
REVERENCE,
RIGHTEOUSNESS,
AND RAHAMANUT

Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung

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The Ninety-three Bais Yaakov Girls of Cracow: History or Typology?

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Jewish martyrdom during the Holocaust is a tragic and emotionally charged issue for anyone examining Jewish life under Nazi rule. During the past generation, a number of accounts of both physical and spiritual martyrdom have metamorphosed into much more than stories of bravery in the face of adversity. With the passage of time, the historical events have become symbolic parables woven into the tapestry of Jewish heroism and have taken their place in the historical/legendary chronicles of the Jewish people. One such episode is that of the alleged martyrdom of 93 young women, students of the Bais Yaakov school for girls in Cracow during the summer of 1942. Few precise historical facts are known about this incident; yet, within months of its alleged occurrence, it became a prime example of exalted and laudable Jewish behavior in the face of Nazi persecution.

The place: the Cracow ghetto in western Galicia. The time: summer 1942. From April 1941 until June 1942, the Cracow ghetto had been under the authority of the general Nazi administration. In early June 1942, the first of a series of events occurred which would eventually lead to the ghetto's liquidation in March 1943—authority for the ghetto of Cracow was handed over to the security police, the S.S. and the police of the General Government. The transfer of authority was characterized by two phenomena: the heightened presence of Germans in the ghetto from that date onward and the deportations from the Cracow ghetto which began that

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month.¹ The protagonists: teachers and students in the Cracow Bais Yaakov seminary for girls. In 1917, the first of a series of religious/vocational institutions for Jewish girls called Bais Yaakov was founded in Cracow by Sarah Schenierer (1883–1935), a former seamstress. Eight years later, she founded a teachers' seminary, also in Cracow. Between the two world wars, hundreds of girls had studied at the high school, seminary, or one of the school's extensions.² With the outbreak of war, the young students from other cities studying in Cracow had been cut off from their families, but within a short time, many had managed to be reunited with them in various locations throughout Poland. When all Jewish schools were closed by decree of the German army in 1939, the seminary was forced underground. For close to three years, clandestine lessons on various aspects of Bible, Jewish law and Jewish thought were taught to the students who had remained in Cracow.³

According to two sources described below, the following event took place.⁴ On July 27, 1942, the ninety-three students studying together in the Bais Yaakov school in Cracow were discovered by the Nazis. The girls, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty-two, were transferred by their captors to another building, apparently within the ghetto. Little is known about the physical conditions in which the girls were held. For close to two weeks they were kept in a dark room or in several dark rooms, totally unaware of what the future was to hold in store for them. On the 9th of August, the girls were permitted to bathe with warm water for the first time since their capture. The following day they were taken to a large building with well-lit rooms and beautiful beds. The girls were ordered to bathe again, their clothes were taken away and they were given nightgowns to wear.

¹Abraham Wein and Aharon Weiss, *Pinkas ha-Kehilot, Poland* (Jerusalem, 1984), 33–36; Aryeh Bauminger, et al. (eds.), *Sefer Krakov: Ir Vaem be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1959), 381–400; *ha-Yehudim be-Krakov* (Haifa, 1983), 56–67.

For other information about Cracow Jewry before and after the ghetto was established, see Binyamin Mintz and Israel Klausner, ed., *Sefer ha-Zevaot* (Jerusalem, 1945), 127–33, 157–62, 258–61. For the boundaries of the ghetto, see *ibid.*, 258–59; *ha-Yehudim bi-Krakov, ibid.*, end.

²*Pinkas ha-Kehilot, ibid.*, 30. For information on Sarah Schenierer and the early days of the Bais Yaakov movement in Cracow, see Judith Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, "Sara Schenierer," *Jewish Leaders (1750–1940)*, ed. by Leo Jung (New York, 1953), 407–32; *Em bi-Yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1955), 2 vols.; Yosef Friedenson, "Batei ha-Sefer li-Venot Bet-Yaakov be-Polin," *ha-Hinukh ve-ha-Tarbut ha-Ivrit be-Eropah*, ed. by Tzevi Scharfstein (New York, 1957), 61–82; Yehezkel Rottenberg, ed., *Em Bi-Yisrael: Sefer Zikkaron le-Sarah Shnirer* (Bnai Brak, 1960); *Sefer ha-Yovel ha-25 shel Bet ha-Sefer ha-Tikhon ve-ha-Seminar le-Gananot u-le-Morot "Bet Yaakov" be-Tel Aviv, 1936–1961* (Tel Aviv, 1961); Tzevi Scharfstein, *Gedolei Hinukh be-Amenu* (Jerusalem, 1964), 226–43; Aharon Suraski, *Toledot ha-Hinukh ha-Torani bi-Tekufah ha-Hadashah* (Bnai Brak, 1967), 420–61.

³Moshe Mark, "93," *ha-Derekh* (April 1, 1943), 2; Hannah Weiss, "Kiddush Hashem," *Sefer ha-Yovel ha-25, ibid.*, 20–21. For evidence about underground religious instruction in Cracow's ghetto during this time, see Aryeh Bauminger, *Lohamei' Geto Krakov* (Tel Aviv, 1967), 28, based on testimony given at the Eichmann trial.

⁴This description is based on Hannah Weiss, *ibid.*, 18–19, and the letter written by Chaya Feldman, cited below.

Finally they were told that on the evening of August 11th a group of German soldiers would be coming to "visit" them. The meaning of this "visit" was not lost on these girls. Accordingly, they decided that the time had come to use the poison which their seminary's headmistress had prepared ahead of time and had managed to keep with her throughout the ordeal. Before returning her soul to her maker, one of the girls, Chaya Feldman, penned a letter describing the girls' final hours. The two pages written in Yiddish with German characters, were addressed to Meir Schenkolewski in New York City, secretary of the World Beth Jacob Movement and a member of the Central Committee of Agudath Israel. According to Schenkolewski, the letter was smuggled out of the ghetto and several weeks later it reached Daniel Lewenstein, a textile merchant living in Switzerland, whose address was well known to those wishing to send information out of occupied Europe. Lewenstein immediately forwarded the letter to Schenkolewski and it arrived in New York via air mail at the beginning of January 1943.⁵

The original letter and an English translation reads as follows:

11 August 1942

Liber Freind Herr Schenkalewsky in New York,

Ich waisz nischt ob dieszer Brief wird Sie eraichen. Waiszen Sie noch wer ich bin? Wir haben uns in den Hausz von Frau Schenirer kennen gelaernt und spater in Marienbad wider getroffen. Wen diszer in Ihrer Hande erreicht, lebe ich nischt mer. Mit mir sint 92 Bes Jakob madschen. Noch einige Stunten und ales is nischt mehr. Gruszen Sie Herrn Rosenheim und unsern Freind Gutman, beide in England. Wir haben unsz alle in Warschau bei unser Freind sholemman getroffen und sholemszon war auch da. Wir haben gelaernt und dass Land wo der Brif gaeht hat uns gesendet Brodt. Wir haten vier Zimern. Den 27 Juli sind wir geholt worden und in ein dunckel Zimer geworfen(?) haben nur majim. Haben(?) aus dem Rosch Davit gelaernt und Mut gehabt. Unser Alter ist von 14 bisz 22, die Jungen haben Mairoh, ich laerne zusammen Mamma Soros taitsch, gud leben for hachem, aber gud zu staerben auch. Vorgeastern und gaestern sind wir heisz gebadet worden und man hat unsz gesagt heute nacht werden kimen deutsche Soldaten unsz besuchen. Wir haben geastern die schwio gethan zusammen zu sterben. Man hat uns geastern in ein groszes Hausz mit haellem Zimern und schoenen Beten gesaendet. Deutsche wiszen nischt, das Bad ist unszere teville vor den Todt. Man hat unsz haint alles genomen und nur ein Hemt geschaenkt. Wir haben all Givt. Wen Soldaten komen werden wir alle drincken. Haint sind wir zuszamen, laernen gansen jom vidujohi(?). Wir haben kaine moiroh. Dancken guter Freind vuer ales. Wir haben eine Bite, sagen

⁵Correspondence (Tydor Baumel) with Mr. Meir Schenkolewski, January 15, 1985; interview (Tydor Baumel) with Mr. Schenkolewski, New York, July 16, 1985.

Lewenstein died in Switzerland in 1982 at the age of 76. For a picture of him as well as some information about his personality, see R. Levi Yitzhak Heilperin, *Maaliyot be-Shabbat* (Jerusalem, 1984), 207–11. The book was dedicated in his memory.

Sie Kadich vuer unsz 93 ihre kinder. Baelde sind wir bei mama Soro. Es gruzzt sie.

Chaja Feldman von
Krako⁶

11 August 1942

My dear friend Mr. Schenkalewsky in New York,

I do not know whether this letter will reach you. Do you know who I am? We met at the house of Mrs. Schenirer and later in Marienbad.⁷ When this letter will reach you, I will no longer be among the living. Together with me are ninety-two girls from Bais Yaakov. In a few hours all will be over. Regards to Mr. Rosenheim⁸ and to our friend Gutman,⁹ both in England. We all met in Warsaw at our friend Sholeman's, and Sholemsohn was also there. We learned that the land to which this letter goes has sent us bread.¹⁰ We had four rooms. On July 27th we were arrested and thrown into a dark room. We have only water. We learned David¹¹ by heart and took courage. We are girls between 14 and 22 years of age. The young ones are frightened. I am learning our mother Sarah's¹² Torah with them, [that] it is good to live for God but it is also good to die for Him. Yesterday and the day before we were given warm water to wash and we were told that German soldiers would visit us this evening. Yesterday we all swore to die. Today we were all taken out to a large apartment with four well-lit rooms and beautiful beds. The Germans don't know that this bath is our purification bath before death. Today everything was taken away from us and we were given nightgowns. We all have poison. When the soldiers will come we will take it. Today we are together and are learning the confession all day long. We are not afraid. Thank you my good friend for everything. We have one request. Say kaddish for us, your ninety three children. Soon we will be with mother Sarah.

Yours,

Chaya Feldman from Cracow¹³

⁶Copies of this letter were made available by Mr. Schenkolewsky and by Rabbi Moshe Kolodny, director of the Agudath Israel of America Archives in New York City. It is printed in Appendix I of this chapter.

⁷The reference is to the third Knessiah Gedolah of the World Agudath Israel movement which took place in Marienbad in 1937.

⁸Morenu Jacob Rosenheim (1870-1965) was president of the World Agudath Israel movement and president of the World Beth Jacob movement from 1929. In 1941 he emigrated to the United States and after the Second World War he moved to Israel.

⁹Mr. Harry Goodman was secretary of the World Agudath Israel movement.

¹⁰The meaning of this sentence is unclear. In a conversation (Schacter) with Dr. David Kranzler on February 18, 1992, he suggested that it probably refers to packages of food sent to the Cracow ghetto by Chaim Yisrael Eis in Switzerland.

¹¹The reference here is to the Book of Psalms.

¹²The reference is to Sarah Schenirer who passed away in 1935. For the tendency of her students to refer to her as their mother, see *Em bi-Yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1955), I, introduction, end.

¹³For a partial Hebrew translation of the letter, see *Sefer ha-Yovel ha-25*, *op. cit.*, 25. The

This letter is one of two documents that describe the incident. The second is a letter by Hannah Weiss written in 1947. Weiss was a student at the Bais Yaakov school in Cracow and was the 94th girl who had been called away to care for a sick aunt before the group was captured. After her classmates and teachers were taken away, the elderly charwoman of the seminary came to her and described their capture and transfer. Hannah's attempt to join her schoolmates was unsuccessful; however, she did manage to hide in the yard outside the building and claims to have heard in great detail what was taking place within. In her essay she records verbatim much of the last words of encouragement given the girls by their teacher, describes how she burst into hysterical tears after hearing the girls' decision to commit suicide, and how she was chased away by one of the soldiers guarding the building's entrance.

In September 1942, Hannah Weiss escaped from the ghetto disguised as a Gentile and eventually made her way to relatives in Bogota, Columbia. In 1947 she sent her essay describing the final hours of the 93 young women with a cover letter to a brother of one of her former Bais Yaakov teachers, then living in Palestine. The letter and essay were published in the 1961 Jubilee book of Bais Yaakov.¹⁴

Chaya Feldman's letter reached Schenkolewsky in early January 1943. Deeply moved by its contents, he immediately left his office to meet with Mr. Jacob Rosenheim, president of the World Agudath Israel movement. Rosenheim asked Schenkolewsky to deliver the letter to Dr. Isaac Lewin, the son of Rabbi Aaron Lewin of Rzeszow, another Agudath Israel activist, then living in New York. He also mailed a copy of it to Rabbi Leo Jung, the young rabbi of The Jewish Center in Manhattan and Chairman of the American Beth Jacob Committee. Jung's abridged translation of the letter appeared in *The New York Times* of January 8, 1943; however his accompanying explanation placed the story in Warsaw and not Cracow.¹⁵ Lewin also made reference to this story in an essay he wrote at that time.

introduction to the letter erroneously states that it was sent to Rabbi Dr. Isaac Lewin in New York (and not to Mr. Schenkolewsky).

For a partially incorrect Yiddish translation, see S. Niger, "Vegen dem Kiddush Hashem fun di Bnos Ya'akov: Legende oder Fakt?," *Der Tag* (New York; August 21, 1948), 6. After citing his own as well as Yitzhak Rivkind's doubts about the historical veracity of the story (see below, n. 38), Niger printed what he claimed to be a copy of Chaya Feldman's letter (to her uncle in New York?) which he received from S. Kristalka in Montreal and requested that those whose names are mentioned in the letter (i.e., Schenkolewsky, Rosenheim, Goodman and Sholeman) please come forward and verify its accuracy. In fact, his text is not the original letter but a Yiddish translation of it, which, in addition, is incorrect in a few places.

