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Childhood during War and Genocide: Agency, Survival, and Representation

Edited by Joanna Beata Michlic,
Yuliya von Saal, and Anna Ullrich

Leibniz Institute
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Center for Holocaust Studies

WALLSTEIN

Childhood during War and Genocide

Agency, Survival, and Representation

European Holocaust Studies

Edited by Frank Bajohr, Andrea Löw, and Andreas Wirsching

Volume 5

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Agency, Survival, and Representation

Joanna Beata Michlic, Yuliya von Saal,
and Anna Ullrich (Editors)

WALLSTEIN VERLAG

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Introduction

On October 13, 2023, a cohort of child Holocaust survivor-volunteers at the United States Holocaust Museum (USHMM) issued an open letter about the October 7, 2023, Hamas atrocities perpetrated against the civilian population of southern Israel, including the gruesome and indiscriminate killing and burning of Israeli children. The letter constitutes a powerful statement in which its authors have voiced their concerns for Israeli children, families, and communities, as well as for the future memorialization of the Holocaust:

In our youth, we were proud Jews in our communities throughout Europe. Eventually, that meant escape or certain death. We wanted to flee, but no one would take us. We longed for freedom and security, but there was no Jewish state. Today, the State of Israel is the guarantor of a Jewish future, but it is under horrific assault by Hamas terrorists. Today, men, women, and children are again targeted as Jews. Today, we witness the worst killing of Jews since the Holocaust.

Today, as we see the murderous destruction in Israel, that hope is dimmed. All our lives we mourned for our loved ones lost to the genocidal actions of the Nazis and their collaborators, but we hoped the lessons of the past could shape a different future. Today we mourn for Israel that holds such special meaning for us.

This is not what we expected in this final chapter of our lives, as we contemplate our legacy, the future of Holocaust memory and education, and the future of our people. We write this letter to humanity in sorrow but also in hope. We know pain few can comprehend, having

seen our families and communities obliterated. We are living proof that the unthinkable is always possible.¹

In light of the most horrific massacre (pogrom) of Jews since the end of the Second World War, the authors of the open letter relate how the Holocaust has influenced their lives, especially their lifelong mourning for their murdered families. The letter indicates that its authors could not shed the emotional scars and wounds in 1945, and that these scars and wounds have been part of their post-Holocaust identities and memories despite having lived outwardly successful professional, social, and familial lives. These scars and wounds resurface in emotionally overwhelming and painful moments in survivors' lives, such as during times of individual mourning and when there are attacks against Jewish communities in Israel and abroad.²

The vast body of psychological and historical literature on the impact of war and genocide on child survivors from the Cambodian and Rwandan genocides, the Wars of Yugoslavia, Darfur, and Somalia also speak volumes about the persistence of similar scars and wounds in young survivors. These scholarly works, along with the wealth of varied ego documents produced by child survivors, urge us to recognize the topicality of the field of children, war, and genocide studies both in the past and the present moment.³

Concerning the history of children during the Second World War, many studies have focused on the experiences, identities, and (self-)representations of child refugees and survivors and their rehabilitation. But the field can also contribute to the study of historical topics such as the destructive breakdown in relations between different ethnic and national groups in Central and Eastern Europe before and during the Second World War. It can also offer insight into the devastating outcomes of political propaganda on the education of children in societies under the control of the Soviet and Nazi totalitarian regimes.

The study of the children of the Second World War and the Holocaust can have even wider ramifications. It can contribute to research on rele-

1 "Open Letter: Holocaust Survivors Respond to Largest Massacre of Jews since the Holocaust," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKghRGH7pjM>.

2 Joanna B. Michlic, "Missed Lessons from The Holocaust: Avoiding Complexities of Jewish Child Survivors' Life Experiences," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* 17, no. 2 (2024, forthcoming).

3 Yudit Kiss, *More Nights Than Days: A Survey of Writings of Child Genocide Survivors* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2023).

vant contemporary topics like the scope of brainwashing and the mental and physical exploitation of youths and children in war and conflict zones by militias and armies such as extreme Islamic terrorist organizations like Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ, Jihad), and ISIS. Research on the experience and consequences of the short-term and long-term separation of many young Jewish survivors from their biological parents during the Holocaust can also offer important insights and clear warnings about the destructive outcomes of long separation, children's loss of their original cultural identity, and the many failures that accompany attempts to reunite children with their birth parents—developments that have recently taken place in different parts of the world.⁴ Therefore, there is an urgent need for systematic, global research and education about children, war, and genocide at schools, colleges, and universities, as well as museums as a means to both enrich our understanding of the human condition and society and, hopefully, prevent wars and genocides in the future.

Children are the primary victims of wars, armed conflicts, and genocides. They perish first and in disproportionately large numbers. Wars and genocides also destroy the family and family bonds, and this is strikingly visible in the case of child survivors who are marked for life by painful memories of the loss of their parents, childhood, and community, as well as by their experiences of displacement. Thanks to the last two and a half decades of historical, sociological, anthropological, literary, and ethnographic research, scholars now know much more about the thinking, being, and feeling of Jewish and non-Jewish European children and youth, in addition to their daily experiences both during and in the aftermath of the Second World War. The mass of scholarly works on children and youth in the Nazi era (1933-1945) and studies analyzing the ways relatives, adoptive parents, social workers, medical staff, and respective states treated young survivors in the aftermath of the war is constantly growing. However, large research gaps remain, especially related to topics such as the German war against Soviet children in the East; older children's agency in (self-)survival and rescue from a comparative perspective; the role of gender in survival; and the fate of young orphans during and in the aftermath of war and genocide.

4 On the relevance of the separation of Jewish children from their biological families during the Holocaust for the discussion of recent cases of forced and violent separations of Central American children from their parents in the United States (2017-2019) and Ukrainian children from their parents in the ongoing Russian war of attrition (2022-), see: Michlic, "Missed Lessons from The Holocaust: Avoiding Complexities of Jewish Child Survivors' Life Experiences."

