Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present

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Published by Brandeis University Press

Fishman, Sylvia Barack and Joanna Beata Michlic.
Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present: History, Representation, and Memory.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/87235.

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What happens to family roles and functions in conditions of extreme stress, such as the Holocaust? In theory, the family is one of the most effective social structures for withstanding external assaults because it has a built-in system for taking care of its members, especially those who are younger and weaker. Ideally it provides for the physical, economic, social, and emotional well-being of its members: a place to live, financial security, normative guidance, social status, and unconditional acceptance and love.

In his classic book *The Family*,1 sociologist William J. Goode theorized that these basic functions of the family are incorporated into the concrete actions of individuals through social roles. Those who occupy a specific status within the family—as a mother, father, son, or daughter—learn to adopt the social roles for their status.2 Thus, for example, in the typical Jewish family in Eastern Europe in the interwar period, it was assumed that a husband would be the “head” of the household, the family’s moral authority, and that he would be responsible for financial support of the family. His wife, in contrast, would focus on homemaking and child care (although she might also help out in the family business—or even run it if her husband was devoted to Jewish scholarship).

How did Jewish families try to maintain these basic family functions during the Holocaust and, more specifically, in the ghettos? After reading hundreds of diaries, memoirs, and testimonies, I concluded that most families adopted a collective strategy of pooling their skills and resources to protect each and every member of the family, especially those who were most vulnerable and who could not have survived on their own.

What surprised me was that instead of trying to maintain their prewar roles and responsibilities, the most effective mechanisms for families to implement this collective strategy appeared to be for them to engage in two forms of role reversals: reversing the prewar roles of husbands and wives,
and reversing the prewar roles of parents and children. In fact, it appeared that families who were the most flexible in erasing the traditional dichotomy between the roles of husband and wife, and between the roles of parents and children, were those who were the most successful in coping with the constraints in the ghettos and who were most able to adapt and respond to trying conditions and challenges. We therefore begin examining family strategies by looking at these two types of role reversals: those between husbands and wives, and those between parents and children.

However, I soon found that role reversals explain only part of what was happening in many families. When we look at their experiences in more detail, which we do by focusing on one family in the third section of this chapter, we find much more fluidity and creativity in the type and rapidity of role changes that occur. For example, there is often more “role sharing” than a complete abandonment of old roles or a complete assumption of new roles. In addition, changes in roles are often nonlinear so that one member of the family might assume another’s role, then share it, and then abandon it—before assuming it again. Finally, this case study shows that different components of a single role can vary independently, such as when a father is no longer the breadwinner but is still the moral authority and recognized head of the family. While there is always some fluidity in roles in normal situations, the shifts described in the case study that follows are, as we shall see, more extensive and more of a departure from a normal role set.

In the last section of this chapter, I discuss the larger impact of these family coping strategies and how they explain previously misunderstood aspects of the Holocaust.

**HUSBAND-WIFE ROLE REVERSALS**

When one considers the systematic targeting of Jewish men in the early days of the German occupation of Poland, and the very real threats men faced when they ventured outside of their homes—harassment, humiliation, physical assault, arrest, and even murder—it is easy to understand why men would want to avoid being outdoors during daylight, and why their wives would take on many of their husbands’ prewar roles, such as providing for the family and representing the family outside the home. In fact, it became common for women to leave home during the day to stand in line for bread, trade personal belongings for food, petition the *Judenrat* (the Jewish Council) for permission to retrieve personal belongings from their confiscated homes, and organize the repair of damaged businesses.

As Emmanuel Ringelblum (1900–1944), the noted historian of the Oneg Shabbat underground archive in the Warsaw ghetto, wrote in his diary:
Men don’t go out. . . . She stands on the long line. . . . When there is need to
go to Aleja Szucha [the Gestapo] the daughter or wife goes. . . . The women
are everywhere . . . [Women] who never thought of working [out of their
homes] are now performing the most difficult physical work.3

Adam Czerniakow (1880–1942), chairman of the Warsaw Judenrat, also
wrote about the increasingly assertive role that Jewish women were assuming
in public space.4 His diary describes how these fearless women would argue
with the Germans who came to confiscate family belongings or to take their
husbands to forced labor. Czerniakow even recounts the different techniques
that women used to convince the Germans. He was impressed by their tenac-
ity and observed their fearlessness in exposing themselves to danger.

One of the most important roles that women assumed was their husband’s
prewar responsibility for financial support of the family. We are indebted to
the Israeli historian Dalia Ofer for introducing us to the invaluable source for
following women’s efforts to assume this role, the work of Cecilia Slepak, the
journalist and translator whom Emmanuel Ringelblum commissioned to un-
dertake research on the experiences of women in the Warsaw ghetto.5 Ofer
reports that in early 1942 Slepak interviewed sixteen women representing a
diversity of prewar statuses.6 She found that each one showed a remarkable
determination to support her family. Because the survival of their families
often depended on their ability to become the provider, they not only sought
out “conventional” jobs, such as engaging in a trade or working in a ghetto
“shop,” but when these were not available, the women were willing to pur-
sue less conventional paths and invent ad hoc ways to support their families.
Some, for example, took up the dangerous “occupation” of smuggling and had
to escape from the ghetto to trade on the “Aryan side.” Relying on their inge-
nuity, they renewed past contacts and exchanged clothing, jewelry, and linens
for food and other scarce resources.7

**PARENT-CHILD ROLE REVERSALS**
The second type of role reversal common in ghetto families was when chil-
dren assumed their parents’ prewar responsibilities for providing food, lead-
ership, and emotional support when their parents were barred from or unable
to perform these roles. Consider two examples from interviews I conducted
with children who became family breadwinners.