¹⁴See Hannah Weiss, *op. cit.* (n. 3), 18-19. It would appear that the longer essay by Weiss (*ibid.*, 20-24) is only a fictional description of the event. It would have been impossible for her to accurately hear every word of the conversations going on inside the building from her vantage point outside in the yard.

¹⁵Correspondence (Tydor Baumel) with Schenkolewsky and interview with him. Telephone interviews (Tydor Baumel) with Rabbi Dr. Isaac Lewin and Rabbi Leo Jung, New York, July 9, 1985; letter from Rosenheim to Jung, January 5, 1943 (printed in Appendix II of this essay); "93 Choose Suicide Before Nazi Shame," *The New York Times* (January 8, 1943), 8.

Rabbi Jung reprinted the letter in his *Panorama of Judaism* (London and New York, 1974),

However, he erred in several details: he identified Chaya Feldman as a teacher and the city where the story took place as Warsaw.¹⁶

The article in *The New York Times* was not the letter's first public appearance. Already several days earlier, on January 5th, the letter had been read to the participants of a Vaad ha-Hatzalah meeting of Orthodox rabbis which had taken place in New York City. Here, too, the listeners were greatly shocked by the story.¹⁷

World reaction was soon to follow. Already during the early months of 1943 the girls' bravery was cited as a classic example of *kiddush Hashem*. Two otherwise very different groups in the United States reacted to the letter almost immediately: the Orthodox and the Reconstructionists. At closed meetings of the Vaad Hatzalah the story of the 93 girls was cited as an example of the daily danger to which European Jewry was exposed. In the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, a stronghold of Agudath Israel and the home of many leaders of the Vaad ha-Hatzalah, this story was constantly repeated from every pulpit in every shul and shtiebel and had a powerful and traumatic impact on the entire community.¹⁸ A woman remembers coming home from high school during this period and finding her grandmother crying bitterly over the news of such an event which she had just received in a handwritten Yiddish letter. She made her granddaughter promise to light a Yahrzeit candle, say Yizkor regularly and recite kaddish on Yom Kippur for as long as she lived in memory of these girls. Realizing that the young girl's parents were still alive, she composed a special document which she had them sign that evening stating that they gave her special permission to do so. This woman abided by her grandmother's wishes for close to fifty years, referring to these girls as "my hundred little sisters."¹⁹

The Reconstructionists' reaction was a literary one. During the first week of March 1943, the Reconstructionist journal published a description of the Bais Yaakov seminary in Cracow during the pre-war period. It also published an English translation of a Hebrew poem by the writer Hillel Bavli about the ninety-three girls which had first appeared in *ha-Do'ar*, a Hebrew paper published in the United States, on January 22, 1943.²⁰ Two weeks later, Mrs. Bertha Bad-Strauss, who translated the poem, suggested in a letter to the editor of *The Reconstructionist* that

I, 12-13 and in his autobiography, *The Path of a Pioneer* (London and New York, 1980), 148-49.

¹⁶The essay was reprinted in I. Lewin, *mi-Boker la-Erev* (Jerusalem, 1981), 223-25. It is dated Tevet, 5703.

¹⁷For a description of the reaction to the letter at that meeting, see *ha-Pardes* 16:10 (January 1943):5-6.

¹⁸Interview (Schacter) with Mr. Abraham Bayer, May 9, 1990.

¹⁹Telephone interview (Schacter) with Mrs. Arlene Stempler, April 18, 1990. Her grandmother was Mrs. Esther Rachel Schrader, wife of Rabbi Zalman Reuven Schrader, a hasidic rebbe in Williamsburg. The problem with this evidence is that Mrs. Stempler recalls this event taking place in September-October of 1942. Did her grandmother get information about this event before anyone else or, perhaps, is it a reference to another similar incident? In all likelihood, this simply reflects a confusion about the exact date of an occurrence that took place fifty years earlier.

²⁰*Ha-Do'ar* 22:12 (January 22, 1943):186. It was reprinted in Bavli's collection of poems, *Aderet ha-Shanim* (Jerusalem, 1955), 67-68. See *The Reconstructionist* 9:2(March 5, 1943):23-24.

it be read aloud prior to kaddish during memorial services for victims of the Holocaust.²¹ Other American Jewish publications also featured this story in different ways: as the subject of an editorial in *Congress Weekly*, published by the American Jewish Congress; a poem in *The Jewish Forum*; and a short story based upon it in *Opinion*, a monthly edited by Stephen S. Wise, all within the first half of 1943.²²

Postal delays caused the letter to arrive in Eretz Yisrael only in mid-February 1943. There too its contents touched off a wave of reactions which encompassed the entire political spectrum. Immediately following the letter's arrival, articles dealing with the incident began to appear in the local press. The first to react was the ultra-Orthodox (Edah Haredit) *Kol Yisrael*, which summarized the letter's contents. A week later the same paper printed a description of the incident and stated that it took place in Warsaw. The author was apparently basing his information upon the translation of the letter as it appeared in *The New York Times*. Mention was also made of a first practical step taken to commemorate the tragic episode. Keren ha-Torah, a charitable organization connected with Agudath Israel, stated that the 26th of Adar, Sarah Schenierer's eighth yahrzeit, had been designated as a day of commemoration in all Bais Yaakov schools for the girls who had died martyrs' deaths.²³ On March 25, 1943, a partial and imprecise translation of the letter appeared in *Kol Yisrael* with the erroneous comment that the letter had been sent to Rabbi Dr. Isaac Lewin (and not to Meir Schenkolewski). Along with the letter, two short stories, "The Jar of Poison" and "Stars in the Night," were devoted to the girls' final moments.²⁴

Additional ultra-orthodox reactions appeared in the newspaper *ha-Derekh* which printed the same incorrect information as to the city in which the event took place, originally appearing in *Kol Yisrael*. Here, for the first time, readers received some information about the Cracow seminary during the war years. One article in particular, written by Moshe Mark, raised several pertinent questions which later would be discussed by historians: How was it possible for the Nazis to catch a group that large in Cracow at a time when Jews made an effort to avoid congregating even in much smaller groups? Where did the girls obtain the poison? Most important, how did they manage to smuggle Chaya Feldman's letter out of the ghetto to the free world? In response, Mark stated that the seminary continued to function clandestinely during the war years and that the entire student body was caught during one of the lessons. As for the other questions, the author noted that: "three years of underground work, near . . . the gestapo center in Cracow, was excellent training for smuggling." This may support Hannah Weiss' claim that the headmistress had hidden the poison on her body, as did members of the underground.²⁵

In addition to the aforementioned articles, stories about the 93 girls appeared in various newspapers—*ha-Tzofeh* of the Mizrahi party, *Davar* of the Labor party,

²¹*The Reconstructionist* 9:3(March 19, 1943):19-20.

²²See *Congress Weekly* 10:5(January 29, 1943):4; Alter Abelson, "The Ninety-Three Women Martyrs," *The Jewish Forum* 26:4(May 1943):84; Eugene Weintraub, "The Ninety-Three," *Opinion* 13:8(June 1943):6-7.

²³*Kol Yisrael* (February 12, 1943), 1; (February 18, 1943), 1.

²⁴*Ibid.*, (March 25, 1943), 1-2.

²⁵*ha-Derekh* (February 25, 1943), 3; (April 1, 1943), 2-3, 7.

ha-Mashkif of the Revisionists and *Hed Yerushalayim*.²⁶ The articles sparked a series of commemorative gatherings. At the first of these, which took place in Tel Aviv on February 17, 1943 under the auspices of the chief rabbis of that city, it was suggested that all women should light an extra Shabbat candle in memory of these girls and their heroism.²⁷ A second memorial meeting for women only took place in Tel Aviv on February 24.²⁸ On March 5 a meeting of Agudath Israel women announced the establishment of a special institution in memory of the 93 in which needy girls would be educated. Additional memorial meetings were also held in Safed, Jerusalem, Haifa and Petah Tikva.²⁹

In May 1943, a special pamphlet in memory of "the 93" was published by the "Committee to Defend the Honor of the Daughters of Israel." The pamphlet listed the practical measures that had been taken to commemorate the girls' martyrdom. For example, the Petah Tikva municipality decided to name one of its streets "The 93" and a street in the Hafetz Hayyim district of Tel Aviv was given the same name. The booklet ended with the prayer "*El Malé Rahamim*" in memory of the young martyrs.

No further mention was made about the incident until the end of the Second World War. In 1945, the poet Yehudah Leib Bialer wrote a lamentation entitled "Eli Eli" in which he referred to the martyrdom of the 93 girls. This lamentation was published by the Chief Rabbinate and the Council of Polish Communities in 1948.³⁰ In 1946, a book about the heroism of Jewish women through the ages was published in Tel Aviv which included the story of the 93. According to the version of the story presented there, the incident took place in Warsaw and the girls were brought to an army brothel.³¹ Furthermore, the incident was quoted in a January 1946 issue of *Oif Der Frei*, a newspaper published by survivors in liberated Germany. The article was printed at the request of the Bais Yaakov center in Bergen Belsen, which began functioning shortly after the liberation in the spring of 1945.³²

²⁶*ha-Tzofeh* (February 18, 1943), 4; *Davar* (February 17, 1943), 3; *ha-Mashkif* (February 25, 1943), 2; *Hed Yerushalayim* (January 1, 1945), 4. See also the newspapers quoted in the pamphlet, *93: le-Zekher Tishim ve-Shalosh Me'ahyotenu be-Polin Shebaharu Lamut Bemot Kedoshim Levilti Himaser le-Kalon* (Tel Aviv, 1943).

²⁷See *Davar* (March 17, 1943), 3; 93, *ibid.*, 21–25.

²⁸See *ha-Derekh* (February 25, 1943), 3.

²⁹See the *Bulletin of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 7, 1943, 4; 93, *op. cit.*, 20. For more information about this and other special prayers relating to the Holocaust, see Dr. Tydor Baumel's forthcoming book, *Kol Bekhiyot: ha-Shoah ve-ha-Tefillah*. See also the comments by R. Reuven Katz who served as Chief Rabbi of Petah Tikva, *Shaar Reuven* (Jerusalem, 1952), 154–57. They were first written in the winter of 1943.

³⁰Yehudah Leib Bialer, "Eli Eli," *Ashdot Yamim* (Jerusalem, 1957), 46. Although written in 1948, it was not published in a book until 1957. It was reprinted by Yissachar Yakobsen, *Netiv Binah III* (Tel Aviv, 1973), 500–04. See also the poem by Yehudah Karmi, "ha-Tishim ve-Shalosh," *Shir va-Dema* (Tel Aviv, 1945), 14.

³¹Shlomo Ashkenazi, *Neshei Yisrael bi-Ge'uratan* (Tel Aviv, 1946), 154–55. See too *idem.*, *ha-Ishah bi-Aspaklaryat ha-Yahadut I* (Tel Aviv, 1953), 67; *idem.*, *Giborot bi-Yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1961), 259–61; Zerubavel Galed, ed., *Moreshet Gevurah* (Jerusalem, 1946), 317.

³²A handwritten circular signed by "Merkaz Bais Yaakov, Bergen Belsen, Lager II, Block 67" was distributed, containing a copy of Chaya Feldman's letter and a postscript by the Bais

Also, in a letter written in New York on May 10, 1946, Rabbi Leo Jung indicated that a Bais Yaakov building in then Palestine was "to be dedicated to the ninety-three martyrs who glorified Jewish history in our own day."³³

Several years were to pass until the story of "the 93" would again receive formal or institutional expression. Although it appeared in poems such as that by David Shimoni entitled "The 93,"³⁴ it was first given liturgical expression as part of the Yom Kippur Musaf service in the High Holiday prayerbook edited by Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser in 1959.³⁵ It was featured as well in the order of High Holiday services edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow in 1972.³⁶ In both prayerbooks the incident's location is given as Warsaw and both reproduce Hillel Bavli's poem about the event written in January 1943, cited earlier.³⁷

None of the sources cited until this point, with the exception of the article by Moshe Mark mentioned above, raises any doubts about the historicity of the incident. However, in the early 1950s questions regarding the incident were raised in historical circles.

The first historian to question publicly the episode's veracity was Joseph Wolff, a Jewish researcher from Cracow, who stated that it was a total fabrication.³⁸ Wolff claimed that the conditions in the Cracow ghetto would not have permitted such an incident to occur. Furthermore, the fact that there were no witnesses to the

Yaakov leadership there urging that these young women be remembered. The circular was reproduced in Eliezer Gad-Oz, *Ish Hayyil* (Tel Aviv, 1971), 196–97. In a letter (to Schacter) dated November 28, 1990, R. Pinkusewitz of Antwerp, a former student of Sarah Schenierer, wrote that she first heard of this story right after the liberation in Bergen Belsen where Chaya Feldman's letter made "an enormous impression (*a gevaldigen royshem*)."

³³Leo Jung, *The Path of a Pioneer*, *op. cit.* (n. 15), 242.

³⁴David Shimoni, "ha-Tishim ve-Shalosh," *Hevlo Shel Mashiah* (Tel Aviv, 1952), 5; reprinted in S. Ashkenazi, *Giborot bi-Yisrael*, *op. cit.* (n. 31), 261. See too Avraham Broides, "ha-Tishim ve-Shalosh," *me-Adam le-Adam* (Jerusalem, 1947), 154; Moshe Tabenkin, "Tefillah Aharonah," *Sefer Shirim* (Tel Aviv, 1966), 184–85.