The articles in this volume largely originated in the international conference “Childhood at War and Genocide: Children’s Experiences of Conflict in the 20th Century—Agency, Survival, Memory and Representation” that took place between October 17 and 19, 2022, at the Center for Holocaust Studies at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) in Munich, with the cooperation of Tobias Freimüller at the Fritz Bauer Institute and the UCL Centre for Collective Violence, Holocaust and Genocide Studies IAS. In planning the conference, we were guided by child-centered historical methods and interdisciplinary approaches focusing on child survivors’ production and articulation of their experiences in different formats such as diaries and letters written within genocide, early postwar interviews, drawings and paintings, and late postwar oral histories and memoirs. We aimed to examine different case studies using comparative and transnational lenses. But our goal was not only to look for similarities and differences across varied cases but also to use one set of phenomena to understand the other: for example, the forced transfer of children and child survivors’ identities in the aftermath of genocide; Children Born of War (CBOW) and the long-term social and familial identity stigmas and painful secrets; and the intersection of the therapeutic counseling of child survivors and the biographies of those who provided such treatments. In this volume, we present many of the major “fruits” of our conference and post-conference discussions, which are authored by senior and junior scholars, including doctoral researchers.

From the very beginning of the initial planning stage of the conference, we were confronted with Russia’s barbaric invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, followed by the horrific news that thousands of Ukrainian children and their mothers were fleeing the country. At that moment, we realized that the subject of our conference had become, yet again, of utmost relevance for understanding the current situation of children in Ukraine.

In his official statement of February 27, 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke about the “watershed” or “turn of the times” (*Zeitenwende*), referring to the disruption of the peaceful European order that now had to be defended from Putin and his authoritarian regime.⁵ Russian heavy bombardments and large-scale military offensives against civilians resulting in the destruction of entire towns and cities and caus-

5 Olaf Scholz, “Regierungserklärung in der Sondersitzung zum Krieg gegen die Ukraine vor dem Deutschen Bundestag am 27. February 2022 in Berlin,” accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/992814/2131062/78d39dda6647d7f835bbe76713d30c31/bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-reden-zur-zeitenwende-download-bpa-data.pdf>.

ing the mass exodus of people illustrate that we have been witnessing a war that has not been experienced on European soil since 1945. In this ongoing war, we are confronted with news that is filled with images of mass murder and torture and revelations about the use of rape as a military weapon against Ukrainian women and the forced displacement of Ukrainian children from their homeland. Looking closely at the situation of Ukrainian children in the areas occupied and annexed by the Russian invader, we can speak about Children of War—those who were injured and killed, separated from their parents, kidnapped, or detained by Russian military forces and other Russian occupational authorities. According to the Ukrainian Office of the Prosecutor General, 511 Ukrainian children have been killed, 1,125 wounded, 2,212 missing, and 19,546 deported and/or forcibly displaced since the beginning of the war till December 2023. Among the latter group are the most vulnerable children from Ukrainian children’s homes (orphanages) and some children who were separated from their parents and siblings. It has also been reported that thirteen children might have been sexually abused as of December 2023.⁶ These are crimes against humanity.

One of the official Russian practices used to deny Ukraine the right to exist as an independent state is the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, followed by their re-education and subjection to intense coerced Russification.⁷ Although a team of investigators assembled by the UN Human Rights Council could not verify the exact number of abducted Ukrainian children in the ongoing war, investigators have, however, accepted the evidence that Russian authorities have placed the most vulnerable Ukrainian children in Russian children’s homes and Russian foster families and granted them Russian citizenship. To make this process efficient and final, President Putin signed a decree on May 30, 2022, according to which Ukrainian children without parental care can be naturalized as Russian citizens in a quick and simplified procedure.⁸ The Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued

6 See the daily updated numbers on the official platform of the Ministry of Reintegration and the National Information Bureau on behalf of the Office of the President of Ukraine, which was created as a tool for finding children and documenting the crimes committed against them, last accessed October 3, 2023, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en/>.

7 Yulia Ioffe, “Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation: A Genocide?” *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, no. 3-4 (2023): 31–51.

8 *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, Advance Unedited Version, A/HRC/52/6*, accessed November 30, 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf. See also: *Report on Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian*

warrants for the arrest of President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova in March 2023. The latter is the Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, who has been responsible for the unlawful deportations of Ukrainian children.⁹ Other evidence collected suggests that some vulnerable Ukrainian children were taken by force to Belarus, Russia's ally in the war of attrition against Ukraine. The official Russian version claims that these children were taken to Belarus to recuperate in sanatoriums; however, they have not yet returned home.¹⁰ In June 2023, Pavel Latushka, the former Belarusian Minister of Culture and member of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, handed over evidence to the ICC that showed that at least 2,100 Ukrainian children from some fifteen Russian-occupied towns and cities had been forcibly removed to Belarus with President Lukashenka's consent.¹¹

Overall, it is difficult to calculate the exact number of abductions of Ukrainian children or the precise figures for those Ukrainian children who have suffered from violence and forced displacement due to active warfare and the occupation of parts of Ukrainian territory between February 24, 2022 and the present. However, obvious war crimes committed against Ukrainian children by the Putin and Lukashenko regimes have been documented. In the ongoing attempts to recover the deported children, the Ukrainian state and an activist Ukrainian group called Kid-mapping, working in partnership with the Latvian-based human rights group Every Human Being, have been documenting all identified cases of forcibly abducted Ukrainian children.¹²

and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, Related to the Forcible Transfer and/or Deportation of Ukrainian Children to the Russian Federation, OSZE, May 4, 2023, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/542751>; Yuliia Khomyn, "Why the Deportation of Ukrainian Children to Russia is an Act of Genocide," June 1, 2023, <https://war.ukraine.ua/articles/deportation-of-ukrainian-children-to-russia-is-a-genocide/>.

- 9 Press Release of ICC, March 17, 2023, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.
- 10 Tatiana Gargalyk, "Detei iz Ukrainy nezakonno vezut v RB po prikazu Lukashenko?" accessed November 28, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/ru/ukrainskih-detej-nezakonno-vyvozat-v-belarus-otvetit-li-za-eto-lukashenko/a-65399019>.
- 11 Irena Kotelovich, "Ukrainskich detei massovo vovoziat v Belarus. Chto proshodit i pochemu eto voennoe prestuplenie?" accessed November 29, 2023, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/12-07-2023-ukrainskih-detej-massovo-vyvozyat-v-belarus-chto-proshodit-i-pochemu-eto-voennoe-prestupleni>; Anastasiia Chupis, "Childhood in the Conditions of War. The Ukrainian experience," *Baltic Worlds* XVI, no. 4 (2023): 4-11.
- 12 See the report: "Activists Map Deported Ukrainian Children in Russia," *The Moscow Times*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/05/23/activists-map-deported-ukrainian-children-in-russia-a81244>.

