

Humor as a defense mechanism in the Holocaust

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Nothing connected with the Holocaust was funny!

ABSTRACT

The Purpose of this study:

The purpose of this study was to investigate and comprehend the types of humor and laughter and the functions they fulfilled in the Holocaust.

Research Questions:

1. What types of humor were used by Jews in the Holocaust?
2. What functions did humor fulfill for Jews in the Holocaust?

Conceptual Framework:

Theoretical and practical assumptions concerning the importance of humor and the various functions it fulfills in stressful situations were the starting point for this study. It follows Ziv (1984, 1996), who classifies the functions of humor into five main categories:

1. The aggressive function of humor which includes two types:
 - a. Humor stemming from a sense of superiority
 - b. Humor stemming from frustration
2. The sexual functions of humor
3. The social functions of humor
4. The functions of humor as a defense mechanism which contains two types
 - a. Gallows humor
 - b. Self humor

5. The intellectual functions of humor

Following the content analysis additional types were found;

1. Scatological humor was added to the function of sexual humor
2. Humor about food was added to the function of defense mechanism

The chapter "Interviewees' Opinions about Humor and Laughter in the Holocaust" was also included, since their opinions concerning the importance of humor during the Holocaust did not fit any of the above mentioned categories.

Literature Review:

The literature review is divided into two main sections.

The first deals with central theories about humor and laughter, including Jewish humor. The second deals with humor and laughter in the Holocaust as expressed in utterances, episodes and various other means of expression such as: humorous and satirical songs, cabaret and other humorous shows and caricature created during the Holocaust.

Methodology:

A qualitative - biographical genre paradigm was selected for this study. The data were analyzed quantitatively.

Population:

84 Holocaust survivors.

Data analysis was done on:

55 Jewish Holocaust survivors (24 men and 31 women).

The following criteria for interviewee selection were employed:

- a. Jews who were teenagers during the Holocaust years.
- b. Those who were in ghettos and/or concentration camps and/or death camps.
- c. Those who used or experienced humor during the Holocaust.

The interviews were conducted only with those survivors who agreed to participate in the study.

Research Tools:

Biographical interview. The interviews conducted were ethnographic semi-open interviews. All were both recorded and typed. The interviews were conducted:

- a. With individual Holocaust survivors
- b. Jointly with couples in which both spouses were Holocaust survivors.
- c. With small groups of 3-5 friends who survived the same ghetto or the same concentration camp.

The central question in each of the interviews was: "Can you describe, or tell about, humor in the Holocaust"? Humor was defined as: "Anything that made you laugh or smile during the Holocaust".

Data Analysis:

The interviews were subjected to three levels of analysis.

- a. At the first level humorous utterances and episodes were located and categorized according to Ziv's categories, functions and types of humor (1984, 1996).

- b. Next, fifteen utterances and episodes of each humor type and function were sampled and given to three independent judges for validation. The judges were asked to determine the extent to which their classification as to the various humor types and functions matched mine.
- c. At the third level a quantitative count of utterances and episodes frequency was conducted and expressed in whole numbers and percentages for the various types and function of humor respectively.

Findings:

The findings indicate that humor in the Holocaust fulfilled all the functions of humor, but especially that of Defense Mechanism, including its sub types - Self-humor and Gallows humor.

Utterances and Episodes frequency in each Humor Function, in Percentages and Numbers

Functions	%	No'
Total Defense Mechanism function	60	252
Self Humor	47	118
Gallows Humor	25	63
Defense Mechanism	16	41
Humor connected with Food	12	30
Total Aggressive function	16	66
Humor stemming from superiority	57	38
humor stemming from frustration	29	19
Aggressive humor	14	9
Total Sexual function of humor	12	48
Sexual humor	52	25
Scatological humor	48	23
Social function of humor	6	27
Intellectual function of humor	6	24
TOTAL	100	417

1. Defense Mechanism function.

Self-humor

...There was a lot of humor about ourselves, about what we do.... that is we made a joke out of every situation, we made fun, yes, why not, how can you live any other way?

