

MARION A. KAPLAN'S *BETWEEN DIGNITY AND DESPAIR*

In her book *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 1998), Marion A. Kaplan narrates the grim story of Nazism's oppression of the Jews, but she does so from the perspective of a well-defined group of victims—middle-class German Jewish women. Kaplan's interest in this subject comes from: first, her personal background as a daughter of refugees from Nazi Germany who "lost all of their uncles and aunts, as well as cousins and friends" in the genocide of the Jews; and second, a lifelong academic goal to elevate Jewish women's history to its proper significance in order to challenge old paradigms (vii).

From this perspective, Kaplan addresses how fascism and antisemitism affected Jewish women in various aspects of their daily lives, as she discusses the public deprivations, the private adaptations, and the social disintegration of family and community life. Rightly, Kaplan observes how the "nightmare of Nazism" constricted Jewish living space "step by step" through its persistent tyranny (3). German Jews, in their adjustment to Nazi ambiguities and ruthlessness, experienced daily life as a ceaseless flux between dignity and despair. For their part, bourgeois Jewish women, in both traditional and reversed gender roles, struggled heroically to sustain their families and community.

Cogently, Kaplan argues for principal consideration of testimony from Jewish victims over that of German persecutors. This, she feels, makes obsolete the historiographical dispute about Nazi atrocities against the Jews, i.e., whether "part of a methodical plan (the intentionalist approach) or haphazard, contradictory, and the result of internal bureaucratic dynamics (the

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functionalist approach)” (4). She reasons: “These debates stem from the bias of looking at the killers. When one examines the hapless *victims* of these policies, the debates pale; they are not something the victims lived” (ibid.). By exploiting this converse viewpoint, Kaplan attempts to highlight “the speed *and* the ambiguities of the attack against Jewish life, and the speed *and* the ambivalences with which Jews reacted” (ibid.). Effectively, Kaplan shows how middle-class Jewish women remain central to this overall response. Further, she hopes to fill the gap in Jewish women’s history by showing how their testimonies clarify the “general history of Jews at the grass-roots level” and the “‘little picture’ of Jewish daily life” (ibid.). Kaplan accomplishes both goals and does this part of her work well.

With careful attention to detail from archival materials, newspapers and periodicals, personal interviews, and private papers, Kaplan shows public and private sides of the daily Jewish experience of “social death” under the Nazis. Publicly, middle-class Jews became little more than pariahs. Privately, the Jews retreated to a domestic sphere that was altered in its psychological and sociological matrix as a result of the external turmoil. Generally, Jewish women responded with heightened activity in regards to everyday needs, such as food, shelter, and social interactions, but particularly by involvement in social services like the Jewish Winter Relief Agency, since they “understood their behavior within the context of an emergency” (29). At home, when traditional male authority languished as a result of either physical or psychological removal, women assumed reversed gender roles “as breadwinners, family protectors, and defenders of businesses or practices” (59). Realistically, though, Kaplan paints a

complex portrait, as she notes, “On the individual, experiential level, the lives of individuals and families were affected unevenly” (32).<sup>1</sup>

Parenthetically, in light of the odd situations created by bizarre Nazi racial policies, Kaplan addresses the difficulties faced by *Mischlinge* (chapter 3, “Jewish and ‘Mixed’ Families”) and young people (chapter 4, “The Daily Lives of Jewish Children and Youth in the ‘Third Reich’”). She notes the predominance of Jewish men over women in mixed marriages (i.e., to “Aryans”) and the greater likelihood of “Aryan” men to divorce (i.e., their Jewish wives). But she resists any decisive statement about gender roles on the basis of her evidence, and she cautions, “More research on mixed marriages and divorce is needed before we draw final conclusions” (93).

Conversely, Kaplan identifies “gender-specific reactions” to negative treatment of Jewish children in “Aryanized” schools. But with scanty substantiation, she assumes that Jewish fathers held “unrealistic hopes” and made “crucial decisions” for their children “in the dark” (102). Also, contrary to her principal focus on women’s issues, Kaplan treats Jewish children and youth as a gender-inclusive group. Except, she accentuates the testimony of mothers and daughters, and she emphasizes female-oriented activities of the Association of German-Jewish Youth and

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<sup>1</sup>In her introduction, Kaplan emphasizes the ambiguity of Jewish experience in Nazi Germany and its realization for the historical reconstruction of conflicting testimony: “Since the experiences of German Jews varied by gender, age, class, and geography . . . there is no single story of Jewish daily life. Instead, I have aimed to make some sense out of a multiplicity of experiences while acknowledging their diversity. Looking not only at daily events but at subjective experiences helps us understand historical ambiguities and casts light on the varied and sometimes conflicting Jewish recollections of the Nazi era” (6).

the League of Jewish Women (i.e., home economics training). In light of the Third Reich's confusing crescendo of ugliness toward the Jews, she appropriately explains the unfolding disintegration of Jewish family life with her insightful analysis of two critical issues—emigration and separation (i.e., the *Kindertransporte*).

