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Jewish Child Survivors in the Aftermath of the Holocaust

JOANNA MICHLIC

The last two decades have been marked by a steadily increasing interest in the history of children during and in the aftermath of the Second World War; this might be described as the children's turn in Holocaust studies. Today, we have a wide range of case studies of Jewish children under Nazi occupation in both western and eastern Europe, studies of children in concentration camps, and child survivors' early post-war lives. Other important areas which have been the subject of research are the resettlement of Europe's unaccompanied and displaced children in the aftermath of the Second World War, the (transnational) reconstruction of Jewish families, mental and medical problems among young survivors in the aftermath the Holocaust, and the memories and self-representation of child survivors. Over the past two decades, scholars and wider audiences have also paid more attention to the wartime diaries of older Jewish children and teenagers. One currently growing area is the history of hidden children during the Holocaust, whose wartime and post-war experiences and memories were barely known to historians in the early 1990s.

It is over. Our liberation has come, but she wears a prosaic face. No one has died of joy. No one has gone mad with excitement. When we used to dream of freedom, we bathed her with our tears. We crowned her with the garlands of our smiles and dreams. Now that she is here, she looks like a beggar and we have nothing to give her. With what desperation did we call for her in those dark days. With what power did her far-off shimmer flesh out our thin bodies? Now she is here and she beckons to us from every corner. She is right before our eyes, yet we cannot see her. She begs us: 'Touch me . . . enjoy me . . .' But we are tired. Our past, like a hawk, circles overhead, fluttering its black wings, devouring our days with horrible memories. It poisons our nights with terror. Poor, sad Freedom! Will she ever have the strength to free us from those dark shadowy wings?

Chava Rosenfarb, 'Bergen-Belsen Diary, 1945'

For years my own feelings lay dormant like a fossil inside an amber bead. Now, fifty years after the war ended, I want to uncover my past and learn who I was . . . For years I did not speak about the war. People were killed. Parents watched their children slain. I survived. What was there to tell? Only the dead can tell. But when my older son, Daniel, went to school, his teacher asked me to meet with the students to tell them about my life.

Miriam Winter, *Trains*, 1997

THE FIRST PASSAGE is from the diary of Chava Rosenfarb (1923–2011), today an acclaimed Yiddish writer, dated 8 May 1945 when she was 22 years old.¹ The second is an excerpt from the memoir of Miriam Winter (1933–2014), a professor of theatre studies in the United States and a hidden child survivor, who was, like

Rosenfarb, born in the great multicultural city of Łódź.² Their writings encapsulate some central aspects of the Holocaust experience for young Jews: anxiety, fear, trauma, and silence.

The war forced young Jews to suppress pivotal aspects of their own identity in order to survive. When that pressure abated, many pursued a sudden compelling search for their pre-war and wartime selves while experiencing an overwhelming sense of the irreparable loss of their families and of their childhoods. Post-war memoirs and testimonies of young survivors are imbued with the realization that wartime experiences have a profound, long-term effect on people's lives, even those who achieved what is regarded as a successful family and professional life.³ The memoirs constitute a body of evidence regarding the young survivors' apprehensions about their identities, their continuous mourning for their murdered families, and their explorations and interrogations of their own memories and their own past selves during and after the Holocaust. They reveal the ongoing long shadow of the Holocaust on their adult lives.

The mortality rate for Jewish children during the Holocaust, as for elderly Jews, was especially high. According to reliable estimates, only 6 to 11 per cent of Europe's pre-war Jewish children, who had numbered between 1.1 and 1.5 million, survived, compared with 33 per cent of the adults.⁴

The Under-Researched History of Young Jewish Survivors

Lawrence Langer convincingly argued that by dividing the history of the Holocaust into two, that of the perpetrators and that of the victims, conventional historians have failed the victims and privileged the perpetrators, merely because the Nazi regime produced official documents.⁵ These conventional historians created narratives concerned mainly with the perpetrators, while ignoring or marginalizing the victims. They failed the youngest victims and survivors most by denying them not only agency but also a legitimate place as a subject of historical enquiry.