Hasia Bornstein (Bielicka), a young woman who gradually assumed her fa-
ther’s prewar role of provider, lived in Grodno, a city near Białystok that was
part of Poland between the First and Second World Wars (and is now in Bel-
arus and known as Hrodno).8 Her father owned a small soda factory, and they
were comfortably middle class. When the Nazis marched into Grodno on June
22, 1941, Hasia, who was born in 1921, had just finished a sewing course sponsored by ORT (Russian Obshchestvo Rasprostraneniya Truda Sredi Yevreyev, the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training), a Jewish organization devoted to providing Jews with the skills and vocational training they need to secure practical jobs. Five months later in November 1941, when Grodno’s Jews were forced into the two split ghettos, Ghetto One in the Old Town suburb and Ghetto Two in the Słobódka suburb, and had to leave behind anything they could not carry, Hasia carried her sewing machine and a few items of clothing.

It proved to be a wise choice. Because her father was cut off from his factory and his means of earning a living, and because her family lost their savings, their home, and all their possessions when they were forced into the ghetto, only Hasia had the means to earn money to help her family survive. Like many young people in the Grodno ghetto, Hasia was conscripted into forced labor for the Germans and was sent to work in a German-owned brick factory. There were also some non-Jewish Polish workers at the factory who found out that Hasia could sew, and they asked her to do some mending for them in exchange for food. The only time Hasia could work for them was late at night, after a full day’s work at the factory. But it was worth it; they paid her with bread and cabbage, which she could then smuggle into the ghetto for her family. Since there were great food shortages in the ghetto, and since only young people like Hasia who worked received any food during the day, the rest of Hasia’s family was always hungry. They urgently needed the food from Hasia’s sewing.

The second example of a young person who took on his father’s prewar role of family provider and breadwinner is David Efrati, who was a teenager in the Warsaw ghetto established in November 1940. In the early days of the Warsaw ghetto, before being caught outside the ghetto became a capital offense for Jews, David’s mother suggested that he sneak out to buy some food. His father had no work, and the family had nothing to eat. She thought David would not be identified as a Jew because he spoke “good Polish” (that is, fluent Polish that was grammatically correct and without a Jewish accent) and had the manners of a street-smart kid. That was because David had insisted on going to a Polish public school before the war, instead of the traditional Jewish heder his parents had wanted him to attend. Unlike his parents and sister, who spoke only Yiddish at home, David therefore spoke colloquial Polish without a Jewish accent thanks to his prewar schooling. David thought of his mother’s suggestion as a challenge and a lark, and he soon became a successful smuggler:

I got some clothes that I could hide food in and it just looked like I was fat. I didn’t always succeed and sometimes the police caught me. They would...
take all my food and throw it away and beat me until I was bloody and
throw me into the ghetto . . . But for me it was an adventure, and I became
very successful.\textsuperscript{13}

By the time he was sixteen, David had established a network of suppliers
and smugglers and was supporting his family in a grand style. He was doing so
well that his family could afford to buy chocolate in the ghetto, a rare luxury
when people were starving to death, and his mother was able to distribute
food to other relatives.\textsuperscript{14}

A final example of a parent-child role reversal is provided by the well-
known memoir (and feature film) \textit{The Pianist}, by the Jewish Polish musician
and composer Władysław Szpilman (1911–2000).\textsuperscript{15} While his father retreated
from the world by “playing his violin for hours on end,” Władysław assumed
many of his father’s former roles by trying to watch over and take care of
other members of the family.\textsuperscript{16}

\section*{WHAT IS MISSING? FLUIDITY, CREATIVITY,
RAPID CHANGES, AND ROLE SHARING}

While these examples illustrate the effectiveness of these two types of role
reversals, a closer examination of individual families suggests that the con-
cept of role reversals is too simplistic to describe the rapidly changing, fluid,
and complicated role shifts that occurred.

For example, roles were often \textit{shared}, rather than being truly reversed. Be-
cause restrictions and opportunities were constantly changing, it was more
common for a man to share the provider role with his wife or children, rather
than to relinquish it completely.

In addition, the pattern of role changes was not always linear—that is, it
was not always from a husband to his wife, or from a parent to a child. Instead
it was often cyclical or reversible or inconsistent and might move in one direc-
tion and then in another.

It is also evident that the definition of various family roles was often refor-
mulated to include or to emphasize different responsibilities. Thus, it is too
simplistic to refer to “the role of the mother,” or \textit{the} father, because various
components of that role varied independently. For example, a father who was
unable to support his family might still retain his role as the family’s strate-
gist, moral authority, and “decider.”