Vividly, Kaplan depicts how the situation worsened as the Nazis pursued their “Final Solution” for the Jews. After the *Kristallnacht* pogrom and the start of World War II, the remnants of Jewish social, family, and personal life vanished rapidly. The Jews lost what little dignity they still clung to, as they were relegated to the status of anxious emigres, slave laborers, deportees, “submerged” *Juden*, and finally, the annihilated (i.e., victims of *Sho'ah*). In these desperate days, Jewish women salvaged from their homes what they could (i.e., physically and emotionally) with “stoic calm” and a “heroism” that “reproached ‘Aryan’ savagery and suggested a new task for women. Traditionally men had publicly guarded the safety and honor of the family and community; suddenly women found that they stood as the defenders of Jewish honor and pride—and of Jewish life itself” (128).

Kaplan perhaps overstates the herculean response of Jewish women, considering the insurmountable odds against them, and her caution to see their reaction as multiplex rather than uniform remains apropos. But certainly, with their men demoralized and many in detention, women out of necessity spearheaded efforts toward emigration,<sup>2</sup> worked under horrendous

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<sup>2</sup>But, according to Kaplan, fewer Jewish women than men actually left Germany during Nazi rule.

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conditions to help support their families, and struggled as energetically as men in the desire to preserve some modicum of dignity in their dying (i.e., self-inflicted death or suicide).

Kaplan forcefully stresses two themes as she evaluates the Jewish experience during this time of horrors. First, she vindicates the Jews as innocent and credulous (“What Jews Believed,” 194-197). Second, she incriminates the German populace as complicitous and guilty (“What Germans Saw, Heard, or ‘Knew,’” 197-200). Here, she reveals her deepest prejudices: she relies strictly on “Jewish witnesses”; she forgets that these remembrances came as a result of hindsight or after knowledge of the seriousness and extent of the Holocaust; and she wrongly attributes “brutal murder” in a general way to German soldiers (i.e., as if the killing of innocents could not be a part of the dynamics of war). She apparently argues this way to support her contention that “many Germans denied knowing or negated information about the genocide because they had erased Jews from their consciousness and their consciences” (199). But why does she argue this, when earlier she describes clearly the numbing effect of Nazi propaganda on both Germans and Jews?

Kaplan evidently wants to bring her narrative to a decisive conclusion about “Jewish Responses” and “German Perpetrators and Bystanders” (229-237), something she does not reveal completely until the end of the book. With “some notable exceptions” aside (and Kaplan looks at only a few exceptions, since this is not a major theme of her work), Kaplan reasons:

Although the road to Auschwitz was, indeed, “twisted”—conceived and implemented piecemeal—the social death of Jews was unswerving. Imposed by the government, it was sustained, with some notable exceptions, by the German population. The German “racial community,” through its complicity in, approval of, or indifference to

the persecution of these newly marked “enemies,” helped pave the way toward the physical extermination of the Jews. The social death of Jews and German indifference to their increasingly horrific plight were absolute prerequisites for the “Final Solution” (229).

In her conclusion, this seems to be Kaplan’s main point.<sup>3</sup> With this contention, she claims to steer a course between two historiographical opinions about the “behavior of the German populace” during the Holocaust: (1) totalitarian thinking and moral apathy combined to produce ignorance and indifference toward the Jews; or (2) ingrained racial ideology and its concomitant antisemitic tendencies erupted in violent hatred and persecution of the Jews (234).

This study challenges both sides. It shows that, with poignant exceptions, particularly those people who hid Jews, many Germans took an active—not passive—role in persecuting Jews and that throughout the Nazi era German racism was widespread, deep, and invidious. Still, “ordinary Germans” balked at rampant violence against Jews. They were *not* bent on killing Jews as much as ostracizing them from society. Their racism led them to hope that the Jews would simply “disappear”—first, economically and politically, then socially—and, later, to avert their eyes when this process escalated hideously (234-235).

But such a course by Kaplan is not readily apparent throughout and seems superimposed by her only at the conclusion of her book.

Surprisingly, Kaplan admits the caricature of her evidence,<sup>4</sup> which renders her assessment less credible and quite vague (i.e., “many participated . . . many Germans stood by or celebrated

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<sup>3</sup> But it is, unfortunately, a thesis after the fact. That is, why didn’t she make this clear at the start of her work?

<sup>4</sup>“It is worth noting that our information regarding the deprivations that Jews endured within Nazi Germany rarely comes from Germans, who were, or claim to have been, too preoccupied with everyday concerns to pay much attention to the regime’s practices or rhetoric. Our information comes almost entirely from the victims . . .” (233-234).

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as Jews lost,” 233; emphasis mine, dwf). In reality, she ignores and disregards extensive testimony, direct and indirect, stated and implied. I believe that, in her conclusion, Kaplan loses sight of her real purpose and her crowning achievement in her book *Between Dignity and Despair*, namely, to illuminate middle-class German Jewish women’s heroic endeavors as definers and sustainers of Jewish life during the Third Reich.