However, in the last two decades there has been a steady increase in interest in the history of children during and after the Second World War which can be described as a 'children's turn' in Holocaust studies. The first two pioneering studies in English of Jewish children in Nazi-occupied Europe were Debórah Dwork's *Children with a Star*, published in 1991,⁶ which gives an overview of the different fates of Jewish children, and Nicholas Stargardt's *Witnesses of War*, published in 2005.⁷ *Witnesses of War* demonstrates the merits of a history of children written from a child's point of view and places children's experiences within broader social and cultural contexts of the Second World War. Today, there is a wide range of case studies of Jewish children under Nazi occupation in both western and eastern Europe, studies of children in concentration camps and of child survivors' early post-war lives. Other important research areas are the resettlement of Europe's unaccompanied and displaced children following the Second World War, the (transnational) reconstruction of Jewish families, mental and medical problems among young survivors, and the memories and self-representation of child survivors.⁸

Over the past two decades more attention has been paid to the wartime diaries of older Jewish children and teenagers, the many 'Anne Franks' of eastern Europe, who, before they were murdered, left poignant, adult-like reflections about life, love, and the everyday struggles of young lives confined in ghettos.⁹ These diaries, written during the Holocaust, provide a glimpse into the world of the young generation, the majority of whom perished voiceless, never having had a chance to leave their own testimony.

The Hidden Children

One current growing area in the study of Jewish children during the Holocaust is the history of hidden children, whose wartime and post-war experiences and memories were barely known to historians in the early 1990s. Today, hidden children have well-established and active social networks, foundations, and associations not only in the United States, Canada, Australia, and western Europe, but also in post-communist eastern Europe.

Hidden children are part of the remarkable global social movement of memory among survivors, committed to the reconstruction of their pre-war and wartime childhood and their post-war youth, which are characterized by a twisted sense of split identities and complicated family histories. Like other child survivors, many hidden children are the driving force behind specific commemoration ceremonies in their new homelands and those of their ancestors. Some take on the role of survivor-educators, 'professional survivors,'¹⁰ by teaching about their experiences and the Holocaust in schools, colleges, and universities and by public engagement, promoting tolerance and multicultural understanding.

Many child survivors have deposited their interviews and memoirs in archives such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, the Imperial War Museum in London, and smaller local archives and museums. Between 1981 and 1995 the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University collected 34,000 testimonies, while between 1994 and 2002 Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California collected 52,000.¹¹ At the same time, there are child survivors who avoid giving public interviews or testimonies, and may never be ready to do so. There are many reasons for their silence, including family concerns, psychological reservations, personal life trajectories, or drastically violent memories of wartime and early post-war experiences, such as emotional and sexual assault by those who were supposed to be their guardians.

Studies of child survivors' testimonies unsettle a number of assumptions and popular conceptions about the Holocaust. First, they shatter the commonly accepted notion that the Holocaust ended in 1945. This sense that the Holocaust is an ongoing trauma is poignantly expressed by Thomas Buergenthal, an internationally acclaimed American human rights lawyer and judge, and a child survivor whose father was a Polish Jew from Galicia and whose mother was a German Jew. He said: 'That story, after all, continues to have a lasting impact on the person I have become.'¹²

Secondly, an examination of child survivors' accounts questions the heroic and martyrological traditions that tend to sentimentalize Jewish children and Jewish families and fail to recognize the complexity of the dilemmas they faced during and after the Holocaust. For example, in the early post-war period, some hidden children struggled to function in the newly reconstructed family units, in which their surviving parents had become forgotten and emotionally distant figures because of the long years of separation or because widowed parents remarried after the war.¹³ As a result, these children sometimes yearned for a reunion with their wartime rescuers. Of course, this pattern was common among hidden children from all over Nazi-occupied Europe, as revealed in a powerful documentary film *Secret Lives* by Aviva Slesin,¹⁴ herself a hidden child from Lithuania.