³⁵Ben Zion Bokser, ed., *The High Holiday Prayer Book* (New York, 1959), 434–36. Bokser erroneously dates the letter on "Rosh Hodesh Elul, 5704." In fact, it was written on 28 Av 5702.

³⁶Jules Harlow, ed., *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York, 1972), 560–61.

³⁷For other references to the story, see Aharon Suraski, *op. cit.* (n. 2), 445 (see n. 21 where he states that the letter reporting this incident was received by Rabbi Dr. Isaac Lewin); Amnon Rubenstein, *Kan, Atah* (Tel Aviv, 1969), 156; Dov Rosen, *Shema Yisrael*, trans. into English by L. Oschry (Jerusalem, 1972), 524–25.

³⁸A quote from Wolff's article appears in a letter sent by Dr. Joseph Kermish, Director of the Yad Vashem Archives, to Dr. Jacob Robinson, September 18, 1975. The letter is included in an unnumbered file containing correspondence about "the 93" in the Yad Vashem Archives.

Already in an article written at the end of September 1945, Yitzhak Rivkind simply assumed that the story was a legend, and was prepared to accept that it may even have been consciously fabricated in order to underscore the tremendous premium placed upon modesty by Jewish women throughout the ages. He does not explain, however, why he did not accept the story as having occurred in fact. See Y. Rivkind, "Kiddush Hashem fun Froyen," *Kiddush Hashem*, ed. by S. Niger (New York, 1948), 1036. His conclusion was cited by S. Niger, *op. cit.* (n. 13) who also had his doubts about the historical veracity of this story.

incident among the Cracow survivors militated against the incident ever having taken place. Another well known historian, Philip Friedman, supported Wolff's contention and wrote the following:

There is an extensive literature on the subject of the 93 pupils of Beit Ya'acov, but all the authors involved have based their descriptions on one letter which was received by a Jewish institution abroad during the war. The letter said that the Germans had tried to force 93 girls of Beit Ya'acov into a soldiers' brothel, but the girls had all preferred death and had committed suicide before the Germans were able to carry out their plan. Later research and examination revealed that the letter was a complete forgery and that the story is without any foundation.³⁹

In his compilation of sources pertaining to religious life during the Holocaust, Mordechai Eliav also questions the historicity of this incident. After citing Chaya Feldman's letter, Eliav states the following:

The incident related here was well publicized throughout the world. Lately, however, there were those who raised doubts about the incident's veracity and the letter's credibility. Nevertheless, it is difficult to come to any final conclusion regarding the matter.⁴⁰

The Yad Vashem Archives contain a large folder about the episode of "the 93," primarily containing correspondence with various individuals and organizations who were seeking information about the incident. Quoting both Wolff and Friedman, the responses from Yad Vashem generally state that the incident did not occur. A letter in the folder from 1977 reads as follows: "During the first years after the liberation the letter was examined in great detail in Poland and no facts were uncovered which would corroborate such a story."⁴¹ We have been unable to unearth any additional details regarding the "detailed examination" mentioned here and in Friedman's article. It appears that both refer to Joseph Wolff's arguments cited above.

Several of the letters in the folder were addressed to Yad Vashem as a result of a strange article appearing in the Hebrew newspaper *Maariv* on March 25, 1975. The article stated:

³⁹Philip Friedman, "Preliminary and Methodological Problems of the Research on the Jewish Catastrophe in the Nazi Period," *Yad Vashem Studies* II (Jerusalem, 1958), 122, n. 14. The "later research" seems to refer only to Wolff. Furthermore, Friedman presumably refers here to extensive literary writings in newspapers or stories, not historical treatments.

⁴⁰Mordechai Eliav, *Ani Maamin* (Jerusalem, 1965), 55.

⁴¹Letter from Dr. Joseph Kermish to Israel Katz, January 11, 1977, Yad Vashem Archives, unnumbered file. Mr. Katz's letter to Dr. Kermish, dated January 4, 1976, cites yet another addition to the story. He states that the girls were taken to a camp before they poisoned themselves. In a letter to S. Wisenberg of Chicago dated November 2, 1988, Dr. Shmuel Krakowski, Director of the Yad Vashem Archives, wrote: "According to my best knowledge, the story of the 93 girls is myth. However, everybody is free to study the story in details, and may be will come to some other conclusion."

The last will and testament of ninety-three Jewish girls who committed suicide rather than fall into Nazi hands has been found. The document, written in Yiddish, was recently found in Poland and was sent to the United States where it was read to former members of the Radom community in a ceremony which took place in New York this March.⁴²

According to the article, the document is that of a 17-year-old girl named Chaya Friedman which describes the fate of ninety-three Bais Yaakov students in Warsaw and which was sent from the United States to Tuvia Friedman, the Haifa-based Nazi hunter. There are clearly several inaccuracies in this account: Chaya Feldman's last name which appears here as Friedman, her age during the episode, the "recent" discovery of the letter in Poland and, most importantly, the fact that the girls were told that German soldiers and S. S. officers would visit them in the evening. This final inaccuracy, concerning the identity of the soldiers who were supposed to "visit" the girls, is the one most frequently cited by contemporary educators and journalists describing the incident. It continues to be the version presented when the incident is cited in "mussar" lessons given in ultra-Orthodox schools and gatherings.

When approached about the article, Tuvia Friedman stated that he had no recollection of the letter and that the state of his archive did not allow access to the document if, indeed, it was there.⁴³ However, a conversation with Mr. Aryeh Reichman of the Radom *landsmanschaft* shed more light on the matter. It appears that the document in question was indeed the letter written by Chaya Feldman as it appeared in the previously mentioned *Oif Der Frei*, edited by Mr. Reichman and his friends. A commentary on the incident, written by the Bergen Belsen Bais Yaakov Central Committee, appeared alongside the article. It stated that the letter had been found sometime in 1942 by a Jew working in the ghetto police and that its date was Rosh Hodesh Elul, 5742 (or August 13 or 14, 1942). Thus, another "addition" to the original story of "the 93" was born.⁴⁴

To date, virtually all scholars are convinced that the incident never occurred. In a book published in 1976, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the noted Holocaust historian, wrote as follows:

A less pernicious form of historical falsification is the myth pretending to documentary veracity. In Holocaust history, myths are especially abundant about the behavior of pious Jews in circumstances of extreme crisis; this is in fact a genre with many precedents in Jewish history. The most widespread

⁴²*Maariv* (March 25, 1975), 6. See also *Radomer Shtime*, the printed organ of the Radom *landsmanschaft* of the United States and Canada.

⁴³Letter from Tuvia Friedman to Dr. Judith Tydor Baumel, August 13, 1985.

⁴⁴Conversation (Tydor Baumel) with Aryeh Reichman in Tel Aviv, September 11, 1985. See too Yitzhak Ganoz, below, n. 106, 60 who also refers to this letter as having been "discovered in Poland." This story was also printed in *Sovetish Heymland* VII (1975), 177. That report also notes that the event took place in Warsaw, that the German soldiers in question were members of the S.S., and that a copy of this letter was being sent then (in 1975) to the German authorities prosecuting the S.S. officer who had been in charge of the Warsaw Ghetto to be used as evidence against him.

such story is probably that of the ninety-three (more or less) devout girls of a Beth Jacob school in the Cracow ghetto who chose mass suicide over the degradation of a German brothel. It is a fanciful and moving tale of sacrificial piety, a lesson in religious morality, fashioned by people who knew nothing of the Nuremberg Laws which made sexual relations between Germans and Jews illegal, criminal, and subject to severe punishment.⁴⁵

In 1983, Professor Yisrael Gutman of Yad Vashem used the same argument in a letter:

One should note that we have no document or testimony of witnesses which corroborate the incident. This raises doubts in view of the racial laws which prohibited sexual relations between Jews and Aryans. It therefore seems impossible that this was planned in an official manner.⁴⁶

Furthermore, doubts about the incident even surfaced in Agudath Israel circles. When asked about the story, the headmistress of the Bais Yaakov seminary in Bnai Brak, herself a Holocaust survivor, stated the following:

We heard about the incident through America only after the war and not during the war itself. It seems possible that something like this could have happened, but with a few girls or with one, in secret, but not with ninety-three. I don't deal with the episode. We have a garden in memory of the ninety-three, streets named after them, but I don't teach the story.⁴⁷

Mr. Joseph Friedenson, prominent survivor, Yiddish writer and editor of *Dos Yiddishe Vort*, the Yiddish language monthly of Agudath Israel in America, also expressed doubts about the historical veracity of this story. He too noted that it was strange that no one in the camps or ghettos ever heard about it. He would have expected that something as striking as this would have been transmitted through the unofficial network that existed during that time. Furthermore, he noted that the language of Chaya Feldman's alleged letter was German-Hungarian Yiddish as opposed to the type of Polish Yiddish one would have expected in Cracow.⁴⁸ Another prominent survivor and Yiddish writer, Dr. Hillel Seidman, also wrote that the story was false and even stated, "I am familiar with who fabricated the 'story' about the 93 and when, here in New York."⁴⁹

⁴⁵Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader* (New York, 1976), 13.

⁴⁶Letter from Professor Gutman to Dr. Judith Tydor Baumel, July 5, 1983.

⁴⁷Interview (Tydor Baumel) with Rebbetzin Rivka Hoffman in Bnai Brak, October 25, 1984.

⁴⁸Telephone interview (Schacter) with Mr. Friedenson in New York City, February 19, 1990. In the part of his essay, cited above (n. 2), dealing with the heroism of Bais Yaakov girls during the Holocaust (pp. 79-82), Friedenson makes no mention of this story. See also Nisson Wolpin, ed., *The Torah World* (New York, 1982), 172-73.

⁴⁹See H. Seidman, "Vyetnam Heymkum un der Musir Haskil," *Der Tag* (Friday, March 9, 1973). In an interview (Schacter) on December 19, 1990, Dr. Seidman stated: "There was

A summary of the main arguments put forth by those questioning the story's historicity would, thus, include the following:

1. Information about the account is not precise. Several versions exist as to the event's location, the person to whom the crucial letter was addressed and the time and place of its being found. Furthermore, no one ever saw the original letter and all assumptions are based only on translations of it which appeared in the press.
2. Conditions in the Polish ghetto did not permit such a large group to be gathered together in one place, nor did they allow for a letter, written only minutes before death, to be smuggled out of the area.
3. Nazi Racial Laws prohibiting sexual relations between Jews and Aryans (*Rassenschande*—racial pollution) could not have permitted such an incident to occur. A candidate for the S.S., for example, had to prove his racial purity back to 1750. Thus, it would be incredulous to assume that a group which took such care to maintain its pure racial status would engage in organized sexual activity with Jewish girls clearly proscribed by German law.
4. There are no witnesses to the incident and no person seems to have known Chaya Feldman.
5. Additional arguments against the incident's veracity appeared in a newspaper article printed in *ha-Ir* during June 1986. A former member of the Cracow Jewish underground was quoted as having said that the small circumscribed area of the ghetto during this period could not have enabled such an event to occur without the underground having received word of it. This argument was strengthened by Professor Yisrael Gutman who stated that the Jewish council in the ghetto surely would have reacted to such an incident.⁵⁰ Also, how would ninety-three corpses be disposed of in the ghetto and how would Chaya Feldman's letter reach Switzerland?

In view of the arguments listed above, most historians who do not wish to claim the letter a direct forgery, discreetly state that the incident is "unlikely to have occurred."

Our examination of the episode provides us with many of the answers to these arguments. While we certainly cannot claim with any certitude that the story

never such a student in the [Cracow] seminary named Chaya Feldman. I had a sister there. . . . I know personally and exactly that it is a lie. It could not have happened. . . . I know who invented it."

In light of this, there clearly is no basis for Menachem Friedman's recent assertion that Seidman was the first to publicize this story. See his "The Haredim and the Holocaust," *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 53 (Winter 1990):99. See too *ibid.*, 100: "Subsequently it emerged that the story of the ninety-three girls was apocryphal."

⁵⁰See *ha-Ir* (June 27, 1986), 52. On June 25, 1942, the size of the Cracow ghetto was restricted for the second time. For the exact area included in the ghetto as of that date, which was about one-third of a square mile, see Jacob Apenszlak, *The Black Book of Polish Jewry* (1943), 84.

did take place, and, in fact, have serious doubts about it, it is possible to address and refute some of the points raised in an attempt to disprove its historicity.