One cannot ignore historical phenomena resembling Putin's current policies toward Ukrainian children. In fact, one can argue that the Russian state's orchestrated practice of abduction and forced Russification of Ukrainian children echoes the deportations of blond-haired and blue-eyed Slavic children from Eastern Europe to Nazi Germany for Germanization during the Second World War. It also echoes, in its intent, the Young Turks' practice of kidnapping and forcibly converting to Islam Armenian children and youth during the Armenian genocide that took place between 1915 and 1916—a case study described in detail in this volume.

At the same time, young children and youth have been treated as the “spiritual armament” of the state both in Putin's Russia and Lukashenka's Belarus.¹³ Building unequivocal loyalties to the state is achieved by ideological brainwashing, militarization, and the political mobilization of children and youth. This phenomenon takes place on a daily basis at Belarusian and Russian primary and secondary schools, as well as outside of schools, during extra-curricular activities in state-sponsored cultural institutions wherein children are being molded into “patriots” by playing military games and participating in “military patriotic camps.” In the latter, they are exposed to real weapons and are forced to train with them.¹⁴ This current intense brainwashing of children did not start in 2022 but can be traced back to 2016 when children eight years old and older began to be forcefully encouraged to join the so-called “youth army” (*Junarmija*) under the auspices of the Russian Ministry of Defense. British historian Ian Garner interprets the outcome of the sinister ideological and military manipulation of children and youth as the phenomenon of creating the “Z-Generation.” Based on online interviews with Russian youths, his analysis of how Putin's regime has brainwashed sections of the Russian youth into what Garner calls a messianic cult is succinct, vivid, and

13 On cases of the brainwashing of youths and the molding of them into illiberal generations in contemporary post-Soviet states, see: Oleg Antonov, Sofie Bedford, Ekaterina Kalinina, and Olena Podolian, eds. “Youth and Authoritarian Values: Internal and External Soft Power Influence,” special issue, *Baltic Worlds* 16, no. 3 (August 2023); and Yuliya von Saal, “Onkel Wowo, wir stehen zu dir! Militarisierung und Mobilisierung des kindlichen Alltags in der Sowjetunion und in Russland” (Reprint,) *Zeitgeschichte-online*, July 1, 2022, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/onkel-wowo-wir-stehen-zu-dir>; Chupis, “Childhood in the Conditions of War.”

14 In the case of Belarus, see: Yuliya von Saal, “Erziehung zum Hass. Die Militarisierung der Kindheit in Belarus,” *Osteuropa* 72, no. 12 (2022): 127–42; on Russia, see: Dar'ja Talanova, “Blut tropft aus den Ranzen: Patriotismuserziehung an Russlands Schulen,” in *Osteuropa* 72, no. 12 (2022): 115–26.

disturbing.¹⁵ Garner's study invites further scholarly research on this troubling topic by applying diachronic and synchronic comparative lenses.

Without a doubt, the ideological and military brainwashing of children and youth in post-Soviet Russia originated in the Soviet state of the 1930s under Stalin's rule. During the 1930s, the Soviet regime introduced repressive measures in childcare institutions and used schools and cultural institutions running programs for children as ideological instruments of the totalitarian state.¹⁶ However, the ideological brainwashing and militarization of children and youth have been a global phenomenon in the past and present, including the current striking and devastating case of Palestinian children and youths trained by Hamas and Jihad to hate Israel and Jews.¹⁷ Hamas and other Islamic terrorist organizations have also cynically employed Palestinian children, adolescents, and women as human shields in past and current wars against Israel.¹⁸ Overall, the topic of the ideological brainwashing and militarization of children and youths in wartime conflict zones deserves a thorough examination by analyzing various cases from the Middle East, Africa, South America, and Putin's Russia in a comparative perspective.

Articles in this volume build on recent studies of children and childhood and, thus, contribute to scholarly discussions about the historical agency of youths and children. Since the history of childhood emerged as a field of study in the 1960s, historians have disputed the significance of

15 Ian Garner, *Z Generation: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth* (London: Hurst Publisher, 2023).

16 Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Andy Byford, "The Imperfect Child in Early Twentieth-Century Russia," *History of Education* 46, no. 5 (2017): 595-617; and Manon Van de Water, *Moscow Theatres for Young People: A Cultural History of Artistic Innovation and Ideological Coercion, 1917-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

17 See the report from March 2023, "UNRWA Education: Reform or Regression? A Review of UNRWA Teachers and Schools Concerning Incitement to Hate and Violence," accessed November 29, 2023, <https://unwatch.org/un-teachers-call-to-murder-jews-reveals-new-report/>.

18 See, for example: CBN News video, "Son of Hamas Co-Founder Denounces the Group at UN. Exposes 'Savage' Indoctrination of Palestinian Kids," accessed November 29, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjOEFJumoABg>; Seyla Benhabib, "An Open Letter to My Friends Who 'Signed Philosophy for Palestine,'" *Medium*, November 4, 2023, <https://medium.com/amor-mundi/an-open-letter-to-my-friends-who-signed-philosophy-for-palestine-0440ebd665d8>. On the history of humans used as human shields in wartime conflicts, see: Neve Gordon and Nicola Perugini, *Human Shields: A History of People in the Line of Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

children's voices and agency.¹⁹ The integration of children's voices into scholarship on peacetime societies, societies at war, and societies experiencing genocidal conditions has been recognized as one of the central challenges of historical childhood research. In the very first issue of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* in 2008, Joseph M. Hawes and Ray Hiner argued that historians of childhood should "resist any historiographical trend and fashion that turns attention away from children or by implication denies them historical agency."²⁰ One of the most recent theoretical contributions to the scholarship on childhood agency was made by Karen Vallgård, Kristine Alexander, and Stephanie Olsen, scholars in the subfield of the history of emotions and childhood who, in their own words, became "frustrated with the concept of agency."²¹ The important 2020 debate about children's agency and the state of the field of the history of childhood was published as a roundtable discussion in the October issue of the *American Historical Review*. In this venue, Sarah Maza questioned the field of history of children and childhood and insisted that what we need is history *through* children rather than history *of* children.²² In response to Maza, brilliant defenses of the field were offered by leading scholars of childhood including Steven Mintz, Ishita Pande, and Bengt Sandin, among others. They rejected Maza's assertion that children are only important insofar as they affect adult histories.²³ Instead, they insisted that children are distinct beings with their own modes of consciousness and behavior, who attempt to make sense of the world around them and who are capable of various kinds of actions.²⁴ Similarly, in the introduction to *War and Childhood in the Era of the Two World Wars*, Mischa Honeck and James Marten state that children and youth during and in the aftermath of war and genocide cannot be treated

19 For an overview of children's agency in historical perspective, see: Julia Grant, "Children Versus Childhood: Writing Children into the Historical Record, or Reflections on Paula Fass's *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*," *History of Education Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2007): 468–90.

