

Descriptions of Sexual Violence in Joan Ringelheim's 'Women and the Holocaust' Interviews, 1979-1984

Presenter: Carli Snyder

In the early 1980s, scholar Joan Ringelheim controversially proposed applying feminist frameworks to the study of the Holocaust after noticing a nearly complete absence of women's perspectives in Holocaust scholarship. To initiate this work, Ringelheim organized the first conference on the topic, which took place in March 1983. Today, scholars recognize this event as a groundbreaking moment, an impetus for their own research, and identification of Ringelheim as the field's "founding mother." Despite frequent reference within the historiography, Ringelheim's initial research itself has gone mostly unstudied. She asked about a wide variety of gendered issues, among them sexual violence.

In this paper, I will analyze the oral history interviews that Ringelheim conducted with 20 women survivors between 1979 and 1984 with a specific focus on how these women recounted memories of sexual violence. Though not all of the interviewees experienced it themselves, almost all of them expressed that they feared rape during the war. This collection of oral histories and Ringelheim's personal papers provide insights as to how she approached a topic that was considered either taboo or inappropriate, and sometimes even irrelevant, to speak about in the late 1970s and early 80s. This paper will address the questions: To what extent did the unique interviewer-interviewee dynamic affect how these women recounted (or did not recount) memories of sexual violence or fears of it? How did Ringelheim's interests as a feminist scholar inform the ways she both asked about and responded to women's descriptions of sexual violence? Ringelheim established ongoing relationships with these survivors and spoke with them about their memories on multiple occasions. A number of these women also recorded interviews with other oral history repositories. These additional interviews allow me to compare how these women addressed sexual violence in other settings with different interviewers.