Look, if I say I'll die, I'll die, you'll die before you're dead, you should know there were many people who died because of it before their time was up because they did not know how to laugh at themselves, we had to!....

...In Auschwitz when they cut our hair, any how we did not give up, we said if the head is

there, there will be hair...

...The first time that I took (the things) like this, not so conventional, when they cut our hair in Auschwitz. That was something terrible. We went into the shower and out of it. It all went so fast we did not understand what it meant, and so fast, we didn't have a moment to think. And after they cut my hair off ... suddenly I saw some girlfriends of mine, that I've known for a very long time. You couldn't recognize them, and then I started laughing. I don't know. Many cried. They cried after long hair and then I started laughing and they asked 'what, are you out of your mind, what are you laughing about?' I said: 'This I never had before, a hairdo for free? Never in my whole life', yes that is what I said 'a hairdo for free? this I never had before'. And I still remember, they looked at me as if I was crazy. I started asking them: 'who did your hair?' I was used to, Misha, he was my hair dresser back home. I said: 'him I didn't see at all' as if I couldn't get an appointment with him.

...This whole situation, they shoved us into those trains. It was like cattle, it was something awful inside the train. When we have just arrived in Auschwitz everybody ran to the window, to see something, but you couldn't. The window had shutters, a small window. I also wanted to see where we were. Then a girl friend asked 'what do you want to see so badly?'. I said: 'I simply want to see the conductor, 'cause I don't have a ticket, I want to see when he comes in...'

Gallows humor

...And I would say: 'Guys, eat and you will see what kind of flame will come out of us Yes eat, and what a flame!' Why? If we are fat it will help the [Muselmans](#) to burn, since we have a flame, we will help, You understand?

...Two Jews meet in Warsaw and one of them is eating perfumed soap, the other asks: 'Moyshe, why are you eating soap with such a scent?' He answers: 'If they turn me into soap, I might as well smell nice'.

...'Entering through the gate is exiting through the chimney'



Painting by Joseph Bau
(the Jewish people exiting the crematorium like smoke)

...Arbeit macht frei in Krematorium Drei - Work will free us through the chimney of crematorium No. three.

...I am talking about Plashow, the end of 1943, they built the camp over a former cemetery. Many horrible things were happening there. When we were standing there

during muster in the rain, stomping our feet against the cold, it happened quite often that a bone would stick out. We would say: 'This is your Grandfather, that is your uncle'. We didn't know on whose grave we were trampling. It was also a kind of gallows humor. ...We had no soap at Plashow either, who is talking about soap? We used to say: Wait, wait till we get to Auschwitz, they will make soap out of us. At Plashow we already knew about Auschwitz, I told you, and they used to say: Yes, wait there we will have soap there they have a personal soap industry...

Defense Mechanism

...Look, without humor we would all have committed suicide. We made fun of everything. What I'm actually saying is that that helped us remain human, even under hard conditions.

...But don't think that it is possible for people in such situations not to have any humor and satire. This is impossible, it is a kind of defense mechanism.

...At the Ghetto we were looking under ground for things to laugh at, even when there weren't any.

...When I was interviewed for Spielberg and they asked me, what I thought was the reason I survived, they probably expected me to answer good fortune or other things I said that I thought it was laughter and humor, not to take things the way we were living but to dress them up as something different. That was what helped me I wasn't thinking about miracles and wasn't thinking anything, I only thought how not to take things seriously, as if I thought that this was the proportion that I was giving, and I guess it (this attitude) helped me. Because it was absurd all that time, it was unconceivable, that they could do those things to people.

Humor connected with Food

...There were all kinds of groups that built around them defense mechanisms, so there were those who exchanged recipes all day. We were supposed to stay on our bunks on Sundays through the bunks recipes were passed how much sugar, how much flour how much this or that. Someone next to me gave many recipes and all of a sudden her mood changed and she didn't want to participate they asked if I knew what happened to her I said 'I think I think she burned her cake...'