20 Joseph M. Hawes and Ray Hiner, "Hidden in Plain View: The History of Children (and Childhood) in the Twenty-first Century," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 4–47.

21 Karen Vallgård, Kristine Alexander, and Stephanie Olsen, "Against Agency," *Society for the History of Children and Youth Featured Commentaries*, October 23, 2018, <http://www.shcy.org>.

22 Sarah Maza, "The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 12–685.

23 See, for example: Steven Mintz, "Children's History Matters," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 128–92, and also Ishita Pande's and Bengt Sandin's responses in the same issue.

24 Mintz, "Children's History Matters."

as “mere objects of adult design.”²⁵ Correspondingly, Joanna Michlic insists that in spite of internal weaknesses and adults’ influence, children’s testimonies are the best window into children’s worlds of feeling, being, and thinking that scholars can ever access.²⁶

The articles in this volume are chiefly embedded in the experiences of children in Europe in the twentieth century, especially before, during, and in the aftermath of the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, one of the key groups of children explored in our volume is Jewish children. One reason for that is the fact that pre-adolescent Jewish children and youths created a relatively large amount of ego documents in the twentieth century that have serendipitously been preserved and collected in historical archives and private collections all over the world. That wealth of diaries, poems, personal testimonies, and pictorial images has facilitated a new wave of historical studies of Jewish children and childhood since the late 1990s and played an important role in facilitating research about other groups of children.²⁷ The abundance of ego documents produced by Jewish children means that historians who embark on writing the history of Jewish childhood before, during, and after the Holocaust do not face what Peter Stearns, a pioneer of childhood studies and emotions, calls the “granddaddy issue”—namely the lack of sources created by younger preadolescent children.²⁸ In fact, our volume showcases some of these Jewish children’s ego documents that have not been accessed, analyzed, or interpreted by historians until today.

Characteristically, Jewish children’s drawings and paintings stand out as the least studied evidence of their lives under the brutal conditions of exclusion, persecution, and extermination. Given these sources’ elusive nature, they demand interdisciplinary scholarly methods to interpret them as material testimonies of children’s engagement with the world. These methods could then be applied to the nuanced analysis of pictorial testimonies of other cohorts of child survivors which, in turn, can facilitate

25 Mischa Honeck and James Marten, “More than Victims: Framing the History of Modern Childhood and War: Introduction,” in *War and Childhood in the Era of the Two World Wars*, ed. Mischa Honeck and James Marten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6.

26 Joanna B. Michlic, “Children in the Holocaust,” in *Cambridge History of the Holocaust*, ed. Natalia Aleksiu and Marion Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

27 See: Friederike Kind-Kovács and Machteld Venken, eds., “1918, 1945, 1989: Childhood in Times of Political Transformation in the 20th Century: An Introduction,” special issue, *Journal of Modern European History* 19, no. 2 (2021): 155–65.

28 Peter N. Stearns, “Challenges in the History of Childhood,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 35.

comparative and transnational studies of children's drawings and paintings in the aftermath of wars and genocides.

Only between six to eleven percent of Europe's prewar population of Jewish children survived the Holocaust. In the immediate aftermath of the Shoah, Jewish organizations began to compile figures to understand the human losses in communities and the age groups represented in the remnant of European Jewry. However, the statistics they compiled were only fragmentary and imprecise because of three major factors: first, the lack of exact prewar statistics concerning Jewish children within some Jewish communities; second, the frequent national and transnational relocation of young Jewish refugees in the early postwar period; and third, the ongoing and incomplete recovery of Jewish children from private non-Jewish homes and Christian convents and monasteries during the same period.

One 1946 report explained that in the British and American zones of occupation in Germany in July 1945, only 3.5 percent of the 22,400 Jewish Holocaust survivors who remained in Nazi Germany after 1939 were under the age of sixteen.²⁹ In 1945, the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) began extensive research on the losses of Jewish children and youths in nine countries in post-fascist Europe. In the AJDC's 1946 report entitled *Jewish Children in Liberated Europe*, Leon Shapiro acknowledged the lack of precise estimates of how many Jewish children survived in Germany, Austria, Denmark, Luxemburg, and Finland.³⁰ At the same time, he endeavored to chart the most accurate map of Jewish children's losses based on all available sources, including prewar statistics. For example, Shapiro cautiously indicated that of the thirty thousand Jewish children believed to have lived in Austria at the outbreak of the war, only three hundred survived, including seventy-three young persons rescued from concentration camps. Shapiro's report also demonstrated that the highest losses among Jewish youth and children were in central-eastern and eastern Europe. That should not be surprising given the severity of the Nazi occupation of that region and the scope of local collaboration. In the case of Hungary, where Jewish children and youths under fifteen years old numbered 78,244 of the total Hungarian Jewish population of 444,567—according to the 1931 census, nine thousand full and half-orphans were counted in the latter part of 1945. In the case of

29 Zorach Wahrhaftig, *Uprooted: Jewish Refugees and Displaced Persons after Liberation* (New York: Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1946), 53.

30 Leon Shapiro, *Jewish Children in Liberated Europe: Their needs and the J. D. C. Case Work* (New York: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1946), 3.

Poland, where 29.6 percent of the entire Jewish population numbering 3,113,900 was composed of Jewish children and youths under fifteen years old in 1931, the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKŻP) was able to locate and register only five thousand Jewish child survivors, mostly half and full orphans, in the second half of 1945.³¹

With a focus on the Second World War, our volume also looks closely at non-Jewish Slavic children and their ruptured childhoods in Belarus in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. It also engages with the most “taboo” and shameful aspect of the history of children in Nazi Germany and Austria between 1936 and 1945, namely the so-called *Lebensborn* children who were born as a result of sexual relations between single Aryan mothers and German SS, military, and civilian personnel in specially created maternity homes as part of Nazi racial and population policies promoting “hereditarily healthy” Aryan offspring. As a social consequence of the Second World War, these children have experienced stigmatization, and their postwar biographies contain deeply rooted family secrets.