Third, child survivors' testimonies reveal how extremely vulnerable young fugitives were in the world of adults under the conditions of war and genocide in Poland and other eastern European countries. Although some rescuers treated their young charges with love, compassion, and dedication, as if they were their own children, there were also what I call 'rescuer-abusers' who tormented them mentally and physically and treated them as a source of free labour. A history of mistreatment of Jewish child fugitives by those who were supposed to rescue and care for them has not yet been written,¹⁵ although there are studies of certain categories of rescuers, such as those who did it for profit.¹⁶ My own research, examining cases of everyday intimate relations between rescuers and their young Jewish charges, reveals a disturbing picture.¹⁷ What should have been a safe shelter was often a space of daily suffering, isolation, loneliness, and even sexual abuse. The reasons behind such abuse seem to have been anti-Jewish prejudice, consciousness of the Nazi persecution of Jews and the calculating understanding that Jews were simply disposable in their eyes and that no one was likely to help the fugitives, and the pure cruelty of some individuals. Children articulated their confusion, fear, and helplessness in the face of dependency on abusive individuals and how they coped. Their recollections of threats of denunciation and of crying and begging for their lives to be spared for one more day provide a brutal and disturbing picture of rescue as a grey zone in which human greed, lack of compassion or respect for a young life, and exploitation were central to the relationships between Jewish children and their rescuers.¹⁸ From the point of view of the hidden children, hard work, making yourself as useful and as indispensable as possible, wit and intelligence in dealing with the rescuer-abusers, and sheer luck were the only means that guaranteed their survival.

Some children who had been hidden in Polish villages and exposed to mental and physical abuse and long hours working in the fields recalled shortly after the war that they did not care about living any longer. A good illustration of the loss of the will to live are brief early post-war recollections of their responses to local battles between the encroaching Russian army and the retreating Germans in the second half of 1944. Unlike their rescuers, the children did not flee to safe shelters but stayed in the fields, risking being killed by bombs or bullets.¹⁹

Their testimonies reveal their mental and emotional fragility, lack of confidence,

and confusion about their identity after the loss of their parents and the long, cruel years in hiding with rescuer-abusers, which led to them developing pathological dependencies on them.

After the Soviets came, the people started to tell me: 'The Germans cannot kill you any longer, you are free.' But I did not believe my luck. In the spring of 1946 I converted to Christianity as a way of thanking [the Wajdzik family] for sheltering me. I wanted to simply give them my soul. After, I went to visit my parents' grave: that is, the ditch where they were buried. I put violet flowers there and cried a lot. Today I do not cry any longer, my heart has hardened out of fear, because of my experiences . . . Later one of my cousins found me and wanted to take me away from them, but they demanded 'a half a million for the child'. He did not have the money, because he served in the army, and left. I did not even want to say 'Goodbye' to him, I was so stupid. I wanted to remain with them forever and to be a Pole, I was so used to that life. But my cousin told the Jews about my existence, and they took me from the Wajdziks. At the first attempt to take me away, I ran off and walked 7 kilometres back to the farmer. At the end, the police had to come to take me away. They held me by my hands and legs because I did not want to go with them. The Jews placed me in the orphanage, and now I feel good.²⁰

Some orphaned children who had survived the war, mostly through using their wits and determination, did not wish to be dependent on adults after the war. Their wartime experiences made them prone to distrust all adults, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. The daily experiences during the war also taught them to be tough, bold, and impudent in dealing with adults. As during the Holocaust, in the early post-war period they continued to be proactive and determined to make their own decisions about their future.²¹

Child survivors constituted the most affected and vulnerable social group in the turbulent early post-war period. For many, who were well looked after and loved by their Christian Polish rescuers, the appearance of a forgotten or an unknown relative meant a messy and frightening disruption of what they regarded as a solid family life and a happy childhood. Therefore, it took them a while to adjust to leaving the familiar and stable environment in which they had lived for two, three, or even in some cases five or six years. The youngest children, those born on the eve of or during the war, were the most shocked by the visits of strangers who came to claim them, since in their eyes they had never had any other family or ethnic, social, and cultural background than that of their rescuers. Unlike some of the older children, they did not have any memories of their biological parents or of the main facets of Jewish identity. Thus, they had to adjust not only to their new Jewish guardians but also to a new social identity. Jewish identity was a totally new, frightening, and foreign terrain, a *terra incognita*.