1. Different versions: Location—There is no question that the incident occurred in Cracow and not in Warsaw. Those who cite Warsaw as the location base this on the mistake which appeared in *The New York Times* article of January 8, 1943. Rabbi Jung later claimed that the mistake stemmed from his secretary's tendency to attribute any event occurring during the war years in Poland to Warsaw.⁵¹ Rabbi Harlow deliberately maintained the misidentification of the city in which the event allegedly occurred as Warsaw, even though he knew it was Cracow, in order to stress the enormous horror of the event itself which transcended any specific time and place.⁵²

Recipient—It appears that the editors of the ultra-Orthodox newspapers and of the Bais Yaakov Jubilee volume found it more impressive to state that the letter was sent directly to Isaac Lewin, a well-known figure, and not to the less prominent Meir Schenkolewski. In fact, Schenkolewski claims that it was he who had passed the letter on to Lewin.⁵³

Text—Although never published before in its entirety, the original letter does exist and a copy of it is appended to this article. Significantly, it makes no mention of S.S. men, the gestapo or a camp, all of which appeared only later in the *Kol Yisrael* translation of it and which served as a basis for the subsequent scholarly reconstruction and denial of the story. Similarly, many others describing the incident felt it necessary to add details and descriptions which did not appear in the original. For example, "vile gestapo men" certainly sounds more striking than simple "German soldiers" and, anyway, in the eyes of many Jews in the free world, all German soldiers were considered "gestapo." Furthermore, its German-Hungarian Yiddish dialect may simply reflect the fact that its authoress hailed from a German-speaking area and came to Cracow for her education. Conceivably it is possible that Chaya Feldman lived in Austria or in the German part of Czechoslovakia and after the Anschluss in 1938 was sent to Cracow, which at that time was still free. Marienbad, itself, for example, is in the German part of Czechoslovakia and what may have brought her to the Knessiah Gedolah there in 1937 was simply the fact that it was her home town.⁵⁴

2. Conditions in the ghetto: During the period in question, the ghetto was overrun by German soldiers. We know that the seminary had continued to function in secret during the roundups, and it conceivably is possible to imagine that a large group of students had been captured at one time. As for the feasibility of smuggling a letter out of the ghetto, we know of other similar incidents in the

⁵¹Telephone interview (Tydor Baumel) with Rabbi Leo Jung, July 9, 1985.

⁵²Conversation (Schacter) with Rabbi Jules Harlow, April 21, 1990.

For another reference to this event as having taken place in Warsaw, see *Sovetish Heymland*, *op. cit.* (n. 44). It also refers to the German soldiers as members of the S.S.

⁵³For the tendency to attach erroneous facts to stories in order to strengthen their impact, see Mendel Piekarz, "Al Sifrut ha-Edut ki-Makor Histori li-Gezerot ha-Pitaron ha-Sofi," *Kivunim* (August 1983), 129–57.

⁵⁴Conversation (Schacter) with Mr. Walter Lowenthal, April 23, 1990. In fact, Hannah Weiss' essay notes that the girls in the Cracow Bais Yaakov "were gathered from all corners of the land" (*op. cit.* [n. 3], 20).

Warsaw ghetto during the same period. While it is impossible to reconstruct the exact route via which the letter allegedly made its way from Cracow to Switzerland, presumably it was transferred by the underground as were most other letters smuggled out of occupied Europe during this period.⁵⁵

3. Racial Laws: While laws against racial pollution did indeed exist, they were not relevant to the story under consideration here. First of all, bearing in mind that the group in question was described as being composed of "German soldiers" and not of "S.S. men and gestapo," it may well be that they were ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) or members of another minority group. While the likelihood of establishing a Jewish brothel for S.S. men may have been remote, the same cannot be said with regard to a brothel for German soldiers and particularly for members of the minority groups permitted to serve in the Wehrmacht. Furthermore, in view of the conditions in the Cracow ghetto during the summer of 1942, this might not have been an organized matter based upon any official policy.

Secondly, there is other evidence that Germans did force Jewish women to have sexual relations with them, in spite of official German legislation which forbade it. In his book of responsa, *Out of the Depths*, Rabbi Ephraim Oshry cites a question posed by a young man from Kovno who asked whether he was permitted to live with his wife after the war:

She, like many of her poor sisters, had been caught by the cursed Germans and given over to prostitution, and in addition to the fact that the vile ones tortured her pure body, they also tattooed upon her arm the words "whore for the soldiers of Hitler."⁵⁶

This sad evidence, taken from a halakhic context, points to the fact that the situation in which the girls from Cracow had been placed was not at all unique. Such incidents took place regularly in cities, ghettos and in camps. For example, the Nazis ordered Jewish leaders in Warsaw to organize a Jewish brothel for German soldiers. In response to opposition, the local leader of the Gestapo explicitly said, "Don't let the race-laws bother you. War is war, and in such a situation all theories die out."⁵⁷

⁵⁵It is, however, interesting to note that in a letter written to Mr. Manfred Meyer of New York City on May 15, 1990, Daniel Lewenstein's widow, Esther, states that she never heard of this story and that she checked her late husband's files for the years 1940–1944 and found nothing that related to it.

⁵⁶Rabbi Efraim Oshry, *Sefer She'elot u-Teshuvot mi-Maamakim I* (New York, 1976), 151, #27. This responsum has been cited in Irving J. Rosenbaum, *The Holocaust and Halakhah* (1976), 145–47 and in H. J. Zimmels, *The Echo of the Nazi Holocaust in Rabbinic Literature* (1977), 199–200.

⁵⁷See J. Apenszlak, *The Black Book of Polish Jewry*, *op. cit.*, 25–29, esp. p. 27. See too the *JTA Community News Reporter*, Vol. 30, No. 15 (April 13, 1990) citing excerpts from JTA press releases between April 19–25, 1940. A press release from Brussels, dated April 25, stated: "Drafting of young Jewish girls has started, purportedly for compulsory labor services. Jews in Warsaw believe, however, that they will be sent to military brothels." Our thanks to Dr. Norman Lamm for this reference.

Furthermore, Jewish girls were used for prostitution after the Wieliczka ghetto near Cracow was liquidated sometime in 1942. Interview (Schacter) with Mr. Sigmunt Rotten-

4. Witnesses: The question of witnesses is a delicate one, particularly in the case of a group where all members had committed suicide. It is even more problematic that no one has been able to identify Chaya Feldman or to describe her history. Schenkolewsky claims that he met so many Bais Yaakov girls in Marienbad that it would be impossible for him to remember one particular girl. Nevertheless, Hannah Weiss' essay partially fills this gap.

5. The arguments appearing in *ha-Ir*: True, the ghetto area was circumscribed during this period, but it still comprised more than the "four streets" quoted in the article. Furthermore, while a Jewish council did function in the ghetto, deportations were taking place daily and it is possible that the girls' sudden disappearance was considered as yet another Nazi "population transfer." This hypothesis is strengthened by the lack of precise information regarding the location to which the girls were transferred after their capture. If they were removed immediately from the ghetto, it might indeed have been assumed that they had joined one of the transports. Professor Gutman's claim that the Judenrat would have reacted to the girls' suicide is a convincing argument—if the girls committed suicide within the ghetto confines. However, what if this event occurred outside the ghetto walls? This would explain how neither witnesses from the Cracow ghetto nor the Yizkor books from Cracow make any mention of the story. Regarding the problem of disposing of 93 corpses, it must be remembered that the letter speaks only of the girls' intention to commit suicide. There is no evidence that, in fact, they managed to carry out their plan. Furthermore, since we have no clear proof of where the incident allegedly occurred, we are spared with having to account for the disposal of 93 corpses within the ghetto.⁵⁸

The final historical issue involves the primary sources describing the inci-

berg, May 9, 1990. Mr. Rottenberg was interned in a labor camp in Plaszow near Cracow and was part of a one-day operation to clean up the Wieliczka ghetto after it was liquidated. At that time he met a number of Jewish girls who told him that they made that decision in order to save their lives. See also Joan Miriam Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual I* (1984), esp. 72-74 for information about prostitution used as a means of protection; for examples of rape, see Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, ed. by R. Bridenthal, et al. (New York, 1984), 297-333.

For other evidence of this in rabbinic literature, see R. Mordechai Yaakov Breisch, *Sefer Helkat Yaakov* (Jerusalem, 1951), I, 37, #16, beginning; R. Tuvyah Yehudah Tavyomi (Gutentag), *Sefer Eretz Tovah* (Jerusalem, 1947), I, 188, #61, beginning. For a discussion of these and other sources, see H. J. Zimmels, *ibid.*, 185-200. See also Eliyahu ben Zimrah, "Kedushat ha-Hayyim u-Mesirut Nefesh bi-Yemei ha-Shoah, al pi ha-Halakhah," *Sinai* 80(1976):175-79; Shimon Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Poland During the Holocaust*, trans. by D. Fishman (Hoboken, 1987), 242.

⁵⁸The matter of the poison allegedly used by the girls also poses no historical problem. In a letter to Dr. Schacter dated May 16, 1990, Dr. Robert Richter noted that it was probably sodium cyanide which was quick and reliable and which was not difficult to conceal in capsule form.

For suicide in general at this time, see Konrad Kwiet, "The Ultimate Refuge: Suicide in the Jewish Community under the Nazis," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 29(1984):135-67. Our story is especially relevant to the issue briefly discussed there (p. 137) regarding suicide as an act of resistance.

dent. The truth remains that the two documents at hand—Chaya Feldman's letter and Hannah Weiss' testimony—are both Jewish sources. No corroboration of the incident is found in any German sources from the period. True, there is a testimony which describes the murder of one hundred Jewish girls in Cracow. This act was a reprisal for the murder of two S.D. men at the hands of Jewish girls whom they had raped.⁵⁹ However, the incident occurred during the summer of 1940 and is not related to the one under discussion here which occurred in 1942.⁶⁰

But this story also raises a larger issue, one which transcends the immediate boundaries of this event and speaks to the core of the classical Jewish response to catastrophe. The recent thought-provoking and insightful work of David G. Roskies and Alan Mintz has drawn our attention to the transtemporal patterns, overarching paradigms, and archetypes that govern this response throughout our history. In their effort to maintain faith in God in the face of often incredible suffering, Jewish victims of tragedy in all centuries felt constrained to view their experiences as part of a continuum and not as something radically new and different. Although they may have objectively believed that the magnitude of their suffering was unprecedented, they never presented it as such, for fear that this might indicate that God was finally breaking His covenantal bond and severing His close relationship with His people, a thought they simply could not abide and one that their faith would not allow them to accept. Whatever cataclysmic event they experienced was never seen in isolation, as *sui generis*, but, on the contrary, was portrayed as just the latest example of the age-old, consistently recurring phenomenon of God's punishment for Jewish sin. Indeed, the Jewish collective memory was so long and sharp that any time it confronted even a tragedy of major proportions, it was able to place it into paradigms of previously experienced tragedies and destructions. In fact, the greater the tragedy, the more potentially dangerous it was to Jewish faith and, hence, the greater was the effort to absorb it and subsume it under already established patterns and archetypes. Such a conception, in which even the unprecedented was assigned a precedent, was a comforting and reassuring one, allowing for the classical covenantal construct to remain intact. This continuity with the past provided great hope for the future.⁶¹

⁵⁹Testimony given on January 23, 1963, Yad Vashem Archives, TR-10/1171.

⁶⁰One other issue also remains unresolved. Chaya Feldman's letter is dated August 11 (= 28 Av) and states that in a few hours all will be over. The end of Hannah Weiss' essay places the death of "the 93" on 13 Av (= July 28).

It is also interesting to note that a reference to a very similar story was made by Baila bat Rivka, "An Overwhelming View: One of the Last Paragraphs of the History of Sarah Schenirer's Seminary in Cracow, Poland," *The Jewish Observer* 18:5(April 1985):37. "Only years later, as a Bais Yaakov student and teacher, did I learn of the horror and *kiddush Hashem* that your beautiful white building [in Cracow] had witnessed, the leap to eternity by thirty-five young girls who jumped from the roof (the same roof that sheltered us) in order not to be defiled by the approaching German soldiers, *yimach sh'mam*." Did the author confuse this event with our story or do we have here the beginning of a new historical fact or myth, "the martyrdom of the thirty-five . . .?"

⁶¹See David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); *idem.*, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia, 1988), 3-12; Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in*

Not only did the *patterns of thought* provided by this archetypal notion of tragedy govern *ex post facto* conceptualizations (and rationalizations) of Jewish suffering, but it also greatly influenced the immediate behavioral response of those who actually experienced it first hand. Here too the actions of the victims, confronted by terrifying choices and realities, were governed by *patterns of behavior* established in similar situations over the course of centuries of Jewish pain and persecution. These modes of behavior were recorded and transmitted from one generation to the next and became hallowed parts of the inner psyche of the Jew. Subsequent generations were almost programmed by their knowledge, conscious or otherwise, of how their devout, pious, and exalted ancestors responded in similar situations. In a word, the nature of the Jewish intellectual as well as practical response to catastrophe was conditioned by the response of previous generations to previous persecutions.

This issue of historical continuities, paradigms and archetypes becomes particularly controversial and emotional when discussing the Holocaust. For some, this is yet another horrible tragedy, to be plotted along the continuum of other tragedies which Jews had to face throughout history. The same historical line includes the destruction of the Temples, the Crusades, the Chmielnicki massacres, the Kishinev pogrom, and the Holocaust which, although more severe than the others, is considered to be part of the same category. For others, however, the Holocaust was so horrible and awesome a tragedy that it cannot possibly be subsumed under the category of previously experienced Jewish suffering; prior paradigms or typologies are simply wholly insufficient to serve as models for it. Yehuda Bauer wrote:

A number of Jewish religious authorities have said that the Holocaust is not essentially new, and represents a continuation of the persecution which has plagued the Jews for two thousand years. The need to integrate the Holocaust into the tradition of Jewish martyrology is understandable from a religious point of view, but it is historically erroneous. For one thing, never before was there a plan to annihilate the Jewish people everywhere. Persecutions were limited in area—Jews usually had the possibility of escaping elsewhere. The attacks and expulsions were the result of local social, religious, economic or political tensions. And the Jews had, as a rule, the option of abjuring their faith—sometimes only temporarily—and if they chose to do so, their lives were usually spared. There was never a persecution that saw in the total annihilation of the Jewish people a panacea for the ills of humanity. In that sense, Nazi anti-Semitism represented a new departure, because while the elements on which it built were familiar, their combination was qualitatively unprecedented, total and murderous. From a Jewish historical perspective,

Hebrew Literature (New York, 1984). See also Mortimer Ostow, "The Jewish Response to Crisis," *Judaism and Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1982), 231–66. This essay first appeared in pamphlet form published by the Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning and the Mount Sinai Medical Center in Milwaukee and in *Conservative Judaism* 23:4(1980):3–25. For more on Jewish collective memory and response to catastrophe, see Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), *in passim*.

therefore, the Holocaust, while containing many elements familiar from the long history of Jewish martyrdom, is unique.⁶²

Passions run very high on this issue among survivors and nonsurvivors alike, but one thing is clear. As unprecedented as the Holocaust may have been in the force and scope of its destruction, the literary and practical reactions of the victims themselves were anything but unprecedented. While from the perspective of the suffering inflicted on the Jewish people, the Holocaust may (and should) be lifted out of history and severed from the millennia-old Jewish experience, from the perspective of the reactions of its victims it is very much rooted in Jewish history. The literature of the Holocaust retrieved and reapplied ancient archetypal images of faith, acceptance and challenge in the face of tragedy, as did the actions of the Jews themselves who experienced it.⁶³ Both fit precisely into pre-existing patterns and together they serve as one more tragic link in the chain of Jewish responses to catastrophe since ancient times.