A similar damaging psychological and social impact of the Second World War has been noted in the large and varied cohort of CBOW, who are defined as children conceived by foreign enemy, occupation, or peace-keeping soldiers and usually local mothers. In recent years, the CBOW field has flourished and has resulted in new and significant comparative studies authored by senior and early career researchers.³² Our volume recognizes the importance of CBOW, presenting one of the least-known cohorts of the group: Polish children born to Polish female forced laborers and Displaced Persons and fathered by foreigners, including Germans and American Afro-Caribbean soldiers. In 1945, many Polish mothers abandoned their CBOW, and subsequently, these children became part of the multinational group of unaccompanied children cared for by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in the western occupied zones of Germany. In the future, it will be necessary to launch comparative studies of CBOW and Jewish child survivors, especially those who were the offspring of mixed Jewish and non-Jewish marriages in East Central Europe, to gain a new historical understanding of the intimate consequences of war for intergenerational families with ties to both survivors and perpetrators, as well as Jewish survivors of mixed ethnic groups/CBOWs’ self-representations throughout the post-1945 period.

31 Shapiro, *Jewish Children*, 2.

32 Sabine Lee, Heide Glaesmer, and Barbara Steltz-Marx, eds., *Children Born of War, Past, Present and Future* (London: Routledge, 2023).

The first four articles in the research section of this volume focus on the ways in which children and young adults experience war and genocidal violence. Though they look at two distinct historical events—the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust—and engage with children from different geographical, social, religious, and national and ethnic backgrounds, all four articles share telling examples of children’s resilience and resourcefulness in times of violent destruction. Through careful historical analysis, they document children as historical actors with varying degrees of agency depending on their age and other political and social conditions. Together, they demonstrate the importance of using early postwar and late postwar testimonies of child survivors to unearth events and experiences that otherwise would be inaccessible to scholars.

In the first article, Edita Gzoyan reconstructs the experiences of approximately two hundred thousand Armenian children during the Armenian genocide, the first genocide of the twentieth century in which 1.5 million Armenians were eradicated by the Young Turk government under the guise of World War One. After the destruction of the Armenian political and cultural elite and non-elite male population, the Young Turks ordered the forced removal of Armenian children from their families and placed them in Ottoman Turkish orphanages and with individual Turkish families. The aim of this cruel policy of separation from birth mothers was for the children to lose key facets of Armenian identity including language, culture, and religion and, thus, fully assimilate into Turkish society. Through a careful interrogation of survivors’ memories, Gzoyan describes quotidian experiences of the violent “assimilation industry” these children, up to the age of fifteen, suffered. She also provides ample evidence of how the children and young people responded to the program of coerced assimilation into Turkish identity. Confronting a cultural genocidal policy, their responses ranged from open acts of defiance to (presumed) compliance to avoid physical brutalization and murder. Drawing on the pioneering studies of the oral histories of survivors of the Armenian genocide by Donald and Lorna Miller and Nazan Maksudyan, Gzoyan places Armenian children at the center of the historical narrative of the Armenian genocide.³³ She also explores the “choiceless choices” of Armenian parents that encompassed dilemmas

33 Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, “Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide,” in *Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. by Richard Hovannissian (London: Macmillan, 1992), 153–68; Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Nazan Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

like which child's life is more valuable and which child should be kept and which child to offer to Muslim Turkish families.³⁴ Gzoyan's article demonstrates the need for comparative research on the complexities of post-genocidal social identities of Armenian children forced to convert to Islam in order to physically survive, Jewish children who converted to Catholicism during the Holocaust and thus physically survived, and any other groups of child survivors who were forced to convert to a new religion in order to escape murder.

Turning to the Second World War, Yuliya von Saal investigates the phenomena of what she calls the adultification and parentification of young children in the Soviet Union during the "Great Patriotic War" (1941-1945). Her article examines the breakdown of the generational order, focusing on the occupied Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus (BSSR). Von Saal shows the collapse of normative childhood under wartime conditions by paying close attention to the subjective experiences, actions, perceptions, and feelings of affected youths. She delineates how the children ceased to be children in their everyday lives and how naturally they took over the responsibilities of adult members of their families. This includes not only Jewish children, who had been exposed to complete annihilation since the first year of the occupation, but also non-Jewish Slavic children, who had to take on responsibilities and roles that were at odds with their biological age. At the same time, von Saal calls for the acknowledgment of the complexity of the ways in which children functioned during and after the war, and for the recognition of not only the pathological consequences of war-related role reversal but also the transformative effects of such a reversal on society as a whole. Her analysis of children's war experiences continues beyond the end of the "Great Patriotic War" to demonstrate that the adult agency forcibly imposed on Soviet children during wartime was not easily reversed. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviet regime insisted on returning to the Stalinist pre-war narrative of a "happy childhood". The state not only refused to provide the younger generation with mental health support, but it also expected them to become productive, prosocial, and loyal citizens. By early 1950, the state shut down the mental health studies about the young people of the Second World

34 The literary scholar Lawrence L. Langer coined the term "choiceless choice" in his 1980 essay and since then the term has become one of the fundamental notions in the Holocaust Studies. The term is used to refer to a decision about how to act in the ghettos or the concentration camps where no real decision was possible, see: Lawrence L. Langer, "The Dilemma of Choice in the Death Camps," *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (1980), 53-59.

War which Soviet psychiatrists and psychologists had been carrying out since 1943.

Expanding on his highly acclaimed research project “Jewish Child Forced Labourers, 1938–1945,” Dieter Steinert analyzes the experiences of Jewish child forced laborers during the Second World War.³⁵ Steinert estimates that several hundred thousand Jewish children—probably more than a million—had to endure longer or shorter periods of forced labor before being liberated or, most likely, murdered in the Holocaust. He shows that Jewish children and adolescents under the age of eighteen were found in virtually every space where forced labor was used by Nazi Germany, including the workshops of SS slave labor camps in the German Reich, the ramp in the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, and the sorting centers for murdered Jews’ possessions during *Aktion Reinhardt* (March 1942 to November 1943). Children worked in mining and agriculture, performed construction work and were forced to build production plants, bridges, roads and railway tracks, barracks, airfields, defensive positions, and trenches, jobs beyond their physical strength. Based on a plethora of late-postwar survivor testimonies, Steinert uncovers previously neglected everyday histories of young forced laborers and, in the process, identifies diligent survivor-observers of Nazi crimes. He convincingly explains why young Jewish forced laborers’ experiences have only recently captured the attention of scholars. In the past, key oral history projects have focused on general experiences of survival in the Holocaust and the loss of one’s family and community rather than on forced labor. Thus, Steinert’s study contributes to the wider methodological discussion concerning the frames of late postwar testimonies, qualified by Alexandra Garbarini as “far-sighted.”³⁶ He demonstrates that careful combing through these testimonies enables the historian to uncover wartime events and developments previously ignored and grasp the meanings individuals impart on their childhood Holocaust experiences that otherwise would be inaccessible.