In addition to noting these rapidly changing, fluid, and nonlinear shifts
in roles, and in addition to the possibilities of role sharing and parsing out
different components of a single role, the following analysis is complicated
by the possibility of a discrepancy between a person’s behavior and the social
label that was attached to it. In fact, because people were so attached to the
normative expectation that they fulfill their role obligations, it was evident that individuals were likely to label their behavior as consistent with their idealized view of their role, even though an observer might see the very same behavior as a major change.

For example, when Dalia Ofer examined the accounts of the women in the Warsaw ghetto who were interviewed by Cecilia Slepak, Ofer described the women as setting aside conventions and assuming new roles to support their families. According to Ofer, these women were embarking on uncharted territory. However, as Ofer noted, the women themselves viewed and explained their behavior as a continuation of their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, emphasizing their duty to sustain their husbands, children, and parents. For example, a woman might talk about her involvement in smuggling as if it were a “normal way” to provide food for her children. By labeling her activities as part of conventional “mothering,” she did not have to explain her willingness to engage in unconventional and dangerous activities.

A final complication arises from the fact that resources and contributions to the family were typically pooled. Therefore, the social definition of what one contributed might be the result of one’s status or position in the family, rather than the true measure of one’s contribution.

In addition to these complications in analyzing behavior in a “stable” family, the composition of the family itself was often changing in the ghetto as individual family members became sick, died, were captured for forced labor, or were deported.

Before examining these fluid role adjustments in a single family, one brief note on methods is in order. When I began this study of family coping strategies, I started out by making a long list of families I knew about from reading diaries, memoirs, and testimonies and by conducting my own interviews. I decided to focus on Eastern European ghettos (thus eliminating Western Europe, where there were no ghettos) and to eliminate places where the ghetto period was less than several months. I then applied a “thought test” to the families on my list. At first, the instances of role reversals were most prominent. However, as noted above, when I examined individual families more carefully, more complex patterns in role adjustments emerged. It therefore seemed heuristically useful to scrutinize role changes in a single family and to use a published text that would allow the reader to examine and analyze this material with me.

**ROLE SHARING AND ROLE SHIFTS**

*SARA SELVER-URBACH’S LODZ GHETTO MEMOIR*

*Through the Window of My Home: Recollections from the Lodz Ghetto,* by Sara Selver-Urbach, is a chronicle that underscores the overwhelming forces arrayed against the survival of any single family in the ghetto. But it is also a
chronicle of a family that consistently adopted a collective strategy to care for and save those who were or became weak, sick, or disabled.

While it is impossible to know if this family was “typical,” I chose it primarily because it provides what the anthropologist Clifford Gertz referred to as “thick description” — that is, a full and detailed narrative of the individuals and their collective experiences — which enables us to track the dynamics of role adaptations in a single ghetto family.21

Sara’s memoir begins with her prewar family life: her father was a bookkeeper and proficient in English, German, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish. But more important than his occupation, and above everything else, was his passion for studying Torah. Though he was forced to earn a living, he dedicated every free moment to his studies.22 As she wrote:

The rhythm of his life was determined by his Judaism which was the very essence of his existence. . . . We children especially enjoyed father’s zmirot — special songs chanted on the Sabbath. His singing and soulful melodies surrounded us by day, lulled us to sleep at night, and enveloped us anew when we woke up in the morning.23

Sara describes their standard of living as “not plentiful, but they never lacked essentials.” There was a clear division of labor between her mother and father, with her father solely responsible for the family’s economic support. As she wrote:

Father alone carried the heavy burden of breadwinner, mother’s help being limited to encouraging his endeavors. Father was thus compelled to work very hard, but we children never noticed it, because the mood at home was cheerful and happy. The father we saw was always ready to either joke with us or hold “serious conversations” which infused us with pride and a sense of “maturity” and increased importance. As children and like all children, we did not probe beneath appearances, including the few shadows that we noticed, yet misinterpreted or misunderstood. We listened to father’s comforting singing when sick, delighted in his fascinating “tales” about Josef and his brothers, Hannah and her seven sons, etc.24

“We children” refers to Sara and her older brother, Fulek, her three younger brothers, David, Leizer, and Yankush, and her younger sister, Branulka. Sara’s mother is described as a “beautiful and totally feminine woman, . . . but also a modern woman with a college education who loved reading and going to the movies.”25 Her love for her husband was “truly boundless” and he returned her love fully.

Sara’s idyllic portrait of life before the German occupation is completed by her enthusiasm for school. She was always an excellent pupil and attended a
Bais Yaakov school, a network of primary and secondary schools established to provide Orthodox Jewish girls with a first-rate education.

As soon as the German army took over Lodz in early September 1939, family roles begin to change with what looks like a classic parent-child role reversal.

