

The Holocaust was not experienced in the same way by everyone

March 31 2008

Jewish experiences of the Holocaust are complex. Swedish researcher Laura Palosuo from Uppsala University has studied the testimony of Hungarian survivors, and in her dissertation she shows that the way different people experienced the anti Jewish legislation and the violence in the German occupied areas is linked to gender, age and social class.

Hungary was the first country in Europe to legislate against the Jewish minority in 1920. In the late 1930s and early 1940s several anti-Jewish laws were introduced, but the deportations did not take place until after the German occupation in March 1944. Then, over half of the country's 800,000 Jews were transported in goods trains to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the majority were killed immediately after arrival.

The thesis *Yellow Stars and Trouser Inspections* is based on 151 interviews, reports and memoirs with and by Hungarian Jews who survived the Holocaust. Most of them came from Budapest, and belonged to the group that was not deported but that experienced the terror of the Fascist Arrow Cross party. With the aid of these accounts Laura Palosuo has analysed the way Jewish men and women of different ages and from different social strata describe the persecution and their own reactions to it, and how their experiences can be linked to gender, age and class.

The results show that the experiences were extremely complex, and that they cannot be related just to 'race'.

"A clear example of the role played by gender was the so-called trouser inspections. When a Jewish man was outdoors the authorities could easily check whether he was circumcised by simply pulling down his trousers," says Laura Palosuo.

Jewish women could move about outdoors more freely if they removed the yellow star, and since they did not have any physical markers indicating their 'Jewishness' they could more easily avoid harassment. However, the differences linked to gender, age and class were erased in the course of time, and towards the end of the war these factors came to play a smaller and smaller role in people's experiences.

Analysing the importance of gender combined with other factors in the way Laura Palosuo has done is a new and unexplored perspective in the field of genocide research.

"The results are of interest to anyone who wants to know more about how people perceive and react to catastrophic situations," she says.

Source: Uppsala University

Citation: The Holocaust was not experienced in the same way by everyone (2008, March 31) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-03-holocaust-experienced.html>

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