Correspondingly, Lilia Tomchuk examines a previously neglected topic in Holocaust research, the everyday encounters between Jewish youths and Italian soldiers in two Transnistrian counties, Balta and Juguastu. Italy’s participation in the German war against the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front has received increasing attention from historians in the

35 Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit. Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938–1945* (Essen: Klartext, 2018).

36 Alexandra Garbarini, “Diaries, Testimonies and Jewish Histories of the Holocaust,” in *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust: New Transnational Approaches*, ed. Norman J. W. Goda (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 91–104, here 102.

past two decades. Tomchuk contributes to this body of scholarship by shifting the focus to Italian soldiers' attitudes toward and treatment of Jewish children and youth born between 1924 and 1937, thus interrogating the powerful postwar national commemorative myth of "*Italiani brava gente*" ("Italians, good people"). Tomchuk's examination of more than one hundred late postwar testimonies of young Jewish survivors enables her to reconstruct the complex nature of encounters between Italian soldiers and Jewish youths, revealing the agency of older Jewish children and adolescents in their interactions with the Italian military. By employing gender and age as categories of analysis, Tomchuk successfully identifies multiple facets of barter between individuals and groups of Jewish children and Italian soldiers stationed in Transnistria.

The next three articles in the research section explore three major topics: the wartime rescue policies targeting Central European Jewish children in the West; early postwar policies concerning family reunification, children's welfare and national belonging; and psychotherapeutic approaches to child survivors. In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, the West was deeply shocked about the unprecedented number of orphaned children—Jewish and non-Jewish—who were victims of the Nazis' destructive policies, which were considered to constitute a "war against children."³⁷ At the same time, Western politicians, pundits, and humanitarian activists feared the generation of war-damaged children and, therefore, saw their rehabilitation as a priority for building new societies in the post-1945 era.³⁸ However, young Jewish and non-Jewish refugees' voices were hardly taken into account in the discussions about policies that were purported to act in the "best interest of the children." In fact, the idea of "the best interest of the children" was subordinated to the political and social needs of adult members of societies, including the specific requirements of potential adoptive parents, rather than addressing the real needs and painful experiences of child refugees.³⁹

Laura Hobson Faure shows that subordination of children's needs to the interests of the state and adult members of society had already

37 Heidi Ferenbach, "War Orphans and Postfascist Families: Kinship and Belonging after 1945," in *Histories of the Aftermath: The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe*, ed. Frank Biess and Robert G. Moelle (New York: Berghahn Books), 175–95.

38 Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3; and Rebecca Clifford, "The Picture of (Mental) Health: Images of Jewish 'Unaccompanied Children' in the Aftermath of the Second World War," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 15, no. 2 (2022): 137–38.

39 Michlic, "Missing Lessons from the Holocaust."

emerged during the Second World War in her examination of the little-known case of *Kindertransports* of German Jewish children who first arrived in France between 1938 and 1941 and subsequently had to flee to the United States between 1941 and 1942. Her analysis of the care policies for unaccompanied Jewish children before and during the Holocaust reveals that there was no single solution in the Jewish diaspora to help these children, despite their shared religious origins. Central European Jewish children confronted challenges as they learned new languages, new cultures, and new social systems alone, without the assistance of their parents. Only rarely did these children encounter trustworthy and empathic adults in different national and geographical settings. Hobson Faure employs a comparative and transnational lens in her analysis of approximately 253 young German Jewish refugees, with a special emphasis on brothers Claus and Werner Gossels. This constitutes a new and innovative approach in the field of Holocaust and Jewish childhood studies, and as such, it should be welcomed as an important and inspiring method for the study of child refugees of post-1945 wars and genocides. Her use of comparative and transnational perspectives contributes to a deeper understanding of children's responses to the various humanitarian agencies and individuals assisting them, the complex and chaotic trajectories of escape, and the heavy emotional and familial toll of displacement.

Expanding on his acclaimed PhD dissertation, Jakub Gałęziowski's article investigates the politics of the newly established Polish communist government, which vigorously campaigned for the return of all Polish children deported to Nazi Germany during the Second World War.⁴⁰ The national request for the repatriation of those officially called "stolen children" was amplified and applauded in the official communist media of the early postwar period, and this issue has subsequently become part of a powerful national narrative about righting the wrongs committed by Nazi Germany against Poland and its people. However, as Gałęziowski skillfully explains, the early postwar Polish communist campaign for the return of "stolen children" ended in chaos and failure and had negative short-term and long-term repercussions on a cohort of CBOWs repatriated to Poland. More than eighty percent of the children the Nazis deported from Poland during the war never returned to their homeland,

40 Jakub Gałęziowski, *Niedopowiedziane biografie. Polskie dzieci urodzone z powodu wojny* (Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, 2022). On Gałęziowski's book in English, see: John Beauchamp, on *Understated Biographies*, *ThefirstNews*, June 10, 2023, <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/memory-of-polish-children-born-of-war-in-the-spotlight-39055>.

and the number of children who returned to Poland between 1946 and 1951 is estimated to be between 3,500 and 4,500. Among the twenty per cent of those who were repatriated to Poland were many CBOW born during the war in Nazi Germany and Austria or immediately after the war in the British and American occupation zones of Germany. These children were abandoned by their Polish mothers, who feared social ostracism within their own country. But as Gałęziowski argues, exclusion and negative stereotyping were part and parcel of the life experiences of CBOW in postwar Poland. One such child, a girl named Genia whose father was an African-American soldier, was not adopted by a Polish family nor was she accepted into an orphanage for older children. When she was four and half years old, she was admitted to the State Hospital for the Nervous and Mentally Ill in Lubliniec, and there the trail of her existence ends.⁴¹

Turning westward, Anna M. Parkinson discusses the legacy of Hans Keilson (1909-2011), a German-Dutch-Jewish psychoanalyst and writer who was a member of the Dutch Resistance during the Second World War and settled in the Netherlands permanently in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Parkinson's contribution is an example of the growing number of works about Keilson that have been published in recent years. The author of the first seminal study about the impact of the Holocaust on different groups of child survivors, Keilson played a major role in advancing the conceptualization of trauma and expanding our understanding of the long consequences of trauma in young survivors.⁴² Keilson's study was based on his clinical work with child Holocaust survivors that began during the war, when he worked as a counselor for troubled Jewish children on behalf of the Dutch Resistance. At the same time, he himself was living under an assumed identity. Parkinson masterfully discusses Keilson's method of using the "talking cure" with children who learned to be silent to stay alive and whose sense of agency was limited because of

41 See: Jakub Gałęziowski, "Researching Global Phenomena in Local Circumstances: Polish Children Born of War in the Context of CBOW Research," in: *Children and Youth at Risk in Times of Transition: International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Baard Herman Borge, Elke Kleinau, and Ingvill Constanze Ødegaard (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024), 115–38.