The family’s first problem was getting food. When their supplies ran out, Sara’s older brother, Fulek, “whose blond hair and fair eyes lent him an ‘Aryan appearance,’” set out for Kalisz, in western Poland, where her mother’s family owned a grocery store. He returned with supplies and further assumed the role of family provider by standing in lines for bread (from which Jews were barred), protected by his non-Jewish looks.26

The family lived “in perpetual fear” of the terror that surrounded them—the constant kidnapping of Jews for forced labor, with those who returned from the labor coming home battered and bleeding; targeting Orthodox Jewish men on the streets for humiliation, beatings, and ripping off their beards; and assaulting Jews at home, with soldiers marching into private apartments to terrorize the occupants and confiscate whatever they fancied. But Sara’s parents believed they did not have the money or resources to escape, and they resigned themselves to staying in Lodz.27

When the winter of 1940 arrived “with its snows and piercing cold,” they could not afford to heat their three-room apartment and had to move into a single room. Sara described the days as “bleak and filled with anxiety.” Sara’s father was attacked on the streets and had his beard cut off. But he tried to make fun of the whole incident and to retain his otherwise positive demeanor.28 Adopting his perspective, Sara noted that he was “lucky,” because they had not ripped out his beard as they had done with other Jews, who had also been forced to sing and dance while the German soldiers assaulted them.29

But Sara’s mother showed signs of the physical strain: she lost weight and frequently had to lie down because of severe headaches.30 In a double example of role reversals, Sara started assuming her mother’s tasks in the home, and her father became her helper. She wrote: “I kept the house as best I could. On heavy wash days, father would don an apron during curfew hours and lend a hand.”31

During this period, Sara’s father was constantly trying to find work that would enable him to provide for the family. His first venture was to set up a home-based workshop for crocheting caps. He managed to find some wool, and they “knitted caps from morning to night.”32 Sara’s brothers also learned to knit and helped out. While her father organized the production, they all shared the work.

By March 1940, Sara’s family and all the Jews of Lodz were forced to move into the Lodz ghetto, the second largest ghetto in all of German-occupied Europe, after the Warsaw ghetto. Unable to find an apartment in the slum area
designated for the ghetto, they squeezed into her grandfather’s one-room apartment, shared with another aunt and her children. They slept on the floor and “huddled together for warmth” because they were unable to get fuel. But despite these dismal conditions, Sara remembers her parents playing their traditional roles in leading the family celebration of the Jewish festival of Purim, with her father and grandfather singing and cursing Haman (the villain) and enjoying all the double meanings of the curses (applied to Hitler), and her mother, grandmother, and aunt somehow finding the ingredients to prepare cookies and sweets.

But these memories of Purim were bittersweet, because it was to be her father’s last Jewish holiday with the family.

After Purim, her father resumed his role as the family leader-provider by finding them a one-room apartment of their own and starting a new business as an illegal smuggler. As Sara wrote:

He began sneaking out of the ghetto, at high risk, to trade with Poles.

At that time, the Ghetto was not totally cut off. Some contacts still continued with the outside world, as well as some vestiges of trade with the Poles. Father . . . managed to sneak out at dusk with a bundle hidden under his clothes . . . and sell all sorts of embroidery silks.

He was almost caught once (and) his face grew more and more haggard from day to day. Mother helped him as much as she could. In those matters, she was bolder than father . . . ingenious and resourceful, and could improvise schemes and escapes from predicaments on the spur of the moment.

Father (continued to poke) fun at things . . . and made us laugh at the absurdities in our new circumstances. But his bright, intensely blue eyes reflected his anxiety . . . and dread for the future.

Two weeks later, Sara’s father came down with influenza, which developed into pneumonia. Despite her mother’s efforts to nurse him, he died. The entire family was terrified and devastated. As Sara wrote:

Mother was crouching over him, sobbing her heart out, dazed with grief and almost unrecognizable. “Oh, how I am shamed! How I am shamed!” This lament that my mother kept repeating was meaningless to me at the time. It was only much later that I understood how vulnerable and exposed to disgrace and mortification a woman can become when bereft of her husband.

Though reality was staring at us terrifyingly from the floor, we were unable to grasp that this appalling thing had really happened to us, that our father would no longer talk to us, be with us, care for us, protect us, sing to us, encourage us.
Sara described a family so numbed by grief that they were “incapable of exerting the energy and vigilance required by the growing hardships.”\(^{38}\) Sara felt as if her “mother also died,” even though her body was still there, and she continued to feed her children.\(^{39}\)

But Sara believed that her mother never felt any hunger herself:

Throughout the long years of starvation, mother was never hungry. Literally. . . . as though nothing could affect her physically. Since father’s death, she was plunged in a state of dazed torpor which made her insensible to all physical needs and requirements. She undertook any number of activities in the hope of increasing a little our scanty diet, and would not be deterred from her purpose no matter the efforts or inescapable humiliation. And yet, it was evident that her thoughts and feelings were focused on one single person—father. Her life was over; it ended with father’s. Since his death, she merely existed, and this solely for us.\(^{40}\)

The next shift in family roles occurred in the summer of 1940 after the death of the father, when a dysentery epidemic spread through the ghetto, and everyone in Sara’s family became ill. At first, when her older brother Fulek got sick, Sara’s mother nursed him day and night. But when her mother and the youngest sister, five-year-old Branulke, fell ill, the other children assumed that role. A visiting doctor saw that their efforts were inadequate and insisted that their mother be sent to the hospital. The children were left alone at home to nurse Branulke, who was soon diagnosed with pneumonia. For several days she struggled between life and death: as Sara held her in her arms and tried to infuse her with her warmth and vitality, her brothers recited psalms to pray for her recovery. But she died in the arms of her fourteen-year-old brother David and left her brothers and sisters in a state of utter despair, “numb with pain.”\(^{41}\)

The children were not allowed to visit their mother in the hospital because she suffered from a contagious disease, and they were terrified that she too would die. At the same time they were also terrified of telling her about Branulke. How could they tell her she had died in their care?