The story of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls of Cracow is a perfect example of this point from both of these perspectives, each of which will be analyzed in some detail. As indicated above, it inspired a small but significant corpus of literature which, in its fictional descriptions and poetic laments, reflects familiar, oft-repeated and well-known themes and motifs. The most famous literary work written in connection with this story is the poem by Hillel Bavli which first appeared in *Hadoar* in January, 1943, and was popularized through its inclusion into the Yom Kippur service in two widely used High Holiday prayerbooks.⁶⁴ Already at the beginning of his introduction to the poem, Bavli placed the story into a broader historical context. He noted how "this affair adds the voice of our own generation to the voice of past generations by proclaiming and stating: it is better to sanctify the name of God than to profane it and live." He went on to state how "the ninety-three

⁶²"The Place of the Holocaust in Contemporary History," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* I (1984), 218. See also *ibid.*, 201–02; *idem.*, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* (Seattle, 1978), 30f. Cf. George Steiner, "The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the 'Shoah,'" *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Berel Lang (New York and London, 1988), 158–59.

For the first view, see R. Moshe Feinstein, "bi-Devar Keviat Yom Taanit le-Kedoshai ha-Shoah," *Am ha-Torah* 2:10(1985):17–18: "... one should not establish another [fast] day exclusively for the decrees that were in our times. It is in the category of all the decrees that were made in the course of this entire, long Exile . . ."

In the course of an early debate (1952) in the Israeli Knesset about the propriety of accepting German reparations money, Pinhas Lavon, who later became minister of defense, argued against those who feared that doing so would undermine the unique historical horror of the Holocaust. He claimed that Jews had always been killed by their enemies. Yes, more Jews were killed this time but that was only because there were more Jews living in the world at that time and also because the Nazis were particularly efficient in their methods. See *Divrei Knesset* (1952), 910. For the significance of this comment in the context of the general difficulty in dealing with the Holocaust in the early years of the State, see Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel* (Berkeley, 1983), 100f.

For a recent discussion about historical continuities and discontinuities in connection with the Holocaust, see Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way* (New York, 1988), 314f.

⁶³See the works cited above, n. 61.

⁶⁴See above, n. 20, 35, 36.

What is meant by “after?” R. Yohanan said on the authority of R. Yosé b. Zimra: After the words of Satan, as it is written “And the child grew, and was weaned [and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned]” (Genesis 21:8). Thereupon Satan said to the Almighty: “Sovereign of the Universe! To this old man You did graciously vouchsafe the fruit of the womb at the age of one hundred, yet of all that banquet which he prepared, he did not have one turtle-dove or pigeon to sacrifice before You! Has he done aught but in honor of his son!” Replied He, “Yet were I to say to him, ‘Sacrifice your son before Me,’ he would do so without hesitation.” Straightway, God tested Abraham . . .

R. Levi said: After Ishmael’s words to Isaac. Ishmael said to Isaac: “I am more virtuous than you in good deeds, for you were circumcised at eight days but I at thirteen years.” “On account of one limb would you incense me!” he replied. “Were the Holy One, blessed be He, to say unto me, ‘Sacrifice thyself before Me,’ I would obey.” Straightway, God did tempt Abraham.⁷²

This is precisely at issue here in this talmudic passage. For R. Yohanan, Abraham is being tested; for R. Levi, it is Isaac.⁷³

Furthermore, an oft-quoted rabbinic passage conflates both of their roles:

R. Bibi b. Abba in the name of R. Yohanan explained: Our father Abraham stood before the Holy One, blessed be He, in prayer and supplication, and said to Him: “Sovereign of the Universe! It was manifest and known to You, when You said to me, ‘Take now your son, your only son’ (Genesis 22:2), that there was in my mind an answer I could have given You and that there was in my mind something I could have said, viz.: But yesterday You promised me, ‘For in Isaac shall seed be called to You’ (Genesis 21:12), and now You tell me, ‘Offer him there for a burnt-offering’ (Genesis 22:2)! However, just as I had an answer to give You but controlled my inclination and did not reply to You, ‘As a deaf man, I hear not and . . . as a dumb man that opens not his mouth’ (Psalms 38:14), so when the children of Isaac give way to transgressions and evil deeds, recollect for them the binding of their father Isaac and rise from the Throne of Judgment and betake Yourself to the Throne of Mercy, and being filled with compassion for them, have mercy upon them and change for them the Attribute of Justice into the Attribute of Mercy!”⁷⁴

⁷²Sanhedrin 89b. See too *Bereshit Rabbah* 55:4. For an analysis of these texts, see Yaakov E. Ephraïm, *op. cit.*, 69–77; Yaakov Elbaum, “From Sermon to Story: The Transformation of the Akedah,” *Prooftexts* 6:2(1986):100–02.

⁷³See also *Midrash Tanhuma* (Jerusalem, 1982), 89, *Bereshit, Parashat Vayera*, #18, end; *Midrash Ekhah Rabbah*, ed. by Salomon Buber (Wilna, 1899), 14a, Proem 24.

⁷⁴*Vayikra Rabbah* 29:9. See also *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:10; *Talmud Yerushalmi, Taanit* 2:4; *Midrash Tanhuma, op. cit.*, 95, *Parashat Vayera*, #23, end. In this latter passage, God assures Abraham that He will favorably respond to his request: “The children of Israel are destined to sin before Me and I will judge them on Rosh Hashanah. However, if they wish me to search for a merit on their behalf (*she-ahapes lahen zekhut*) and remember for them the *akedah* of Isaac, let them blow before me with the shofar of this [ram].” For the different versions of

Although drawing God’s attention to his own personal act of faith, Abraham’s concluding request was not that God should remember what *he* did when *his* children will sin but that God should remember what *Isaac* did when *Isaac’s* children will sin. Both father and son acted in a virtuous way and the actions of *both* should later redound to the favor of their descendants.⁷⁵

The image and precedent of the *akedah* occupied a very prominent position in Jewish martyrological literature beginning with ancient times. In keeping with the simple biblical text, the earliest sources highlight the role of Abraham in that episode. In the famous story of “The Woman and Her Seven Sons,” the mother gave a message to her children who one by one refused to bow down to an idol and were therefore all taken to be killed:

Their mother wept and said to them: “Children, do not be distressed, for to this end were you created—to sanctify in the world the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He. Go and tell Father Abraham: Let not your heart swell with pride! You built one altar, but I have built seven altars and on them have offered up my seven sons. What is more: Yours was a trial; mine was an accomplished fact!”⁷⁶

In the *akedah* story, the focus is on Abraham’s action. If his behavior was meritorious, argued the mother, then hers should certainly be considered as such,

this text, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. by Judah Goldin (New York, 1979), 90–91. See also L. Ginzberg, *op. cit.* (n. 67), 252, n. 248; Y. Ephraïm, *op. cit.* (n. 68), 308–12.

⁷⁵See too the familiar passage in the Selihot service which echoes the statement cited earlier (n. 68): “May he who answered Abraham our father at Mount Moriah answer us” and then continues, “May he who answered Isaac his son when he was bound on the altar answer us,” acknowledging a role not only for Abraham but for Isaac as well. See *The Authorised Selichot for the Whole Year*, trans. by A. Rosenfeld (London, 1969), 19. Also, R. David Halevi explained the *Shulhan Arukh’s* ruling that the biblical description of this story should be recited as part of the daily ritual “in order to remember the merit of our forefathers (*zekhut avot*) every single day,” clearly giving equal significance to both Abraham and Isaac. See *Taz, Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim*, 1:4. See also *Bet Yosef, ad. loc.*

For more on this theme, see the comprehensive study by Shalom Spiegel, “me-Aggadah ha-Akedah,” *Sefer ha-Yovel li-Khevod Aleksander Marx* (New York, 1950), 471–547; translated as *The Last Trial, ibid.*; Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden, 1961), 193–227; Alter Hilevitz, “Nosei ha-Akedah ba-Tefillot,” *Hikrei Zemanim* I (Jerusalem, 1976), 36–43; Meir Givati, “Oked ve Ne’ekad—Mikra u-Midrash,” *Bet Mikra* 27:2–3 (1982):144–54; Aharon Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah* (Albany, 1988), 33–68; and other articles printed in the collection by Eli Yassif, *Akedat Yitzhak: Mehkarim be-Hitpathutah shel Masoret Sifrutit* (Jerusalem, 1978). The work also contains a useful introduction and bibliography.

This issue is also a central feature in many of the biblical commentaries on the story. A careful examination of them would yield much interesting material relevant to our theme.

⁷⁶*Yalkut Shimoni, Deuteronomy* #938. This story appears in a number of different sources. See J. Gutman, “ha-Em ve-Shivat Banehah ba-Aggadah u-ve-Sifrei Hashmonaim II ve-IV,” *Sefer Yohanan Levi* (Jerusalem, 1949), 25f; Gerson Cohen, “Maaseh Hanah ve-Shivat Banehah be-Sifrut ha-Ivrit,” *Sefer ha-Yovel li-Khevod Mordekhai Menahem Kaplan* (New York, 1953), 109–22; S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial, ibid.*, 13–16. For special emphasis on the role of the *akedah* in this story, see A. Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah, op. cit.*, 11–35.

for her sacrifice was far greater than his, both in numbers and, more importantly, in result.

Here, the focus is not on the exemplary behavior of the sons but, rather, on the extraordinary sacrifice of the parent (the mother), hence the identification with the parent (the father) in the *akedah* episode. The authors of subsequent Jewish martyrological works, however, identified more directly with Isaac who, as the victim of the *akedah*, much more closely prefigured their own situation. Indeed, it has been suggested that it was precisely the new historical reality of persecution, suffering and martyrdom in the centuries before and after the destruction of the Second Temple which was responsible for the later rabbinic reshifting of the focus in the *akedah* story from the exclusive biblical emphasis on Abraham to a more active and central role for Isaac. In their search for biblical paradigms, these beleaguered Jews found in Isaac an excellent role model and reformulated his role to fit their own needs.⁷⁷ They even went so far as to claim that Isaac was actually killed, all in an attempt to parallel his story as much as possible with their own.⁷⁸ No longer was Abraham the hero; it was now Isaac, the martyr, who was the hero. And not only was his exemplary behavior to act as a source of merit in the Heavenly court for the Jewish people down through the ages, it was to be actually emulated by all future generations. In a celebrated passage explaining the *mitzvah* of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, R. Saadya Gaon wrote:

The sixth reason is to remind us of the *akedah* of Yitzhak who gave his life for the sake of Heaven. So too must we be prepared to give our lives for the sake of Heaven, for the sanctification of His name.⁷⁹

The most famous references to the *akedah* story as a paradigm of Jewish martyrology in medieval Hebrew literature are found in the literature surrounding the First and Second Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For example, one Crusade chronicler wrote in a well-known passage:

Please inquire and find out as to whether there ever was such a mass *akedah* from the days of Adam; have there ever been eleven hundred *akedot* in a single day, all of them like the *akedah* of Isaac son of Abraham? A single one performed on Mount Moriah shook the world, as it is written, "Behold their valiant ones cry without; the angels of peace weep bitterly" and the skies darkened. But now what have they done? Why have the skies not become black, and the stars withdrawn their shining, and why have not sun and moon darkened in their courses, when on a single day, a Tuesday, the third of Sivan, were killed and slaughtered eleven hundred martyrs, including infants

⁷⁷See, for example, Ephraim E. Urbach, *Hazal: Pirkei Emunot ve-Deot* (Jerusalem, 1976), 445–46; Dov Noy, "ha-Akedah ke-Avtipus shel Kiddush Hashem," *Mahanayim* 60(1962):140–44; G. Vermes, *op. cit.*, 203–04; M. Givati, *op. cit.*, 151–53.

⁷⁸See especially the sources cited in Urbach, *ibid.*, 446–49; D. Noy, *ibid.*, 141–42; G. Vermes, *ibid.*, 204f; S. Spiegel, *op. cit.*, 28f; *idem.*, "Perur me-Aggadot ha-Akedah," *Sefer ha-Yovel Li-Khevod Avraham Weiss* (New York, 1964), 553–66.