42 See: Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 116–18; and Aurèlia Kalisky, "Sharing a Fruitful Silence: Hans Keilson and Listening to Jewish War Orphans as a Psychoanalyst and Survivor," in *After the Darkness? Holocaust Survivors' Emotions, Psychological and Social Journeys in the Early Post-war Period*, ed. Constance Paris de Bollardiàre and Sharon Kangisser Cohen (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem with Association of the American University of Paris, 2023), 227–56.

their wartime experiences in concentration camps or completely alone in hiding. Through a careful analysis of Keilson's approach to his young patients, Parkinson reveals the short- and long-term effects of traumatic wartime experiences on young survivors' sense of agency and ability to form personal relations in the postwar period. Parkinson's contribution also demonstrates the need for historical research on lesser-known "wounded healers," who, like Keilson, dedicated their lives to the treatment of child Holocaust survivors, and whose own personal lives were marked by unbearable family losses in the Holocaust.

In the Source Commentary section, three texts focus on neglected contemporaneous sources produced by children before and during the Second World War, as well as on ego documents penned by adults involved in humanitarian schemes designed to support children from war-torn continental Europe. Wiebke Hiemesch expertly demonstrates the importance of children's pictorial works as historical sources by analyzing a neglected collection of children's drawings from the Talmud Torah School in Hamburg, Germany, produced in the 1930s. By employing a material culture perspective, Hiemesch interprets the children's drawings as artifacts embedded in a complex cultural and historical context. Her work urges scholars to pay attention to both the creation and afterlife of these precious material testimonies.

Similarly, Zofia Trębacz underscores the importance of underused Jewish children's letters from within the Holocaust for researching the social history of the Jewish family and children in Nazi-occupied Poland. She examines the letters of two sisters, Estera and Awiwa, to their father Chaim Finkelsztein, the well-known Zionist journalist and director of the publishing house Haynt, as well as the correspondence of half-siblings Artur and Rywka to their father Szmuel Zygielbojm, the famous and tragic Bundist (Jewish socialist) leader who committed suicide in exile in London in May 1943. Her analysis sheds new light on family relations, emotions, and the coping mechanisms of children who were separated from their beloved paternal figures and experienced ghettoization and persecution.

Lorraine McEvoy's commentary focuses on letters sent by members of the UK-based voluntary organization Children of Europe Air Rescue to the British government, calling for financial support for an initiative to offer German children from defeated Nazi Germany a recuperative holiday. Given the fragmentary and elusive nature of the letters and the lack of other personal and other documentation, McEvoy concludes that there are many unanswered questions about the motivations behind this planned humanitarian action.

Our volume ends with the Project Descriptions section, which showcases the works-in-progress of four junior and early career scholars. Oksana Vynnyk's doctoral dissertation interrogates the complexities and paradoxes of a medical relief campaign that aimed to provide medical assistance to Ukrainian children suffering as a result of the Soviet state-induced famine of the early 1930s, which is commemorated as the Holodomor. Drawing on perspectives from the history of medicine and hunger, and employing late-post-Holodomor testimonies of survivors, Vynnyk aims to reconstruct the experiences and reactions of young patients during and in the aftermath of the Holodomor.

Similarly, in his doctoral project, Barnabas Balint explores young Hungarian Jews' responses to persecution during the Holocaust, drawing on sources from multiple archives. To capture the full picture, he aims to chart the evolution of attitudes and beliefs of young Hungarian Jews from the interwar period, throughout the war, and in the immediate postwar years. Balint's goal is to enhance our knowledge of the subjective experience of young Hungarian Jews by employing age as an intersectional category of analysis—probing how it interacted with gender, religion, and ideology. His approach promises to deepen our understanding of youth and youth agency in times of discrimination and persecution.

The final project featured in this section deals with the burdensome consequences of the Second World War for *Lebensborn* children and their multigenerational families in contemporary Germany and Austria. Lukas Schretter and Nadjeschda Stoffers's "Interview Narratives of Lebensborn Children from the Wienerwald Maternity Home, 1938-1945" is part of a larger ongoing project network that aims to collect oral history interviews with children born in *Lebensborn* maternity homes operated by the National Socialist regime all over Germany and Austria. Schretter and Stoffers focus on the historical reconstruction of one such facility, the Wienerwald Home, which operated in Austria from 1938 to 1945. Their research reveals how sensitive and painful the circumstances of one's birth and family are for those who were born in the Wienerwald Home, how challenging is to collect the oral testimonies of former *Lebensborn* children, and how these children and their multigenerational families came to terms—or not—with a dark family past shaped by the Nazi era. Schretter and Stoffers make an important contribution to the conversation about the methodological and ethical issues concerning *Lebensborn* children that could be helpful in scholarly discussions about other groups of CBOW.

Overall, our volume presents a collection of innovative contributions about overlooked and neglected children's experiences and representations

of war and genocide in the twentieth century and the echoes of these experiences in the twenty-first century. Thus, it shows the importance of positioning microhistories of children within the context of their prewar and postwar families and wartime relations, as well as in relation to the history of “wounded healers” who engaged in therapeutic treatments of child refugees and those individuals working for humanitarian agencies. The volume also demonstrates the need to examine the effects of war and genocide on children and childhood—children’s emotions, mental health, and social identities—and on child survivors’ relations within their families and friendships and the broader societies in which they have lived. It invites scholars to conduct research on the subject by applying diverse methods and analytical approaches to historical inquiry, including emotional and oral histories, synchronic and diachronic comparison, and microhistorical and transnational perspectives. Therefore, we hope that our volume will be an inspiration to other scholars and that it will enhance the growth of the field and contribute to debates about the global development of the history of childhood and children’s historical and social agency. Given its persistent topicality, *Children, War, and Genocide* is a field of global interest, and it deserves to be well represented in special research centers and widely taught.