The end of the war did not bring an end to the confusion and vulnerability of the young survivors in the world of adults. The key features of their early post-war experience were shattered dreams and a deeply felt sense of orphanhood buried beneath the surface of their joy at having survived. Other features included different

and often contradictory expectations of behaviour and educational and career choices between the young survivors and their newly appointed guardians, and a lack of understanding and sympathy on the part of some adoptive parents and institutionalized authorities in the West. Despite obvious differences between then and now, perhaps these unsettling findings about young Jews during and after the Holocaust constitute important lessons on how young victims of current and future genocides and wars should be treated.

Many Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Hungarian Jewish children found themselves in the displaced persons camps in the American, British, and French zones of Germany and made their new post-war homes in the West: in the US, Canada, and Australia, and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom and France. Many child survivors, the full orphans, were shattered by the painful knowledge that no one would 'come for them', because their immediate and extended families had been totally destroyed. As a result, they were attracted not only in an ideological but also primarily in a practical and existential sense to Zionism as the only way to build a future life.²² The children's homes and kibbutzim that mushroomed in the early post-war period were the formative centres for young survivors in which the yearning for the 'dreamed' safe Jewish homeland crystallized. These children emigrated, mostly illegally, to Palestine/Israel between 1945 and 1950, but the sense of orphanhood did not disappear easily in their new homeland, as is expressed in a simple poem by an unnamed child survivor written in Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'emek, in 1946:

I have so much of everything
 But I have no parents
 At the same time
 I hear the wind whisper
 Child, don't listen to that voice
 There are many children like you
 Who have no mothers
 So don't cry
 You must sing, study, and dance
 And build our land.²³

Other orphaned children were adopted by unknown Jewish relatives or complete strangers in the United States through a variety of Jewish charities such as the European Jewish Children's Aid, which became part of the United Services for New Americans. The 'lucky ones', who were reunited with at least one surviving biological parent or other close relative, emigrated to the West after their newly reconstituted families met all the bureaucratic criteria and achieved the difficult task of proving that they were 'blood relatives', often without possessing crucial documents such as birth and death certificates.

The post-Holocaust history of young east European Jews encompasses many transnational aspects, such as the reconstitution of their families, adoption, and a variety of life trajectories, including first loves, marriages, life-long friendships, and family-like relationships among those who met in children's homes and kibbutzim.

It is a history that must be approached through a transnational lens. To understand the short- and long-term impact of the Holocaust on young survivors and the post-1945 multi-generational Jewish family, it is also illuminating to study that history in both the wartime and post-war historical contexts rather than treating these two periods separately.

The growing awareness of the inevitable passing of the survivor generation, gravely accelerated by the COVID pandemic, makes interpretation of the Holocaust memories of adult and child survivors by the 'second' and 'third' generations a compelling and timely research subject. The subject engages not only historians, psychologists, sociologists, and literary scholars, but also neuroscientists, who have recently claimed that it is possible to identify the mode of transmission of Holocaust survivors' stress to their offspring through their genes: 'the epigenetic inheritance'.²⁴

Since 1977 there has been a growing global outpouring of fictional and life writing and visual artistic works by the second generation, known as 'the heirs of the Holocaust',²⁵ a term coined by Helen Epstein, the pioneering voice of the second generation who made 'an unidentifiable group identifiable'.²⁶ There have also been a number of fictional works by the third generation, such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), Andrew Wiener's *The Marriage Artist* (2010), and Nathan Englander's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* (2012), and the emergence of new Holocaust memorialization projects. The latter include getting tattoos of a survivor's concentration-camp number by the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors as a way of remembering and raising awareness of the Holocaust.²⁷ According to Michael Berenbaum, transmitting memories of the Holocaust with one's own body is a manifestation of a broader transition from 'life' to 'historical memories': 'We're at that transition, and this is sort of a brazen, in-your-face way of bridging it'.²⁸