There was no joy when their mother did return from the hospital, just fear and the dread of telling her: when she realized what had happened, they all broke down into uncontrollable sobbing and fell into each other’s arms.

Despite their tragic failure in assuming their mother’s role as the family’s caretaker, the children were forced to continue in that role and nurse their mother, who was still ill, when she returned from the hospital. In addition, because she could not assume the provider role of her former husband, the children became responsible for obtaining food as well. But they were not very good at it, and the family was soon on the verge of starvation. As Sara wrote:
Mother’s recovery lasted a long time . . . We were in dire circumstances . . . (because) we did not know how to force our way, a very necessary skill in those days. Somehow we always found ourselves at the tail end of the queue, and when the supply was limited, we were among those who came away empty-handed. Mother was quicker and smarter than we, and knew how to get around, not with brute force but thanks to her keen astute mind. But she was still bedridden and would get up for one hour a day to test her strength.42

Fortunately, Sara’s older brother, Fulek, who was then working at the ghetto post office, received a large portion of soup at work, along with some grits and potatoes. He filled the void by bringing some of it home to share with the others.

At this point, there were family arguments about the roles and responsibilities of the children. Sara’s mother wanted the seventeen-year-old Fulek to assume his father’s role—especially his role as the family’s spiritual leader on Shabbat. But Fulek, who was involved in a nonreligious youth movement in the ghetto, disagreed and showed his reluctance to observe the Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. As Sara wrote: “In his youthful enthusiasm, he—like all young people—considered his ideas superior to everything else, and our home played only a secondary role in his eyes.”43

Sara also yearned for a “normal” life of her own. She had become involved in a group of Orthodox girls, B’nos Agudas Yisroel, guided by an inspiring teacher and mentor. She also had a new best friend, who shared her enthusiasm and hunger for learning.44 Some of the clashes between Fulek and his mother became daily fights and developed into ugly arguments and quarrels. She chastised him for neglecting his younger brothers and sister by spending all of his after-work time on his youth movement activities. Although she asserted her authority as their parent, Sara’s mother was disabled by her sickness, and her effectiveness was visibly diminished. It was with considerable shame, in hindsight, that Sara wrote about how her children “ganged up” on her:

Mother was so defenseless against our rude tongues. Full of youthful arrogance, we dared teach her how children ought to be raised, dared analyze to her the psychological causes for her behavior, had the audacity to claim and prove that she was in the wrong. And mother would often face us helplessly, cut to the quick, a childlike despair in her imploring eyes, with no father to stand up for her, to thunder at us and silence us. There was no longer a father whose mere presence would have prevented us from “lecturing” our mother on such topics. And so we threw off every rein, and mother could not restrain us.45
But not long after this phase of what appeared to be a complete breakdown in family solidarity, Sara’s mother regained her strength; and sometimes in the summer of 1940, she opened a small vegetable store in their apartment, selling the meager produce from a large ground-floor window. While her children were not particularly enthusiastic and hampered their mother “by acting like stupid snobs because it never occurred to us that mother was sacrificing her own dignity in an effort to improve her ungrateful children’s material circumstances,” nevertheless, some people stopped to buy something and once again, the family had some food to eat.

The most significant improvement in the family’s material circumstances occurred two months later, after the family’s shop failed, when a wealthy neighbor, who was handicapped, hired Sara’s mother to shop and cook for her—and paid her generously. In addition, there was leftover food that she could take home so that everyone in the family had something to eat. Their mother was once again the primary breadwinner. While their newfound good fortune was tinged with some “shame at eating leftovers,” their mother’s practicality won out, and she once again assumed the authority and leadership of the family.

From here on we see a family with an effective and forceful parent-leader: they coped collectively and met each ensuing crisis successfully. For example, they always had problems keeping themselves and their clothing clean because they did not have any hot water for washing, nor any fuel to boil water. Nor could they afford to pay for electricity. In the winter their room was so cold and damp that icicles hung in the corners. Their inability to wash themselves and their clothing reached what they defined as an embarrassing crisis when they started to itch and found lice in their clothes. David, who always had a technical knack, came up with a solution by rigging up illegal electricity and “fabricating an electrical gadget that could warm and even boil water.” Then they were able to carry out a big cleaning operation and keep themselves, their clothing, and the apartment clean.

Sara wrote that the spring of 1941 was the happiest time of her life, “no matter how incomprehensible that might sound.” With her family back on a relatively firm footing, Sara was freer to enjoy being eighteen, spending Sabbath mornings with her friends, often accompanied by her beloved teacher, under a solitary tree studying and taking in the spring air. Sara and her new best friend, Haya Gutterman, a kindred soul who shared her love of learning, talked about their innermost feelings about life and love, and their profound and sincere faith.

Some of the pressure on the family was reduced because the children were working and were fed lunch at work. Sara had a very good job in the storeroom of Glazer Clothes, where David worked in electrical appliances, and Leizer

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and Yankush worked in the carpet department. Fulek worked at a youth farm in Marysin, the section of the ghetto where all the youth movements were based. Only their mother could not find a job and was in a precarious position as a target for deportation because everyone in the Lodz ghetto was required to work.

