

ABSTRACT

THE DEAD AND THE SURVIVORS:
HISTORICAL LEGENDS ABOUT WOMEN
DURING THE 1648/49 POGROMS
AS A FEMALE SITE OF MEMORY

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This article addresses legends about women during and after the Chmielnicki pogroms (1648–1649) and treats them as a female site of memory. It highlights the importance of historical legends for exposing the problems that troubled Jewish society then and its ways of coping with them, and shows how the legends made women aware of the conduct expected of them in such times. The French thinker Pierre Nora has defined *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) as cultural institutions that seek to preserve society's values and pass them on to future generations. He examined the ways in which a society forms and constructs a collective memory of the past that can serve its needs in the present.

The pogroms of 1648–1649, part of the uprising led by Bogdan Chmielnicki against the Polish overlords, are among the most traumatic episodes preserved in Jewish memory. I distinguish two main groups of legends: those of conflict and death, in which a sexually charged confrontation between a young Jewish woman and one or more of the persecutors, who lust for her, ends with her death; and legends about women who survived the attacks.

I identify two main patterns within the first group. In one pattern, the young woman, desperate to avoid rape or a forced marriage, inverts the gender hierarchy and adopts male traits and actions. In the second pattern, the young woman employs the age-old stratagem of the weak – deceit – in order to trick the man and escape his violent lust. In both patterns the young woman dies at the end and is viewed as a martyr.

The main point discussed here is the way these legends, which arose in patriarchal Jewish societies, legitimize the women's crossing of gender boundaries in times of persecution. With regard to the stories about survivors, I note the complex attitude toward their heroines, which ranges from total rejection to a willingness to accept them under certain conditions. My argument is that these legends prime the women's mind to accept the restoration of traditional values and norms of patriarchal society after they were breached during the catastrophe.

The existence of the two types of legends about the pogroms of 1648/1649 makes us aware of the disparity between the kind of female behavior that men can see as legitimate in times of persecution and what they will accept in normal times.