⁷⁹See *Abudarham ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 1959), 270; M. Givati, *op. cit.*, 153.

and children who had never sinned and souls of the innocent and humble? Will You in the sight of these things withhold Your anger?⁸⁰

When hundreds upon hundreds of men and women slaughtered one another and their children, no immediate historical precedent was provided. The chronicler preferred to go all the way back to the Bible and did so to accomplish a two-fold purpose. First, in order to link the current acts of martyrdom with a typological antecedent of great resonance and, hence, not only to legitimize them but even to exalt them. Secondly, he intended to go one step further and show that even this exalted precedent cannot legitimately serve as such for it does not even compare to what happened later, either in numbers or outcome. "Please inquire and find out as to whether there was ever such a mass *akedah* from the days of Adam," asks the chronicler. Clearly he is convinced that the answer to this rhetorical question is "no"; that no such event ever took place in all of human history. The scope of the present martyrdom remains, therefore, unprecedented and the faith it reflected is, as a result, even more remarkable and praiseworthy. And indeed, these martyrs of the Crusades, with their appeal to the imagery of the *akedah*, become very significant role models for the martyrs of subsequent generations.⁸¹

It is against this literary-historical background that we can appreciate the significance of the use of the *akedah* precedent as a historical paradigm for the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls. In the two examples cited above—whether that of "The Woman and Her Seven Sons" or the martyrs during the Crusades—it was used as a precedent for an act of either allowing a loved one to be killed ("The Woman") or actually killing someone else (the Crusade martyrs) in order to sanctify the Name of God. Indeed, both of these conclusions were logical extensions of the biblical story and its midrashic elaborations. In fact, it is in keeping with such a context that we also find a reference to the *akedah* motif in a poem about the

⁸⁰See the chronicle by R. Shelomo b. Shimshon printed in A. M. Haberman, *Sefer Gezerot Ashkenaz ve-Tzorefat* (Jerusalem, 1945), 32.

⁸¹For more on the Crusade chronicle descriptions, their use of the *akedah*, and their significance for later Jewish history, see S. Spiegel, *op. cit.*, 17–27; A. Mintz, *op. cit.*, 85–101; M. Ostow, *op. cit.*, 254–55; Ivan G. Marcus, "From Politics to Martyrdom: Shifting Paradigms in the Hebrew Narratives of the 1096 Crusade Riots," *Prooftexts* 2:1(1982):40–52; Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley, 1987) 127–28; Gerson D. Cohen, "Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim," *Studies in the Leo Baeck Institute*, ed. by Max Kreutzberger (New York, 1967), 149–52.

See also the short story by Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "Lefi ha-Tzaar ha-Sekhar," *ha-Esh ve-ha-Etzim*, *Kol Sippurav Shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon VIII* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1962), 5–19; *idem.*, *Yamim Noraim* (1938), 48–52; Michah Yosef ben Gurion (Berdycewski), *Tzefunot ve-Aggadot: Aggadot Am I* (Leipzig, 1925), 116.

It is interesting to note that the Crusade chronicles also refer to Abraham's behavior as a paradigm for their own: "And Zion's precious sons, the people of Mainz, were put through the ten trials like Father Abraham. . . . They too offered up their sons, exactly as Abraham offered up his son Isaac." See A. M. Haberman, *ibid.*, 31–32.

For the use of the *akedah* motif in Selihot written by Ashkenazic Jews to describe their own experience during the Crusades, see Yaakov Rotschild, "Seder ha-Selihot," *Maayanot: Me'asef le-Inyanei Hinukh ve-Horaah IX* (Jerusalem, 1968), 453, 466, 472–73.

Holocaust by Aharon Zeitlin entitled "Shir ha-Akedah." As the subheading to the poem, he cites the verse (Job 13:15; in the *keri* as opposed to the *ketiv* version): "Though He slay me, yet in Him I will trust" and goes on to refer to himself as a burnt offering (*olah*) and as a bound sheep. Once again, these allusions relate to being killed by someone else, in this case either God or the Nazis, depending on to whom the "he" in the first phrase of the verse refers.⁸²

But our story is different, for here the *akedah* theme is being directly used to justify, and even glorify, solely the act of suicide, something for which neither the biblical version nor any of its midrashic embellishments provides any basis.⁸³ While there is one fairly isolated midrashic tradition which claims that Isaac bound himself to the altar,⁸⁴ there is certainly no text which states that he attempted to kill himself, nor would there be any reason to expect such a text.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the imagery of the *akedah* story had so seeped into the psyche of especially Ashkenazic Jewry and had become so accepted in martyrological literature that it was applied here even in a case where such an application was not strictly warranted. Clearly its

⁸²See A. Zeitlin, "Shir ha-Akedah," *Shirim u-Poemot* (Jerusalem, 1949), 269–70. For another reference to the *akedah* in Holocaust literature, see R. Kalonymus Kalman Schapiro, *Sefer Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1960), 72–73.

For other examples of the *akedah* motif in modern Hebrew literature, see Moshe Steiner, "Bein Akedah le-Hitmodedut Gevurah," *ha-Umah* 14(1976):409–20; Glenda Abramson, "The Reinterpretation of the Akedah in Modern Hebrew Poetry," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41:1(1990):101–14.

⁸³Although "the woman" did commit suicide after her seventh son was killed (*Gittin* 57b; *Yalkut*, *op. cit.*, n. 76) and there were many examples of suicides in the Crusade chronicles, the *akedah* motif need not be understood as having been directly applied to them, as it clearly is in our story.

⁸⁴See *Sifré al Sefer Devarim*, ed. by Eliezer A. Finkelstein (Berlin, 1940), 58:

R. Meir says: Scripture says, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart." Love Him with all your heart, as did your father Abraham, of whom it is said, "But thou, Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham My friend" (Isaiah 41:8). "And with all thy soul," as did Isaac who bound himself upon the altar, as it is said, "And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son" (Genesis 22:10).

The standard assumption, however, is that Abraham bound Isaac to the altar (as per Genesis 22:9). According to some midrashic traditions, he did so at Isaac's request. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:8. See Menachem M. Kasher, *Humash Torah Shelemah* III:2 (New York, 1949), 886–87, #108–109; Y. Ephraïm, *op. cit.*, 252–56.

⁸⁵It is, however, most striking to note that the Midrash associates suicide with Abraham's role in this story. See *Sifré al Sefer Devarim*, *ibid.*, 355, #313:

"He kept him as the apple of His eye" (Deuteronomy 32:10): Had the Holy One, blessed be He, asked Abraham for his eyeball, he would have given it to Him; and not only his eyeball but his very soul, the thing most precious to him of all, as it is said: "Take now your son, your only one . . . even Isaac" (Genesis 22:2). But is it not well known that Isaac was his only son? Rather, this refers to Abraham's soul, which is called "only one," as it is said, "Deliver my soul from the sword; mine only one from the power of the dog" (Psalms 22:21).

application here is unusual, if not unprecedented. But the unprecedented should no longer surprise us, especially in this context. It has long been noted that the mass martyrdom of the victims of the Crusades themselves was also unprecedented, going beyond any mode of behavior mandated by the biblical *akedah* story or, for that matter, by the *halakhah* itself. And so, in our case, the unprecedented is taken yet one step further—the *akedah* paradigm moving from one, near killing at the command of God (the biblical story) to eleven hundred real killings spontaneously done (during the Crusades) to ninety-three suicides. And, as we move further and further away from the original source, the tremendous self-sacrifice of Jews in time of great persecution and suffering gets raised to yet another level of saintliness and virtue.

The theme of the *akedah* was not the only biblical paradigm invoked in the poetic and belletristic literature about "the ninety-three." Poets and essayists alike mined the corpus of Jewish tradition for other motifs which they utilized in attempting to cloak this story in ancient biblical imagery for the purpose of granting it transcendental meaning and significance. In David Shimoni's poem mentioned above,⁸⁶ he paralleled the levels of purity and courage which these young women attained to the heights of Mount Sinai which their ancestors dared not ascend during the time of revelation.⁸⁷ He also referred to the ninety-three as "olot" or burnt offerings, putting their death on par with biblical sacrifices brought to expiate Israel's sins. Furthermore, he wrote that the container of poison they used "shall be hidden like the jar of manna in the memory of the nation for generations." The poison which took the lives of these girls is as exalted as was the manna which sustained the lives of their forefathers in the desert. Also, not only will their story enter the storehouse of the collective memory of the Jewish people, but the very physical essence of the poison, like the jar containing the manna (and the ark, the cruse of anointing oil and the staff of Aaron with which it is grouped in the talmudic text),⁸⁸ will ultimately be unearthed and proudly displayed in a position of prominence at the end of days.

Furthermore, Shimoni noted that: "We do not know their burial place, like the burial place of the faithful shepherd. But we do know that, like him, they died at the will of God." This identification of the ninety-three with Moses is significant and shows the extent to which Shimoni was prepared to go to glorify their act and their memory. After all, it was God Himself who buried Moses.⁸⁹ Furthermore, this imagery raises another association with a relevant rabbinic passage:

R. Hanna b. Hanina said: Why was Moses' burial place hidden from human beings? For it was obvious and known to God that the Bet ha-Mikdash was destined to be destroyed and the Jewish people would be exiled from their land. Perhaps they will come to Moses' grave and cry and plead, and Moses will rise and nullify decrees. For the righteous are more beloved in their death than in their life.⁹⁰

⁸⁶See above, n. 34.

⁸⁷See Exodus 19:24.

⁸⁸See Yoma 52b.

⁸⁹See Deuteronomy 34:6, *Sotah* 9b, 14a.

⁹⁰This passage is cited in the *En Yaakov* on *Sotah* 13b. See too R. Barukh Halevi Epstein, *Torah Temimah* on Deuteronomy 34:6, s.v. *ve-lo yada*.

The contemporary relevance of this passage to the Holocaust is clear. God was absolutely insistent on going through with this great destruction, including the death of the ninety-three, and refused to allow anything that might possibly stop this "destined" act. Also, the final phrase provides solace to those who mourn their loss, for as righteous as they were in life, they were even more so in death.

The parallel of the experience of the ninety-three to Mt. Sinai is also found in an English poem written about them by Alter Abelson:

"For chastity, we chose to die
Rather than live like swine in sty.
Recite the Kaddish hymn, we pray,
In our behalf on Yizkor day."
So Haya wrote the day before
The Nazis came to shame their core.
A glory trembled in the wor[ld],
As when on Sinai's heights was heard
The voice of Heaven, by Israel's tribe,
Which God's eternities inscribe . . .⁹¹

Finally, another one of the literary sources, a short story by Eugene Weintraub, acknowledges the twin responses of acceptance and challenge which characterize the Jewish response to catastrophe through the ages. At first, he places the following remark into the mouth of the girls' principal: "Yes children, you can shed your tears, but remember that we have a duty to perform. God has seen fit to appoint us for the task about to be done. We should be proud. Just as our fathers and mothers—just as our brave ancestors of old—had their appointed hour so have we to face our task." What an expression of faith and belief in God! But the story ends on an entirely different note. Sister Sarah prayed: "Where are you this night, Almighty, when your children cry for the need of Your protection. Where are You, oh God, when monsters are coming to destroy what You have brought forth."⁹² This, too, is a classical Jewish response to catastrophe and has ample precedent in ancient and medieval times.⁹³ The typology is thus maintained, both in descriptions of the tragedy as well as in the responses to it.

But there is one last, historical typology that remains to be explored. Our interest here is not in the general act of suicide in the service of martyrdom, but in the more specific act of taking one's life to avoid being forced to engage in sexual activity with an enemy.⁹⁴ Whether this particular episode of the ninety-three

⁹¹See above, n. 22.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³See the works of David G. Roskies and Alan Mintz cited above, n. 61. Compare the challenge described here with the absolute passive acceptance, prayer, and expressions of faith in God which greeted the news of this event at a meeting of the Vaad Hatzalah in New York City described above, p. 98.

⁹⁴For examples of suicide as an act of martyrdom in general, see the Crusade chronicles discussed above which are full of them and the literature cited above, n. 81. In addition, see Abraham Zacuto, *Sefer Yuhasin ha-Shalem* (Frankfurt am Main, 1924), 51; Sidney Goldstein, *Suicide in Rabbinic Literature* (Hoboken, 1989), 41–50.

occurred or not, we do not know. But it is clear that it could have occurred, for the collective memory of the Jewish people contains many such instances, from ancient times into the modern period. A few salient examples of suicide for the sake of maintaining chastity will suffice to make the point clear.

A famous talmudic passage already describes such an event as having taken place during the time of the destruction of the Second Temple:

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Samuel, or it may be R. Ammi, or as some say it was taught in a Baraita: On one occasion four hundred boys and girls were carried off for immoral purposes. They divined what they were wanted for and said [to themselves,] "If we drown in the sea shall we attain the life of the future world?" The eldest among them expounded the verse, "The Lord said, I will bring again from Bashan, I will bring again from the depths of the sea" (Psalms 68:23). "I will bring again from Bashan," from between the teeth of [*ben shinei*] lions. "I will bring again from the depths of the sea," those who

We will also not enter into the issue of the halakhic legitimacy of allowing oneself to be killed and certainly taking one's own life when faced with the alternative of forced conversion. There is a large literature on this subject, especially in connection with the suicide of the Jews at Masada. For a bibliography of this literature, see Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937–1980)* (Berlin and New York, 1984), 779–89.

For the case made by later Ashkenazic authorities to justify this apparently clear breach of the law, see Jacob Katz, *Ben Yehudim le-Goyim* (Jerusalem, 1960), 89f; trans. as *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York, 1969), 82f; *idem.*, "Ben Tatnu le-Tah ve-Tat," *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Yitzhak Baer* (Jerusalem, 1961), 321–22; David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1979), 25–26; Haym Soloveitchik, "Religious Law and Change: The Medieval Ashkenazic Example," *AJS Review* 12:2(1987):208f.