But her children somehow managed to get her a work permit and averted another potential crisis. It was Fulek who secured the valuable card that meant the difference between life and death: the card verified her employment, even though she did not actually have to go to work. As Sara explained: “One needed pull for such an arrangement, and this was one very rare occurrence where our family profited from Fulek’s connections.” It was not only a major feat for Fulek, but also reflected the fact that he was once again fully attached and dedicated to his family.

In addition to family cohesion, it is evident that their mother’s power, authority, and leadership were, once again, firmly established. For example, at one point she decided to use the money she earned to pay for Sara to have lessons in Latin, German, and world history. While this must have been a strain on family resources, it signaled her ability to determine how family resources would be spent. In addition, it probably reflected her new awareness of the importance of Sara’s lessons and her sons’ involvement in underground political activities in combating the apathy that overcame many in the ghetto.

At another point, when her son David contracted pleurisy, she made the previously unimaginable decision to bring nonkosher horse meat into the house—just for David. Sara wrote about how difficult that was for observant Jews:

We never brought meat into our house (before then) because the miserly amount that we were allotted was non-kosher; either pork or horse meat. But when David fell ill, mother determined that we had reached a crucial stage and should start using non-kosher meat. At first, only David ate this meat, and we kept two separate kitchens, one kosher and one not kosher. At the end of a year, however, we found it very difficult to observe punitively every rule of kashrut, and as the two other boys started showing symptoms of ill-health, we gave in and ate the non-kosher meat.

This level of family cooperation and coordination was also palpable in the winter of 1942, when a typhoid epidemic swept through the ghetto. Each of them “fell ill, one after another, suffering fits of violent shivering.” Although it was primarily their mother who “was beside herself with worry and overwork, nursing us night and day,” each of them nursed each other in turn. Later on, when their mother became seriously ill, they mobilized to help her...
and secretly traded their own rations for food they thought would help her. As Sara wrote:

Mother was ill and had become so emaciated that it frightened me. The two of us slept together in the same bed and I was aware of [her] thin and protruding bones. . . . Mother always gave us part of her rations, and when we refused to eat her food, she would say that she did not need all of it since she had stopped growing long ago. The reasons she invented were amusing . . . (and she persuaded us). Now that mother lay ill, we knew we had to give mother some of our food. Mother fought us on this issue, but we managed to save up a loaf of bread, secretly, and I traded it for a small amount of butter [which they believed would help her recover].

In retrospect, however, Sara berated herself for this “futile achievement,” and bemoaned her inability to be more effective in helping her mother because she was not like others who managed to unearth extra ration cards and get help from “protectionists” in the ghetto. But even if Sara was correct, and even if others “could” have done more, that does not undermine our analysis about the depth and strength of her concern and commitment to her mother. If anything, the depth of her guilt underscores the analytic point.

The most dramatic example of the family’s coordinated effectiveness in a crisis occurred in the Gehsperre (Sperre), a massive, terrifying Aktion and roundup of over fifteen thousand Jews, mostly children under the age of ten, the elderly, and the infirm, for deportation between September 5 and 12, 1942. At that time the Germans demanded a comprehensive and strictly organized series of inspections to separate the strong and healthy workers from those deemed “unproductive”—children, elderly, and sick, who would be deported to the Chelmno death camp. At first lists were compiled, but then the Germans took over and went from door to door taking anyone who looked unfit. Sara and Fulek were terrified that their mother, David, and Yankush looked too weak to pass the inspection, so they decided to hide them from the Germans:

(First) Fulek came running home to warn us that a group of ss troopers was approaching. We hurried mother out of the house because she was skinny and looked unhealthy. She hid with a relative who lived on a street which, so it was assumed, the Germans would not inspect on that day. Our two sick boys, David and Yankush, were taken by wonderful Mrs. Goldman, whose kindness I shall never forget. She hid them in a secret recess in her attic and locked them in. . . . and dragged a cupboard so that it screened the whole wall, including the locked door.

And then, Fulek, Eliezer and I went home and waited. They came. “Alle
raus! Everybody out!” their roar rent the air. We went out into the courtyard, trembling . . . 60

[After they each passed inspection and the Germans left, they stumbled upstairs and opened the locked door with trembling hands.]

The boys were . . . ashen faced, petrified with fear, but alive! It is truly a wonder how they managed to stifle their sneezes and coughs during those fateful moments . . . We all burst out crying, and Mrs. Goldman gave us some water because we were on the verge of fainting.

[Their mother returned later, having to slip furtively through the surrounded streets . . . and] we burst into renewed tears [that we] remained together . . . (and were) saved from the Germans’ clutches.61

After these events, Sara realized that they had experienced a fundamental change in their relationship with their mother. They once again appreciated everything she had done for them and “her tremendous spiritual courage.” They bonded with her in “a close, precious relationship which enabled us to discuss everything with her as freely as we wished.”62 They saw that she, in turn, “understood and empathized” with them, and “shared so fully in our frustration at the waste and loss of our youth, she now allowed and forgave our every whim, letting [each of us] look for our own individual solace and support.”