However, despite the current impressive research into the history of Jewish childhood under the Nazis, and of child Holocaust survivors, there are still many questions about the wartime experiences of Jewish families and certain groups of Jewish children in German-occupied Europe and about how the Holocaust affected child survivors and the second and third generations. These questions require various historical, ethnographic, sociological, and anthropological approaches, different analytical tools, and research into previously unavailable or ignored archival collections. With the endorsement of the child-centred historical methods and interdisciplinary approaches, there is no doubt that the field will continue to thrive and bear new fruit.

Notes

- 1 C. Rosenfarb, 'Bergen-Belsen Diary, 1945' [excerpts], trans. G. Morgentaler (27 Jan. 2014), 8 May 1945: Tablet website, visited 14 May 2022. The diary was written in the displaced persons camp at Bergen-Belsen after the liberation of the concentration camp on 15 April 1945. Excerpts from it were first published as *Fragmentn fun a togbukh* as an addendum to Rosenfarb's first collection of poems, *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* (Montreal, 1948). They

- were translated into English by Goldie Morgentaler, Rosenfarb's daughter and a professor of English at the University of Lethbridge.
- 2 M. Winter, *Trains: A Memoir of a Hidden Childhood during and after World War II* (Jackson, Mich., 1997).
 - 3 There is a lack of studies on the cultural, social, and economic achievements of young east European Jewish survivors in the West. For an interesting analysis of socio-economic achievements of young Jewish refugees from German-speaking Europe in the United States, see G. Sonnert and G. Holton, *What Happened to the Children Who Fled Nazi Persecution* (New York, 2006).
 - 4 For a short overview of the history of Jewish children during the Holocaust, see K. Nili, 'Children', in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. W. Laqueur (New Haven, Conn., 2001), 115–19; for a rich collection of published primary sources on children during the Holocaust, see P. Heberer, *Children during the Holocaust* (Lanham, Md., 2011).
 - 5 See L. L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn., 1991).
 - 6 D. Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, Conn., 1991).
 - 7 N. Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis* (London, 2005).
 - 8 On the historiography of the subject, see J. B. Michlic, 'Mapping the History of Child Holocaust Survivors', in A. Helma (ed.), *No Small Matter: Features of Jewish Childhood* (Oxford, 2021), 79–102.
 - 9 See e.g. R. Spiegel, *Renia's Diary: A Young Girl's Life in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, trans. A. Blasiak and M. Dziurosz (London, 2019); *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Łódź Ghetto*, ed. A. Adelson, trans. K. Turowski (New York, 1996); J. Feliks Urman, *I'm Not Even a Grown-Up*, ed. and trans. A. Rudolf (London, 1991).
 - 10 A. Sheftel and S. Zembrzycki, 'Professionalizing Survival: The Politics of Public Memory among Holocaust Survivor-Educators in Montreal', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 12 (2013), 210–31.
 - 11 On the revival of interest in the testimony of Holocaust survivors, see G. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996); see also A. Wiewiorka *The Era of the Witness*, trans. J. Stark (Ithaca, NY, 2006), 107–18.
 - 12 T. Buergenthal, *A Lucky Child: A Memoir of Surviving Auschwitz as a Young Boy* (New York, 2009), p. xiii.
 - 13 On the difficulties of reconstituting Jewish families in post-war Holland, see D. L. Wolf, *Beyond Anne Frank* (Berkeley, Calif., 2007), esp. ch. 6.
 - 14 A. Slesin (dir.), *Secret Lives: Hidden Children and Their Rescuers during WWII*, documentary (Ann Rubenstein Tisch, Aviva Slesin, and Toby Appleton Perl, 2002); see D. Kher, 'Film in Review. "Secret Lives": Hidden Children and Their Rescuers during WWII' (16 May 2003): *New York Times* website, visited 14 May 2022.
 - 15 See O. Orzel (ed.), *Dzieci żydowskie w czasach Zagłady: Wczesne świadectwa 1944–1948: Relacje dziecięce ze zbiorów Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej* (Warsaw, 2014). Many of the fifty-five early post-war Jewish children's testimonies in this collection speak directly about mistreatment and abuse.
 - 16 On rescuers for profit, see J. Grabowski, *Rescue for Money: Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939–1945* (Jerusalem, 2008); A. Wierzcholska, 'Helping, Denouncing, and Profiteering: A Process-Oriented Approach to Jewish–Gentile Relations in Occupied Poland from a Micro-Historical Perspective', in H. Kubátová and J. Lániček (eds.), *Jews and Gentiles in Eastern Europe During the Holocaust in History and Memory* 23 (2017), 34–58. Joanna Tokarska-