For this issue as it arose during the Holocaust, see Irving J. Rosenbaum, *The Holocaust and Halakhah*, *op. cit.* (n. 56), 35–40, 47f; H. J. Zimmels, *The Echo of the Nazi Holocaust in Rabbinic Literature*, *op. cit.* (n. 56), 63–64, 82–85, 244–50.

For the halakhic issue as to whether Jewish law permits a (n unmarried) woman to let herself be killed or commit suicide to avoid sexual relations with a gentile, see S. Yisraeli, "Mitzvat Kiddush Hashem bi-Shlosh Averot ha-Hamurot," *Torah she-Be'al Peh* XIV (1972), 72–78; Shmuel T. Rubenstein, "Hatzalat Nefashot al Yedei Giluy Arayot - ba-Halakhah," *ibid.*, 89–96; Eliyahu ben Zimrah, *op. cit.* (n. 57).

One thing is crystal clear. By the twentieth century, the (alleged) action of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls had been so much a part of normative Jewish behavior for centuries that not only did it not occur to anyone to question their behavior on halakhic grounds and accuse them of violating the law but, on the contrary, it was held in the highest regard and esteem as being a most exalted act of *kiddush Hashem*.

Another context for this story is the special role played by women in Jewish martyrology, both by killing themselves as well as by allowing themselves to be killed by others. For a preliminary treatment of this phenomenon, see M. Kayserling, *Die Jüdischen Frauen in der Geschichte, Literatur und Kunst* (Leipzig, 1879), 63–73; Shlomo Ashkenazi, *Neshei Yisrael bi-Gezuratan*, *op. cit.* (n. 31); reprinted with additions as *Giborot be-Yisrael*, *op. cit.* (n. 31); *idem.*, *ha-Ishah be-Aspaklaryat ha-Yahadut*, *op. cit.* (n. 31), 61–67; Yitzhak Rivkind, "Kiddush Hashem fun Froyen," *op. cit.* (n. 38), 1029–39; S. Noble, "The Jewish Woman in Mediaeval Martyrology," *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies II* (Jerusalem, 1972), English section, 133–40.

drown in the sea. When the girls heard this they all leaped into the sea. The boys then drew the moral for themselves, saying, "If these for whom this [i.e., sexual intercourse] is natural act so, shall not we, for whom it [i.e., homosexuality] is unnatural?" They also leaped into the sea. Of them the text says, "Yea, for thy sake we are killed all the day long, we are counted as sheep for the slaughter" (Psalms 44:23).⁹⁵

A slightly different version of the story appears in *Midrash Ekhah Rabbah*:

Vespasian, may his bones be pulverized!, filled three ships with men and women of the nobility of Jerusalem, planning to place them in the brothels of Rome. When they had embarked on the sea, they said, "Is it not enough for us that we have angered our God in His holy house? Shall we now outrage Him overseas as well?" They said to the women, "Do you want such a thing?" They said to them, "No." They said, "Now if these, who are accustomed to this, do not want it, as to us, how much the more so!"

They said to them, "Tell us, if we throw ourselves into the sea, shall we have a portion in the world to come?" The Holy One, blessed be He, enlightened them with this verse: "The Lord said, I will bring again from Bashan, I will bring again from the depths of the sea" (Psalms 68:23). Those in the first ship stood up and said, "Have we forgotten the name of our God or spread forth our hands to a strange God? [Surely not!]" (Psalms 44:32), and threw themselves into the sea. The second [group] went and said, "Would not God search this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart" (Psalms 44:22), and they threw themselves into the sea. The third [group] said, "Yea, for Thy sake we are killed all the day long, we are counted as sheep for the slaughter." (Psalms 44:23), and they threw themselves into the sea. And the Holy Spirit cried, "For these things I weep" (Lamentations 1:16).⁹⁶

Not only is there evidence here that such behavior occurred, but it clearly had the blessings of the rabbis, even in this case where the involvement in sin they were trying to avoid was not immediate. In fact, while in the first text, the assurance of a share in the world to come for those who committed suicide under these

⁹⁵Gittin 57b. See too *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Psalms*, #798, *Ekhah* #1028; *Midrash Zuta*, *Ekhah*, ed. by Salomon Buber (Berlin, 1894), 68, #21 (Parma ms. #541). For the significance of the number four hundred, see Gerson D. Cohen, "The Story of the Four Captives," below (n. 99), 86-89.

⁹⁶*Midrash Ekhah Rabbah*, ed. by Salomon Buber (Vilna, 1899), 41a-b. For a slightly different version of this text, see the standard edition of *Midrash Rabbah*, *Ekhah* 1:45, beg.

For the ancient concern that someone who is drowned will not merit resurrection, see Menahem Stern, "Ema-Adamah be-Sifrut ha-Ivrit ha-Atikah," *Tarbitz* 9:3-4 (1938):272-74; Saul Lieberman, *Sheki'in* (Jerusalem, 1939), 58; *idem.*, "Some Aspects of After Life in Early Rabbinic Literature," *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume II* (Jerusalem, 1965), 527-30. Both cite our text as an example of this fear, implicitly suggesting that what concerned these martyrs is not that their suicide may make them ineligible for *olam ha-ba* but rather the fact that they would perish in water and not be buried in the ground. Cf. D. Noy, *op. cit.* (n. 77), 143, who interprets their concern as stemming from their contemplated suicide.

circumstances comes from "the eldest among them," in the second text it is provided by none other than God Himself!

In another rabbinic text, this act was not even questioned and was simply taken for granted as being an appropriate mode of behavior:

It once occurred with seventy virgins who were captured and put in a ship to be brought and placed in brothels. Those virgins said to one another: "Let us come and sanctify the Name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and not allow ourselves to be defiled by uncircumcised idolators." What did they do? They went up to the roof, fell into the sea and drowned themselves in it.⁹⁷

These stories must have made a tremendous impression on subsequent generations and, with the passage of time, they seeped into the collective consciousness and historical experience of the Jewish people.⁹⁸

Close to one thousand years later, the story is repeated in Abraham ibn Daud's *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* in connection with a tragic episode which occurred in the tenth century. At the beginning of his famous story of "the four captives," Ibn Daud recounted how the commander of the ship carrying these great scholars wanted to violate the wife of one of them, R. Moses, who later became the leading rabbinic figure in Spain at that time:

Thereupon, she cried out in Hebrew to her husband R. Moses and asked him whether or not those who drown in the sea will be quickened at the time of the resurrection of the dead. He replied unto her: "The Lord said: I will bring them back from Bashan; I will bring them back from the depths of the sea." Having heard his reply, she cast herself into the sea and drowned.⁹⁹

While there are at least a dozen other examples of the phenomenon of women committing suicide to preserve their chastity among both Ashkenazic and Se-

⁹⁷See *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Ekhah*, #1017; see too *Midrash Zuta*, *Ekhah*, *op. cit.*, 64, #13 (Parma ms. 541); 135, #9 (Parma ms. 261). See also Gerson D. Cohen, "The Story of the Four Captives," below (n. 99), 75f.

⁹⁸It is interesting that the celebrated Tosafist, Rabbenu Tam, based his positive evaluation of martyrdom in certain circumstances on this story. See *Tosafot*, *Avodah Zarah* 18a, s.v. *ve-al*. See too R. Chazan, *op. cit.* (n. 81), 123: "While these four hundred young martyrs are not mentioned explicitly in the Hebrew First Crusade chronicles, they do seem to play a role in the thinking of the chroniclers, certainly, and perhaps of the members of the persecuted communities."

It was also included in subsequent collections of Jewish martyrological literature. See, for example, Shimon Bernfeld, *Sefer ha-Demaot I* (Berlin, 1924), 110; S. Ashkenazi, *Neshei Yisrael bi-Gevuratan*, *op. cit.* (n. 31), 42-43; *idem.*, *Giborot be-Yisrael*, *op. cit.*, 73.

⁹⁹See Gerson D. Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah: The Book of Tradition by Abraham ibn Daud* (Philadelphia, 1967), 46-47 (Hebrew), 64 (English); *idem.*, "The Story of the Four Captives," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29(1960-61):59-60, 74. This story is repeated in Abraham Zacuto, *Sefer Yuhasin ha-Shalem*, *op. cit.* (n. 94), 209. For Zacuto's liberal use of Ibn Daud's chronicle, see G. Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, *ibid.*, xiii-xiv. See also S. Ashkenazi, *Neshei*, *ibid.*, 46-48; *idem.*, *Giborot*, *ibid.*, 82-83.

phardic Jews during medieval times,¹⁰⁰ the next most famous example of this activity comes from the Jewish experience during the Chmielnicki massacres in Poland in the middle of the seventeenth century. In describing the destruction in the city of Nemirow, R. Nathan Nata Hannover wrote: "They ravished women and young girls as they wished, but some of the women and maidens jumped into the moat surrounding the fortress in order that the uncircumcised should not defile them. They drowned in the waters."¹⁰¹ Then, in one of the most well-known and dramatic passages of the work, he provided two specific examples:

It happened there that a beautiful maiden, of a renowned and wealthy family, had been captured by a certain Cossack who forced her to be his wife. But, before they lived together, she told him with cunning that she possessed a certain magic and that no weapon could harm her. She said to him: "If you do not believe me, just test me. Shoot at me with a gun, and you will see that I will not be harmed." The Cossack, her husband, in his simplicity, thought she was telling the truth. He shot at her with his gun and she fell and died for the sanctification of the Name, to avoid being defiled by him. May God avenge her blood.

Another event occurred when a beautiful girl, about to be married to a Cossack, insisted that their marriage take place in a church which stood across the bridge. He granted her request, and with timbrels and flutes, attired in festive garb, led her to the marriage. As soon as they came to the bridge she jumped into the water and was drowned for the sanctification of the Name. May God avenge her blood. These and many similar events took place, far too numerous to be recorded.¹⁰²

The events of 1648–1649, in general, left an indelible imprint on the collective Jewish historical consciousness. They served the subject of many liturgical works (*piyyutim*, *kinot*, *selihot*) in Hebrew and Yiddish and a number of historical chronicles, and served as the cause for the establishment of the twentieth of Sivan as an annual day of fasting.¹⁰³ In the nineteenth century, they continued to provide

¹⁰⁰For a number of examples, see S. Ashkenazi, *Neshei*, *ibid.*, 32, 34, 35, 39, 59–60, 68–69, 76, 82, 86, 96–97; *Giborot*, *ibid.*, 44, 46, 50–51, 92, 100, 107–08, 110, 111n., 113, 128–29. See also Yosef Hakohen, *Emek ha-Bakha*, ed. by M. Letteris (Cracow, 1895), 25, 44, 113.

¹⁰¹R. Nathan Nata Hannover, *Yeven Metzulah* (Tel Aviv, 1966), 38.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 39. S. M. Dubnow accepted this description as historical fact. See his *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland I* (Philadelphia, 1916), 147.

For other examples of suicides during the 1648–1649 persecutions, see the sources cited by J. Katz, "Ben Tatnu le-Tah ve-Tat," *op. cit.* (n. 94), 331, n. 54.

¹⁰³See, for example, Shimon Bernfeld, *Sefer ha-Demaot III* (Berlin, 1926), 160–84; Nachum Wahrmann, "Der Widerhall der Ereignisse von 1648/49 in der synagogalen Dichtung," *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 80(1936):282–93; *idem.*, *Mekorot le-Toledot Gezerot Tah ve-Tat: Tefillot u-Selihot le-20 Sivan* (Jerusalem, 1949); Abraham Berliner, "Sefer Hazkarat Neshamot," *Kovetz al Yad* 3(1887):29–31; Avraham Yaari, "Likutim Bibliografiyim," *Kiryat Sefer* 16:3(1939):375–79; A. M. Haberman, "Piy-

material for ballads, poems and novels in Hebrew and Yiddish and their memory remained strong until the Holocaust.¹⁰⁴

In particular, Nathan Nata Hannover's *Yeven Metzulah* was very popular. It was reprinted a number of times and well over a dozen Yiddish and Polish translations were published into the twentieth century.¹⁰⁵ It was even the custom of some Jewish communities to read this work during the three week period of national mourning between the Fasts of the Seventeenth Day of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av.¹⁰⁶ And, of all the works published in connection with this tragedy and of all the descriptions of events in *Yeven Metzulah*, the stories about these two young women, in particular, captured the imagination of subsequent generations. Due to their stark, powerful simplicity and tragic, dramatic poignancy, they

yutav ve-Shirav shel Rabi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller," *li-Khevod Yom Tov*, ed. by R. J. L. Hakohen Maimon (Jerusalem, 1956), 125f; Max Weinreich, "Zvey Yiddishe Kinis oyf Khmelnitskis Gezeyros," *Bilder fun der Yiddisher Literaturgeschichte* (Vilna, 1928), 192–218.

For historical chronicles in addition to *Yeven Metzulah*, see, for example, R. Shabbetai Kohen, *Megillat Afah*, printed in *Bet Yisrael be-Polin II*, ed. by Israel Halpern (Jerusalem, 1954), 252–55 (among other places); H. J. Gurland, *le-Korot ha-Gezerot al Yisrael*, 7 vols. (Jerusalem, 1972); M. Hendel, *Gezerot Tah Tat* (Jerusalem, 1950).