...Food was not enough, we were very sad, so I said: 'there is a way, if we could get hold of a magnifying glass it would right away magnify our portions, how can we get one?'



"Competition" painting by Erich Laskely, Terezin

2. The Aggressive function of humor.

Most of them were about "the prominent", Jews holding official jobs.

Aggressive humor

...With me there was a guy who was a little disabled, he somehow passed selection in May in Plashow, (he used to prepare the bristles in the brush manufacture hut) and this is the way we talked. If I lay my hands, after the war, on Emon Get (Commander of Plashow) how will I handle him? I will inject him like this: Cancer in one leg and Tuberculosis in the other I'll treat the leg with the cancer, I'll make it well and infect it with T.B. and so on until I finish him off this way, these were the jokes.

Aggressive humor stemming from superiority

...The Germans came into Warsaw and everywhere they went they would say: "Jews out, Germans in", and this is how they get to the Jewish cemetery...

...On a moving train a Jew spots an S.S. man searching for Jews hiding. The Jew rushes into the toilet to hide, he does what he needs to do and the German goes on looking.

Finally he knocks on the toilet door, the Jew doesn't answer. He finally attempts to open the door screaming S.S. (sounds like "eat, eat" in Yiddish). The Jew answers: Dos drek ess alein. Translation: The shit you eat by yourself.

Aggressive humor stemming from frustration

...The topic we laughed at the most and we envied them the most for (his wife, an Auschwitz survivor also) was the one I learned it from, was that of the "Scheissekommando" the shit moving commando, - pardon the expression. There was no sewage there or drainage, we would crap into holes in the ground and the Scheissekommando would come collect it and transfer it to where ever they would collect that stuff, and we would laugh. First of all, they smelled horrible, but they were considered as the richest, because they always dug up there, lots of diamonds and gold and gold teeth. You see you can laugh and cry laugh and cry.

3. The Sexual function of humor.**Sexual humor**

...There were dirty jokes too, but a lot less. The erotic element appeared very little. It existed in camps with men, with only women, almost not at all. To say it in short, people who were very hungry, did not have erotica on their minds. Food was more important. However, those who were not hungry and every camp had them, among them you could hear dirty jokes. No doubt, it happened in every camp. I'm not talking about a camp like Auschwitz, there it existed one hundred percent, but also in other concentration camps.

...I was seventeen and a half at that time. That song when I heard it, it made me shudder, I was not used to such language at home. I was brought up as a good girl in a good and decent home. In the camp we witnessed many dirty things.

Scatological humor

...The latrine had a name " RTA- Radio Tuches (buttocks in Yiddish) Agency", there you could learn all the news. Agency is an international word. Yes RTA, in Polish it also had a different name JPP (Jedna pani powiedziala - one woman said), there was no shame we were sitting in a row telling jokes, everything in that latrine.

...You know from the moment we entered the camp on March 13th '43 up to May 2nd 45 we had no chance of privacy. Bathing in front of others, going to the toilet in public, so we had a row. We sat there and we talked and told. I also joked and said that our Auschwitz Birkenau Coffee Shop was there in the latrine. It all happened there: exchange of information, gossip, barter, everything.



Latrine in Auschwitz - Birkenau

4. Social function of humor

...First of all, it was important to be part of the group, alone you were lost. So surely there was a kind of dynamic so here and there a word was thrown, together with help. And also, a person alone cannot joke.

...At that moment when you were with people and it does not matter that it was in the ghetto or the camp or in Auschwitz, at the moment of silence you live with someone, you are among people, you are not alone, you are alive. And then, some one with a sense of humor will be funny there too, they will retain their humor be it gallows humor or ordinary humor, it's there, you hear? There was, there was. There is always someone in every group, in every situation whether in war or not, there is always that character who is happier and the character that is sad and the clever one and the fool, we laughed at each other, sure, like everybody else does. What a question, of course we laughed, it's people, sure, I mean, and how?! Just like today, but then we had different things.