They also gained a new appreciation for her strength and bravery in the final days of the ghetto. As Sara wrote, “Mother withstood everything. . . . When the regular distribution of rations was cut off entirely, mother would get us a loaf of bread by standing on a number of queues simultaneously and rushing from one to the other, regardless of the constant, deadly dangerous ‘Aktions’ that the Germans were conducting.”63 Even Fulek started spending more time at home because “home had suddenly become the most treasured place on earth for us.”64

Months before their momentous decision to leave the ghetto, Sara observed that “It was as though we sensed that our end was growing near and were cherishing the final moments we were given to spend with her. . . . [I]t was so wonderful to feel that we could get close to her, that we could cling to her love and understanding.”65

In the end, in the summer of 1944 when the final liquidation of the Lodz ghetto began on June 23, they made their final collective decision as a family. By then, Sara wrote, life in the ghetto had descended into total chaos: no rations were distributed, all public services had stopped, people were forced to loot the stores for provisions, and it seemed as if only the strong managed to get any food. They were scared by the rapidly deteriorating health of their mother and the younger boys, and they knew that the ghetto was “about to
be liquidated": “We shivered with fright, fearing the horror that was about to befall us in the coming liquidation.”

When Fulek suggested that their only hope was to hide in a bunker with his friends, they “recalled the still vivid horror of the Sperre” and were terrified. Because they were sure that nothing could be worse than what they were facing in the ghetto, they decided, unanimously, as a family, that they would leave the ghetto on the next transport—to be “resettled.” They had no idea of what awaited them on the trains, and no idea that only Sara would survive Auschwitz.

**CONCLUSIONS**

I conclude with two observations.

First, with respect to the theory, examining the coping activities in Jewish families during the Holocaust has allowed us to broaden the sociological model of maintaining family functions through “role reversals” in four respects.

First, we observed considerable role sharing when parents did not relinquish their role as the family authority but nevertheless shared their responsibilities with other members of the family. When Sara’s mother became ill, the older children took on many of her parental roles, such as getting food, cleaning the home, taking care of younger children, and planning a family strategy, but their mother still retained considerable power and authority as the head of the family.

Second, we observed many examples of role shifts that were nonlinear, in which different family members were breadwinners and nurturers at different points in time. For example, early on the role of family breadwinner passed from the father to the eldest son, Fulek, when he was the only one who could stand in line for bread. But then their father resumed his role by organizing the family to crochet caps and by sneaking out of the ghetto to trade with Poles. After the father’s death in the early summer of 1940, Fulek again assumed the provider role by sharing his daily soup, but then their mother became the main provider first with her vegetable stand and next with her work for their rich handicapped neighbor.

Along the same lines, we saw their mother’s prewar role as nurturer and caretaker shift—first to Sara, the oldest daughter, and then to everyone else, as each nursed and cared for the others who became sick. The caregiver role shifted back to their mother when she recovered, and then once again back to the children when she became ill again. Thus, roles shifted from one person to another, depending on who was able to provide food and care, and who was incapacitated. The shifts were not all in one direction: there were many back-and-forth shifts over time.

Third, we noted that each role, such as that of parent, had several com-
ponents, and each of these could vary independently. Some remained fixed, others were shared, and still others were lost. For example, if we think of the initial role of Sara’s father, the three most important components of his role were providing religious leadership, economic support, and emotional sustenance. As long as he was alive, he continued to be the family’s religious leader and the father who sustained them emotionally with his optimism and upbeat interpretation of events. For example, when his beard was cut off, he defined himself as “lucky” that it had been cut off—and not ripped off—by the Germans. However, he shared the breadwinning component of his role: at times it shifted to Fulek, and at other times everyone in the family contributed their labor to the family “business,” even though he was usually the one who organized and directed their work. Finally, we saw many roles, such as those of provider and caretaker, that were taken on collectively and did not remain the responsibility of a single individual. The best example of this family’s collective action was during the Sperre, the terrifying mass roundup for deportation in September 1942, when everyone played a role in their collective planning and activity.

My second conclusion is more controversial: Many observers have commented on the importance of the Jewish family during the Holocaust. This chapter illustrates how and why it was important: the family protected and sustained the weaker members of the family—and gave them a chance to survive.

Obviously, the measure of the success of the family cannot be that everyone survived. We know that survival as a family was virtually impossible. So the measure of family success must be the extent to which family members were willing to forgo the exclusive pursuit of their own self-interest in order to support or care for or sustain other members of their family. My reading of the literature is that most family members were engaged in collective caring and sharing, even if they did not ultimately survive.

These activities of Jewish families during the Holocaust allow us to explain a previously enigmatic fact about Jewish survival in the ghettos prior to their liquidation: the fact that there was such a large discrepancy between the anticipated death rate and the actual death rate of Jews in the ghettos. How did so many Jews manage to survive the draconian conditions in the ghettos when it was assumed that many more of them would die? I believe that the reason why so many Jews were able to stay alive can be traced directly to their strong family bonds, collective strategies, and to the “rescue operations” undertaken by hundreds of Jewish families. Consider, for example, how many members of Sara’s family would have starved to death, or died from disease, if they had not been rescued by the other members of their family?