For the fast of the twentieth of Sivan and its relationship to an earlier historical tragedy (the massacre at Blois in 1171), see Shalom Spiegel, "mi-Pitgamei ha-Akedah," *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Khevod Mordekhai Menahem Kaplan* (New York, 1953), 268–70; Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, *op. cit.* (n. 61), 48–52.

¹⁰⁴See Chone Shmeruk, "Gezerot Tah ve-Tat: Sifrut Yiddish ve-Zikhron Kolektivi," *Tzion* 53:4(1988):371–84; trans. into English as "Yiddish Literature and Collective Memory: The Case of the Chmielnicki Massacres," *Polin* 5(1990):173–83.

For another example of the resonance of the fast of the twentieth of Sivan in the twentieth century, see Yosef Halevi, "'Taanit Tzibbur Kavanu': Tehinah Nishkahat be-Ikvot ha-Peraot be-Russyah be-Reshit ha-Me'ah," *Divrei ha-Kongres ha-Olami ha-Asiri le-Mada'ei ha-Yahadut* 3:2(Jerusalem, 1990):121–28. Also, the same issue of *ha-Pardes* which contains a description of the story of our ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls (above, n. 17) begins with an "el malé rahamim" prayer commemorating the destruction caused by the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648–1649 and composed for recital on the twentieth of Sivan. See *ibid.*, 2. The day is also marked in the annual *Luah Minhagei Bet ha-Kenesset* distributed by the Ezras Torah organization up to and including the present time.

For an example of the widespread knowledge about these massacres in the period immediately preceding the Holocaust and their being seen as the prototype of Jewish suffering, see Ephraim Shmueli, "Kiddush Hashem bi-Yemei ha-Shoah," *Sefer Yovel li-Khevod Morenu ha-Gaon Rabi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik Shlita II* (Jerusalem and New York, 1984), 1188.

¹⁰⁵See Yitzhak Ganoz, "ha-Sippur ha-Tragi al 93 ha-Banot ba-Shoah, le-Or ha-Meoraot shel Gezerot Tah ve-Tat," *Yeda-Am* 51–52(1984):64, n. 3; C. Shmeruk, *Polin*, *ibid.*, 178; E. Shmueli, *ibid.* Cf. R. Barukh Halevi Epstein, *Mekor Barukh*, Introduction (Vilna, 1928), 592, who refers to *Yeven Metzulah* as being a very rare book.

¹⁰⁶See "Likkutim mi-Divrei Yosef le-R. Yosef b. Yitzhak Sambari," in Adolf D. Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles I* (Oxford, 1887), 149; H. J. Gurland, *le-Korot ha-Gezerot al Yisrael*, *op. cit.*, I, 11.

became especially well known in the annals of Jewish martyrological literature and inspired much subsequent literary activity.¹⁰⁷

Our story of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls of Cracow fits squarely into this pattern which had long become well defined and prominent in Jewish history. Whether or not it actually happened as described is difficult to determine, but there is certainly no question that it *could* have happened. And if it didn't happen to ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls in Cracow, it undoubtedly did happen to other women, in other cities, under different circumstances, during the long dark years of the Holocaust.¹⁰⁸ We are dealing here with an archetype, one of the most powerful and poignant ones in all of Jewish martyrological literature, which we have traced from the first century destruction of the Temple to the twentieth century destruction of European Jewry.¹⁰⁹

* * * *

What conclusions may be drawn from our description and analysis of the episode of the ninety-three girls? First and foremost, we must recognize that the informa-

¹⁰⁷See Yaakov Fichman's introduction to *Yeven Metzulah* (Tel Aviv, 1966), 12. For this story (and others like it) in the works of Michah Yosef Berdyczewski, Yehudah Leib Gordon, Shaul Tchernichowsky, Y. L. Peretz, and Shalom Asch, see Y. Ganoz, *op. cit.*, 55-59; Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?* (New York, 1988), 62-65.

The *Yeven Metzulah* text about the two maidens was reproduced in later collections of sources dealing with the events of 1648-1649. See, for example, Abraham Kahane, *Sifrut ha-Historiyah ha-Yisraelit II* (Warsaw, 1923), 306; S. Bernfeld, *Sefer ha-Demaot, op. cit.*, 117-18; M. Hendel, *op. cit.* (n. 103), 17-18; A. Ben-David, *Moyredike Mayses I* (New York, 1983), 59; D. Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction, op. cit.* (n. 61), 112-13.

It is most striking that in attempting to show the development of the Yiddish language from the seventeenth to the twentieth century at the end of his Hebrew article cited above (n. 104) by examining successive Yiddish translations of *Yeven Metzulah*, C. Shmeruk chose precisely these two stories as his example. See *ibid.*, 381-84.

For other references to this story (and others like it), see M. Kayserling, *op. cit.* (n. 94), 71; S. Noble, *op. cit.* (n. 94), 136; S. Ashkenazi, *Neshei, op. cit.* (n. 31), 104-06; *idem.*, *Giborot, op. cit.* (n. 31), 138-39, 142-44. For a more elaborate version of it, see H. J. Gurland, *le-Korot ha-Gezerot al Yisrael, op. cit.*, V, 34-35.

¹⁰⁸For some examples, see S. Ashkenazi, *Neshei, ibid.*, 143-54; *idem.*, *Giborot, ibid.*, 177f, esp. 352-59.

See Y. Rivkind, *op. cit.* (n. 94), 1036:

[The story of the 93] is maybe a consciously fabricated legend, without a basis in reality. But it is in the spirit of our thousand-year martyrdom. Therefore it found such an echo and was so praised by Yiddish and Hebrew poets.

The curriculum of the Bais Yaakov schools stressed the paramount importance of modesty or *tzniut*. For an example of this, see an essay by Sarah Schenierer on the subject in *Em bi-Yisrael I* (Tel Aviv, 1955), 162-64.

¹⁰⁹Y. Ganoz, *op. cit.* (n. 105), 61-62, even tries to see the number 93 and the word *tzag* (the numerical value of which in Hebrew is 93) in typological terms.

tion available to us does not enable us to draw any definitive conclusions about its historicity. The impossibility of reconstructing the route which the letter took in occupied Europe, the lack of corroborative witnesses and, most of all, our discussions with knowledgeable individuals do not allow us to state with any degree of certitude that the incident described in the letter did, indeed, occur. In fact, we have serious doubts that it occurred. However, we hope to have demonstrated that the historical evidence adduced against the likelihood of the story having occurred is not conclusive because for each historical argument it is possible to mount a counterargument. Finally, in response to those claiming that the incident is "unlikely" to have occurred, let us remind the reader that the period in question was one during which the most unlikely events *did* occur, when entire communities were wiped out without leaving even a single survivor. Thus, while "unlikely" is an argument which may be used in normal times, this was a time period during which "unlikely" events occurred on a daily basis.

How does reality (or nonreality) become a myth? What process does a historical incident undergo as it metamorphoses into a parable? Our survey of the episode of the ninety-three girls provides us with a partial answer to this question. This episode includes most of the components necessary for this process: an account of extraordinary heroism, a strong religious dimension, lack of clarity with regard to details, imprecision in the transmission of the story and objective attempts to verify or destroy its credibility. Just a few years after the event allegedly took place, the account of the girls' life and death had already metamorphosed from a possible tragic reality into a tale of Jewish heroism. This process was greatly assisted by the fact that the story was continuously embellished in order to glorify the girls' actions. Ironically, these embellishments, meant to glorify their achievement, only strengthened the arguments of those who denied that it ever had occurred. Thus, within little more than one generation, the episode underwent a dual metamorphosis: from possible reality to symbol—in other words, from a possible tragic historical incident to an example of Jewish bravery—and from symbol to myth—from a historical moral example to a parable rooted in a historical setting but without having necessarily occurred in fact.

The mystery surrounding the tale of the ninety-three Beth Jacob girls remains unsolved. We can only temper some of the arguments of those who deny its historicity and claim that they do not prove that the story could not have happened. Maybe it did happen. But, maybe again, it didn't. Could it have happened? Of course.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰In a conversation on July 1, 1991, an individual who requested anonymity informed Dr. Schacter that Dr. Jacob Griffel, an individual who worked for the Vaad Hatzalah during and after World War II, told him that his daughter was one of the ninety-three.

A recent book about the Bais Yaakov girls of Cracow during the Holocaust by Pearl Benisch, *To Vanquish the Dragon* (Jerusalem/New York, 1991) makes no mention of the story.

APPENDIX I

Reproduction of Handwritten Letter from Chaya
Feldman to Mr. Schenkolewsky, August 11, 1942

11 August 1942

Lieber Freund Herr Schenkolewsky in
New York,

Ich weiss nicht ob Dieser Brief
wird Sie erreichen. Weissen Sie noch
wer ich bin? Wir haben uns in ein Haus
von Frau Schenirev kennen gelacert und
später in Mairienbad wieder getroffen. Man
sitzt in Ihrer Hande erreicht. Lebe ich
nischit mex. Mit mir sind 92 Bais Jakob
mädchen. Noch einige Stanten und alles
is nischit mehr. Weissen Sie Herrn
Kosenheim und unseren Freund Gutman,
beide in England. Wir haben uns alle in
Warschaa bei unserm Freund Sholemman
getroffen und Sholemman war auch da. Wir
haben gelacert und das Land in der Bruf
guakt hat uns gesendet Brodt. Wir haben
vier Timern in den 21 Juli sind wir geholt
worden und in ein dunkel Timern geworfen
haben nur mayim haeci aus den. Pasch
Davit gelacert und Hut gehalt. Unser
alter ist von 14 bis 22 die Jungen
haben Mairon, ich haecine zusammen
Mamma Loro, taitel, gud leben
for nachern, aber gud zu staerben auch
Lorgeaster und geaster sind wir heitz
gelacert worden und man hat uns gesagt

APPENDIX I (CONTINUED)

heute nacht werden kimen Deutsche Soldaten
unsy besuchen. Wir haben geaster die
schwie gethan zusammen zu sterben. Man
hat uns geaster in ein grosses Haus
mit laektem Timern und schoenen Betten
gesacert. Deutsche wissen nischit das
Bad ist unsere levile vor den Todt.
Man hat unsy haent alles genommen
und nur ein Flemt gehaent. Wir
haben all Gyt. Von Soldaten
kommen werden wir alle dircken.
Haent sind wir zusammen loeren
gansen jom viduyoh. Wir haben
kaine moirah. Danken guter
Freund vuer alles. Wir haben eine
Bile sagen Sie Kadih vuer unsy
93 ihre Kinder. Braede sind wir
bei mama Loro. Es gruyst sie

Chaya Feldman von
Krako.

APPENDIX II

Reproduction of Letter from Jacob Rosenstein to
Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung, January 5, 1943

מונמנט 2-3543.
MONUMENT 2-3543.

גיה

התדרות העולמית, אגודת ישראל
Agudas Israel World Organization
THE UNION OF UNIVERSALLY ORGANIZED ORTHODOX JEWRY
(WORLD-AGUDAH OF ORTHODOX JEWS INC.)

CENTRAL EXECUTIVE: LONDON - BRANCH OFFICES: JERUSALEM AND NEW YORK

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
226 WEST 97TH STREET
NEW YORK

January 5, 1943.

Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung
The Jewish Center
131 West 86th Street
New York City.

Dear Rabbi Jung:

I send you enclosed the literal copy of a scarcely precedented human document of Jewish heroism, which Mr. Daniel Lewenstein in Zurich has transmitted to Mr. Schenkolewski.

It is a document, not only for Jewish heroism in general, but of the education in the Beth Jacob schools, which has granted to those girls the courage of preferring death to disgrace.

My request to you in your quality as the chairman of the "American Beth Jacob Committee" is a double one:-

- (a) to arrange that a permanent Yedish from now until the middle of July shall be said in the "Jewish Center" for these young martyrs of Beth Jacob.
- (b) that you kindly translate the letter into English and send it with some introductory remarks and some commentary details for publication to the "New York Post" or to the "NY". I am afraid that the "New York Times" would not be willing to publish such a Jewish document.

May G-d help!

With kind regards, I remain,

JR: NEM
Encl.

Yours faithfully,
Jacob Rosenstein
JACOB ROSENSTEIN

In Search of the Other Jewish Center: On the Writing of the Social History of American Orthodoxy, 1900-1918

Jeffrey S. Gurock

In his inaugural sermon as founding rabbi of The Jewish Center in March 1918, Mordecai M. Kaplan, great innovator that he was, sought to articulate the uniqueness of his new endeavor. In his published remarks he asserted that for too long philanthropically inclined, newly affluent East European Jews had only been concerned with the physical and social fate of their poor coreligionists downtown. The communal institutions they had built ignored their own Jewish needs. The time had come, he argued, and The Jewish Center was the place for

the higher and enlightened form of selfishness . . . in us. Frankly . . . we are establishing the Jewish Center for the purpose of deriving from it for ourselves pleasures of a social, intellectual and spiritual character . . . We are not building an institution for the doing of uplift work. This time we feel that we are as much in need of being uplifted as they for whose benefit the city is dotted with communal institutions.¹

An historian, possessed of an orientation fundamentally different from that of an institution builder, immediately casts a jaundiced eye at such claims of uniqueness. His skepticism is heightened when he knows from his own research that at least two major institutions, in neighborhoods adjoining Kaplan's own, institutions with which Kaplan had more than a passing personal or professional relationship, had set about, in the very years prior to the rise of The Jewish Center,

¹Mordecai M. Kaplan, "The Jewish Center," *The American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger* (March 22, 1918), 529-31.