5. Intellectual function of humor

...The Jews did it by way of laughter and satirical criticism among themselves. The Yiddish language contains many such elements in expressions whose meanings the Jews new.

...There was no [tram](#) in the ghetto, there was one outside the ghetto, but on the inside there were two Jews Kon and Heller, they organized a kind of a tram with horses. It looked like a train car and it was called Konhellerka after the two owners.

The Warsaw Ghetto was infested with lice and as a result many died of Typhus, it was very difficult to come by the serum against it and many died of Typhus.

There's a famous Polish writer, writer of historical novels, who wrote a novel "The Hut Behind the Village", in Polish it is 'chata za wsia'. What did the Ghetto dwellers do? They called every such "tram" 'chata ze wsza'. It sounds almost the same but it means: The hut with the lice, instead the small hut in the village.

...Mother is feeding her son and he asks her: 'Mommy, who are the worst people in the world'? She answers: 'SS Mein Kind'. Any time someone gave food to someone else he would say: 'Ess Ess Mein Kind' (Eat, eat my child).

Opinions About Humor in the Holocaust

...Humor was one of the integral ingredients of mental perseverance. This mental perseverance was the condition for a will to live, to put it in a nutshell. This I am telling

you as a former prisoner. However little it was, however sporadic, however spontaneous, it was very important, very important. Humor and satire played a tremendous role, in my opinion. It was a cemetery all right and exactly for that reason, the mere fact that we wanted somehow to preserve our personality, they wanted to make robots out of us. ...This was the integral part of our inner, mental struggle for our human identity, the fact that we could still laugh at things like these. ...Look, the ghetto showed that people have great vitality, as soon as a moment's time passed separating one trauma from the other people were already laughing, they maybe, even laughed more.

Conclusions:

The uniqueness of this study lies in several aspects:

1. For the first time in Israel, Holocaust survivors were asked about "Humor in the Holocaust". A subject that was taboo until now.
2. The data collected in this study deserve to be referred to as a document, since it is a product of authentic self-expression of the interviewees Holocaust survivors.
3. This study enriches the understanding of the methods people developed to cope with intensified stress situations.
 - a. Even in an intensified stress situation like the Holocaust, humor served as a stress reducer, according to the interviewees testimonies.
 - b. Among the interviewed Holocaust survivors who were in a severe state of threat, happiness and satisfaction turned easily to laughter.
 - c. The interviewed Holocaust survivors - laughed more then once, especially when they were in horrible situations or confronted with death.
 - d. We may conclude that humor in the Holocaust fulfilled the various functions of humor, and especially that of a defense mechanism through self-humor and gallows humor; this would have been a typical to the Jewish people in situation of stress.
4. According to interviewed Holocaust survivors testimonies, an individual who had a sense of humor prior to the Holocaust, maintained it during the Holocaust, experienced humor and laughter, and retained his or her sense of humor after the Holocaust.
5. Using humor was not connected to place - ghetto and/or concentration/death camp, but rather to having a sense of humor.
6. The use of humor during the Holocaust did not reduce the objective atrocity and horror. It reduced them subjectively, and facilitated coping with them.
7. Humor was expressed in different modes during the Holocaust. In addition to humorous utterances and episode there were also: humorous songs, humorous reviews and cabarets, and caricature paintings and drawings.

Ethics:

1. The interviewees received a thorough explanation as to the purpose of the study.
2. The interviewees were told that the interview would be recorded, transcribed and published.
3. All the interviewees agreed to take part in this study
4. All the interviewees were asked "under which name do you want to appear in this study: your full real name, your first name only, false name or any

other nickname"?

The interviewees consented that their names be used in the study.

Bibliography:

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