the face of secular heroism, manifested in armed revolt, the Haredi community tried to build a narrative of an alternative model of spiritual resistance that took the form of observing the commandments under extreme conditions. But neither preserving human dignity nor observing the tenets of the faith was consistent with the Zionist consciousness, which negated the Diaspora and rested on the foundation of the strong, masculine "new Jew."

The only Haredi story that met the criteria of the narrative of heroism in that period was that of 93 women teachers and students of the Beth Jacob seminary who chose to kill themselves rather than serve as sex slaves to German soldiers. Their story was already known in the Yishuv by 1943. In the period in which the Yishuv could not accommodate the reports about the millions who went to their death "like sheep to slaughter," every report of rebellion or of an attempt by the few to do battle against the many was seized upon and believed. The story of the heroic, Masada-like suicide of Jewish women "who chose a martyr's death over surrendering to shame" dovetailed well with this ethos. Streets in Israel were named for the women who supposedly martyred themselves in the Krakow ghetto - though today it is known that the story is pure myth.

Aftermath of Auschwitz

The women of the Zehnerschaft remained together after being evacuated from Auschwitz in a death march. Their group reached Bergen-Belsen, hundreds of kilometers away, where they were liberated in April 1945.

The graduates of the Beth Jacob schools in Europe, among them some of the members of the group, played a crucial role in the rehabilitation of Haredi society after the Holocaust. Rivka Horowitz was involved in the establishment of 12 schools in the DP camps in Germany, and particularly in Bergen-Belsen. After marrying and moving to Antwerp, she founded Agudat Israel's women's movement there and for many years was the unofficial spokeswoman of the Beth Jacob network.

Rivka England was among the founders of Agudat Israel's Kibbutz Hafetz Haim, an agricultural training center adjacent to the DP camp at Zeilsheim, near Frankfurt, in the fall of 1945. She immigrated to the nascent state of Israel where she became the principal of a boarding school belonging to the movement. For her part, Rachel Shantzer directed an Orthodox children's home for Holocaust survivors of Agudat Israel in Ulm, Germany, before immigrating to Palestine in 1946. Sarah Blaugrund arrived in Israel with her pupils, most of them young girls. She became the director of an institution of Youth Aliyah under the aegis of the Poalei Agudat Israel movement. Pearl Benisch moved to New York after the war, raised a family and became an author. She died in 2017 at the age of 100. The women remained in touch all their lives.

Following liberation, Rega Laub helped establish a field hospital in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp and worked there as head nurse. In 1946 she moved to Hanover. At the age of 33, a widow, a bereaved mother and the sole survivor of her family, she was also appointed coordinator of the Bricha project - which helped Jews get to Palestine immediately after the Holocaust - in the British Zone in occupied Germany. That element of her biography was discovered by her daughter, to her astonishment, in 2003, in the archive of the Haganah, the Yishuv's underground, pre-independence army.

Govrin relates that initially her mother was seconded to soldiers of the British Army's Jewish Brigade, but when the brigade returned to Palestine, she was made coordinator of the Bricha project and was thus responsible for getting 30,000



A Beth Jacob seminary summer camp in the 1930s, with some members of the Zehnerschaft: from left, standing: Toska Neiman, Basha Leiser and Ruchka Shantzer; seated, Feiga Zelicka and Rachel Luria.

refugees to the Jewish state-in-the-making. According to Govrin, some in the Yishuv were not pleased by the choice of a woman for coordinator, and after a time she was replaced by a male envoy to Europe. However, when he proved unequal to the task, Laub was reappointed. In August 1948, she immigrated to Israel from the port of Marseille, traveling as the escort of a children's transport. Her grandparents, her parents and her three siblings perished in the Holocaust. Govrin's father, Pinchas (Globman) Govrin (1904-1985), came from a Hasidic family and immigrated to Israel in 1921; he married Rega in 1949.

"My mother was not a believer in religion," Govrin says toward the end of our conversation. "She believed in human beings, and as she told me, in Auschwitz she sang to herself the words of Shaul Tchernichovsky's poem 'I Believe' ('Sahki, Sahki'), which were set to music: 'For I still believe in humanity, / and in its spirit, strong and bold.'"

"The mutual respect that existed between my mother and the others, precisely because of the difference that always remained, is apparently rare," Govrin adds in conclusion. "They had respect, even admiration, for her as a person who was different from them, as a guide, as one who was attached to the Land of Israel and to self-fulfillment, and as a woman who shared with them humane values and believed in her way. [They had] Respect for belief that was defined differently. That is apparently a rare commodity, and perhaps it was part of the secret of the group's resilience."

Dr. Michal Aharony is a scholar of Holocaust studies and political philosophy (www.michalaharony.net).

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