In fact, there was a time when every person in Sara’s family would have
starved to death if someone in the family had not shared his or her food with that person. In addition, there was a time when every person in Sara’s family would have died of dysentery or typhoid or pleurisy if someone in the family had not nursed him or her back to health. It was only because the family took collective responsibility for rescuing and sustaining each person that six members of this family—Sara, her mother, and her four brothers, Fulek, David, Leizer, and Yankush—all survived more than four years in the ghetto instead of succumbing to starvation and disease. This collective response of the family—and their flexibility in assuming and changing family roles—not only illustrates the theory of family roles, but takes it one step further by showing the dynamic aspects of role shifts as successful coping mechanisms to rescue family members in extreme circumstances, such as during war and genocide.

NOTES

1. William J. Goode, The Family, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982), 5. Goode showed that while the pattern of family relationships may vary—with tribal societies giving priority to extended kinship networks, in contrast to modern industrial societies emphasizing the nuclear family unit—the family serves the same basic functions in all societies. As the social unit for reproduction, the family provides for the physical maintenance of family members. It socializes and educates children, and provides social status for family members in the larger society. The family is an agent of social control that establishes and enforces norms for social behavior by defining what is socially appropriate in each society. In many, but not all societies, the family also provides unconditional love and affection for all family members, or at least it is supposed to do so.

Although Goode wrote about the worldwide diversity of family patterns, he noted that these basic functions are rarely separated from the family. Even though it would be theoretically possible to assign some of these family functions to other societal institutions, all attempts to do that—from the Republic that Plato envisioned, to the (real-life) experiments in Oneida and the Israeli kibbutz—either have not succeeded or not been implemented, or have gradually returned to more traditional family roles.

2. In all societies there is a division of labor in these role assignments, and in all societies role assignments are based on both gender and age (Goode 1982, 7).


6. Cecilia Slepak’s research is preserved in the Ringelblum archive, ARI/49, Yad Vashem (YVA), Jerusalem, Israel.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


16. Ibid., 17–18, 43, and 91. Among the many examples that reflect his assumed responsibility for the whole family are his discussion of the impossibility of getting the vaccine for everyone (17–18) and the impossibility of getting six certificates for the entire family (91). This is not limited to Władysław; see, for example, the text on p. 71 about his brother Henryk.


18. Ironically, the reverse was also apparent when some families saw and labeled something as a significant change, when an outsider, or at least this outsider, would not have labeled it in the same way. For example, many families attributed their survival to a specific contribution of food, such as when children augmented the family’s resources by picking berries or mushrooms, or when a son or daughter sent a food parcel. This food was defined as “what saved the family” and “kept the family alive.” See, for example, Henryk Grynberg, *Children of Zion* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 93, 100. But an outsider might view that as attributing more credit to the mushrooms or food parcel than its actual value. I believe this discrepancy can be explained by the extra “marginal utility” of the food when it was received.

19. These upheavals also led to a pattern in which other social groups, such as the youth movements, assumed many of the functions of the family and became surrogate families. This is similar to women who adopted each other as “camp sisters” and formed surrogate families in the camps. In both instances, these surrogate families fulfilled some of the traditional family functions and sought to protect and sustain each other—even though the odds were stacked against them.


21. Other important portraits of life in the Lodz ghetto include: Michal Unger, *The

22. Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of My Home, 16.
23. Ibid., 15.
24. Ibid., 18.
25. Ibid., 20.
26. Ibid., 32.
27. Ibid., 32.
28. Ibid., 33–34.
29. Ibid., 33–34.
31. Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of My Home, 34.
32. Ibid., 35.
33. Ibid., 37.
34. Ibid., 40.
35. Ibid., 41.
36. Ibid., 42–43.
37. Ibid., 43.
38. Ibid., 44.
40. Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of My Home, 45.
41. Ibid., 49.
42. Ibid., 52.
43. Ibid., 54.
44. Ibid., 59. This hunger for learning was true in all the youth movements (64). The other children in the family were also finding their own way: David was a loner immersed in the study of Torah; Leizer joined the religious Zionist Mizrachi party.
45. Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of My Home, 55.
46. Ibid., 65.
47. Ibid., 67.
48. Ibid., 67.
49. Ibid., 73.
50. Ibid., 73. Her friendship with Haya Gutterman continued to sustain her through the hard times as well. For example, at the end of 1943, she wrote that “in those bleak days she (Haya) was my source of strength. . . . We studied the Bible together and tried to find in it the strength and the solace that would enable us to carry on” (ibid., 115–16).
51. Ibid., 69–70.
52. Ibid., 70.
53. Ibid., 68.
54. Ibid., 85, n. 9. In addition to the meat, the whole family cooperated in giving David richer, more highly nourishing food until he was feeling better (ibid., 86). A year later, when Fulek came down with pneumonia, they again pooled their resources to get him more nourishing food until he also recovered (ibid., 109).
55. Ibid., 86.
56. Ibid., 86.
57. Ibid., 109.
58. Even though Sara was too timid to offer the doctor “gift money” to induce her to visit her sick mother at home, and even though Sara felt “anger and shame at my impotence,” the doctor came to see her mother anyway, and she prescribed some injections that helped (ibid., 110).
60. Selver-Urbach, Through the Window of My Home, 95.
61. Ibid., 95–96.
62. Ibid., 119.
63. Ibid., 120.
64. Ibid., 120.
66. Ibid., 121.
67. I am not arguing that the protection of the weak is confined to the Jewish family. As stated above, this is one of the universal functions of the family.