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Helga Schneider. *Let Me Go.* New York: Penguin Books, 2004. 176 pp. $19.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8027-1435-0.

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Among the myriad of published memoirs on the Holocaust now available in English, this volume engages a topic of much interest to historians but of which there are few first-hand accounts--women in the SS. The author tells of a young mother, her mother, who dramatically abandoned her family in 1941 to join the SS and become a concentration camp guard. Thirty years after the war, Schneider and her mother met for the first time since 1941. Seeing her mother show no remorse for her actions, another twenty-seven years passed before Schneider saw her mother again. This time, her mother was eighty-seven years old, failing in health and living in a nursing home. Schneider's narrative recounts this meeting, interweaving her own childhood memories from the Third Reich and the immediate postwar years.

Schneider's mother was active in the early years of the Nazi Party. She joined the SS, underwent desensitization training, and worked at Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. At Ravensbrück she collaborated with Nazi doctors on medical experiments. After the war she served a brief prison sentence and remained, until her death in 2001, wholly committed to the Nazi cause.

After six decades, Schneider still shows her incredulity at her mother's lack of guilt about her twin crimes: abandoning her children and participating in some of the most horrendous activities of the Final Solution. She is frank and direct as she seeks answers about her mother's motivations and circumstances: "How could you go to sleep at night knowing that thousands of corpses were burning only a few yards away" (p. 84)? "Did you think that way because they made you?...Or were you personally convinced that the Jews were inferior creatures" (p. 137)?

As her mother is provoked and baited into talking about her experiences in the SS, what consistently shows up is the importance of ideology. While historians debate the role of ideology in the carrying out of the Final Solution, there is no doubt about its prominence in the case of Schneider's mother. It was not careerism, apathy or any other "banal" factor but fanaticism and antisemitism that drove her to join the SS. She embraced the entire National Socialist worldview

and went to great lengths to become a loyal follower of Adolf Hitler. She refused, for example, to celebrate Christmas according to the Christian tradition but instead celebrated the ***Sonnenwendfest***, a pagan festival inaugurated by Heinrich Himmler (p. 103). Schneider's struggle to understand her mother is evidenced by her attempts to describe her motivations and actions. "As for my mother's fanaticism, I think it was typical of the double morality of the SS: An outwardly austere façade of rigor, pride, moderation, and temperance masked great gulfs of excess, fanaticism, and conceit--and a limitless thirst for power" (p. 104).

During the visit Schneider was forced to confront her own past as well, when her mother says to her: "You can't get away from me, my dear, don't act the innocent! Can you claim in all honesty that you have never felt hatred toward a Jew" (p. 107)? Schneider was then reminded of an unpleasant childhood experience in which she saw a Jewish couple beaten. Schneider and the other schoolchildren were invited to participate in the beating, "Come on, kids, if you're good National Socialists, give us a hand!" She explains, "I can't say exactly how it happened; all I know is that something like an electric charge ran through us all, as though some kind of primal aggression or some kind of contagious hatred had been awakened within us" (p. 109).

Readers with an understanding of the interpretive challenges in accounts of female perpetrators will approach Schneider's narrative with caution. Women perpetrators, especially camp guards, are often portrayed as being crueler than their male counterparts. As Susannah Heschel explains, "women's cruelty is presented with a sense of surprise, transgressing gender expectations, whereas men's cruelty is discussed without reference to their gender, as though the connection between atrocity and maleness is self-evident."[1] For Schneider, her mother is never just a female in the SS but rather a mother in the SS. If one considers Heschel's observations, connections with motherhood could shed some light on Schneider's mother's decisions.

In a paper published in 2004, Heschel offers direction for future research on women in the SS. She considers the idea that female perpetrators were not just "male imitators." Given the gender roles promoted in the Third Reich, perhaps volunteering at a concentration camp, as Schneider's mother did, was "an expression of aspects of the peculiar femininity endorsed by the Nazi regime. Women's willingness to take part in atrocities, particularly against Jewish inmates, which was understood as a protection of Nazi Aryan society, might signify a maternal devotion to children, morally intensified by their violence."[2] Schneider's mother speaks of the dangerous nature of Jews and how Germany had to get rid of every last one (p. 84). When asked about her own children and how she could have abandoned them, she speaks with firm conviction that her children had nothing to fear; they were Aryan. The Reich would have taken care of them (pp. 85, 113). In reality, Schneider experienced cruel guardians, hunger, and further family separation. Ultimately, what will intrigue readers about this memoir is the extent of their own abilities to identify with an author who asks questions that many people, despite the depth of their understanding of the Nazi regime, keep asking.

Notes

[1]. Susannah Heschel, "Does Atrocity have a Gender? Feminist Interpretations of Women in the SS," in ***Lessons and Legacies Volume VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research***, ed. Jeffry M. Diefendorf (Evanston: Northwestern University, 2004), 305.

[2]. Ibid, 317.

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