- Bakir questions the use of the terms 'righteous' and 'unrighteous' (see J. Tokarska-Bakir, 'The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous', *Dapim*, 24 (2010), 11–63).
- 17 J. B. Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady: Wojenna i powojenna historia oraz pamięć żydowskich dzieci ocalałych w Polsce* (Warsaw, 2020), 248–52; ead., 'What Does a Child Remember? Recollections of the War and the Early Postwar Period among Child Survivors from Poland', in ead. (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, Mass., 2017), 153–72.
 - 18 See Michlic, 'What Does a Child Remember?' 162–3.
 - 19 See Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady*, 126–7.
 - 20 Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego, Warsaw, 301/2731: Gizela Szulberg, testimony for Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce, recorded by Ida Gliksztejn, 3 Sept. 1947 (Pol.), p. 3; see also Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady*, 250–1.
 - 21 See Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady*, 252–3.
 - 22 See A. J. Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Detroit, 2009).
 - 23 Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'emek Archive, Kevutsat shaḥar: 'Mipenei shehaḥayim sheli lefanai' (1949); cited in M. Balf, 'Holocaust Survivors on Kibbutzim: Resettling Unsettled Memories', in D. Ofer, F. S. Ouzan, and J. Baumel Schwartz (eds.), *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities* (New York, 2011), 165–83; see also J. B. Michlic, 'Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Some Vignettes of Jewish Children's Lives in Early Postwar Poland', in Ofer, Ouzan, and Baumel Schwartz (eds.), *Holocaust Survivors*, 46–87.
 - 24 On the subject of epigenetic inheritance, see e.g. D. Samuels, 'Do Jews Carry Trauma in Our Genes? A Conversation with Rachel Yehuda' (11 Dec. 2014): Tablet website, visited 14 May 2022; H. Thomson, 'Study of Holocaust Survivors Finds Trauma Passed on to Children's Genes?' (21 Aug. 2015): *The Guardian* website, visited 14 May 2022; M. Shapiro, 'Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma: How the Holocaust Transmits and Affects Child Development', Working Papers Series, Hadassah-Brandeis Institute Project on Families, Children and the Holocaust, Brandeis University.
 - 25 H. Epstein, 'Heirs of the Holocaust' (19 June 1977): *New York Times* website, visited 14 May 2022.
 - 26 D. Lipstadt, 'Children of Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust: The Evolution of a New-Found Consciousness', *Encyclopedia Judaica Year Book*, 1988/9, pp. 139–50.
 - 27 For a critical assessment of Holocaust tattoos, see Y. Miller, 'Holocaust Tattoos: Isn't There a Better Way to Educate?' (22 Oct. 2012): *Haaretz* website, visited 14 May 2022.
 - 28 Cited in J. Rudoren, 'Proudly Bearing Elders' Scars, Their Skin Says "Never Forget"' (1 Oct. 2012): *New York Times* website, visited 14 May 2022; see also 'A Tattoo to Remember', audio recording (30 Sept. 2012): *New York Times* website, visited 14 May 2022.