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Forcibly Transferred and Assimilated: Experiences of Armenian Children during the Armenian Genocide

“Forget your old name! Forget it! From now on, your name will be Ahmet, and your number will be 549!” The other boys in the room were shaking like leaves. It was my turn next. I said my name was Karnig. Now it was my turn to be slapped across the face and fall to the floor, crying. The schoolmaster then kicked my sides as I lay prostrate on the floor. I eventually passed out from the pain. When I came to, I was lying in a bed. I had never been in this room. I saw more orphans, each lying in a bed of his own. I couldn’t see very well, and I shut my eyes again and fell back asleep. Two days later, I found out that I was in the clinic, and that I had been the first orphan brought there.¹

Karnig Panian

This excerpt from a memoir written by an Armenian Genocide survivor, Karnig Panian [Garnik Banian], shows how, at the age of five, he encountered a brutal Turkification process. This and other accounts refer to the forcible transfer and assimilation of young Armenian women and children into the Muslim community, with an aim to annihilate the Armenian population. The Armenian Genocide (1915–1923) was the culmination of anti-Armenian persecution and pogroms in the Ottoman

1 Acknowledgment: The work published within this contribution was supported by the Science Committee of RA [grant number 21T-6A315]; Karnig Panian, *Goodbye Antoura, A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 80.

Empire that began in the 1890s and strove to change the demographic composition of the Armenian provinces and erase the traces of Armenian existence in their homeland. Unprecedented in its scale and cruelty, the Armenian Genocide resulted in the eradication of nearly 1.5 million Armenians.

Under the guise of the First World War, the Ottoman government implemented the preplanned destruction of its indigenous Armenian population. The Armenian male population was predominantly decimated through conscription into the army, where they were either killed or worked to death in road-building battalions. Those not included in the army service were rounded up, arrested, and killed at the beginning of deportations. Later, hundreds of leading Armenian political, intellectual, cultural, and religious leaders were arrested, deported, and/or killed. The Turkish authorities ordered the deportation of the remaining Armenian population who were mainly women, children, and the elderly, deprived of men and an elite capable of protecting them, to the Syrian deserts.² During these death marches, the deportees faced inhumane suffering.³ Deportation caravans were intentionally left unguarded and, as a result, were constantly attacked by local populations who killed, violated, and robbed the deportees. Others died of starvation, dehydration, diseases, and general exhaustion. Apart from physical abuse, young women and children deportees were stolen, bought, and sold during the deportations; they were taken into sexual slavery, and placed in harems, brothels, or Muslim households, often in the homes of those who had killed their family members. In an atmosphere of total devastation and physiological pressure, mothers voluntarily gave their children to Muslims in an effort to save them. There were also instances of mothers being forced to sell their children to feed and save others.⁴ Apart from the physical suffering, Donald Miller and Lorna Miller identified the emotional suffering of the

2 For more on the Armenian Genocide, see: Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (New York and London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

3 For information regarding a general picture of children's experiences during the Armenian Genocide, see for example: Asya Darbinyan and Rubina Peroomian, "Children: The Most Vulnerable Victims of the Armenian Genocide," in *Plight and Fate of Children during and following Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 57–83; Henry C. Theriault, "'Hell Is for Children': The Impact of Genocide on Young Armenians and the Consequences for the Target Group as a Whole," in *Plight and Fate of Children during and following Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 30–56.

4 Keith David Watenpaugh, "'Are There Any Children for Sale?': Genocide and the Transfer of Armenian Children (1915–1922)," *Journal of Human Rights* 12, no. 3 (2013): 283–95.

deportees—grief, fear, insecurity, witnessing the murder of their family members or fellow citizens—and what they called the tragic moral choices that encompassed dilemmas like whose life was more value, which child should be chosen to be kept, and which one was to be abandoned. These choices also included decisions on whether it was preferable to give a child to a Turk or Kurd, knowing that the child would lose their Armenian identity but still survive.⁵

During the Armenian Genocide, the forcible transfer and assimilation of Armenian children was a structural component of the Ottoman genocidal policy which was planned by the Young Turk Government and implemented as soon as the deportations began.⁶ The process was legalized by governmental decrees and orders which instructed the relevant authorities to first gather the children of deported Armenians younger than ten and place them in government-run orphanages.⁷ Later, this policy was extended to cover children up to twelve years old; the age limit for girls was up to fifteen years old.⁸ Armenian children were to be distributed to prominent figures in the villages where no Armenians or foreigners lived.⁹ The government paid a monthly allowance to care for these children.¹⁰ The policy of forced transfer, its implementation on the ground, and the results thereof were closely controlled and monitored by the government.¹¹ The number of children subjected to these forced assimilation policies is calculated to be nearly two hundred thousand.

By re-centering children and their active positions in narratives of the genocidal forced transfer, this chapter gives them a voice and analyzes the microcosms of the “assimilation industry,” drawing from the lived experiences of those children who had been forcibly transferred into state institutions and individual households with an aim to annihilate their

5 Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, “Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide,” in *Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (London: Macmillan, 1992), 153–68.

6 Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 316.

7 See for example: Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity*, 316–17; Ümit Kurt, “Cultural Erasure”: The Absorption and Forced Conversion of Armenian Women and Children, 1915–1916,” *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 7 (2016): <https://journals.openedition.org/eac/997>.

8 Kurt, “Cultural Erasure”; Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity*, 325.

9 Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity*, 317; Ugur Ümit Üngör, “Orphans, Converts and Prostitutes: Social Consequences of War and Persecution in the Ottoman Empire, 1914–1923,” *War in History* 19, no. 2 (2012): 176.

10 Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity*, 317.

11 Üngör, “Orphans, Converts and Prostitutes,” 176.

Armenian identity and build a new identity. Based on these children's testimonies, this chapter also examines how they accepted their forced national identity change and, later, their liberation, and return to their Armenian one. The only memoir by a perpetrator, that of Halide Edip, the principal of one of the state orphanages where Armenian orphans were Turkified, obscures the true nature of transfer and assimilation policies.¹²

Ara Sarafian has identified four ways through which the process of forced transfer and absorption of Armenian young women and children was carried out: (1) "voluntary" conversion of individuals in the initial stages of the genocide; (2) selection of individual Armenians by individual Muslims for absorption into Muslim households; (3) distribution of Armenians to Muslim families by government agencies; (4) assimilation of selected Armenian children in state-run orphanages.¹³ A deliberate atmosphere of violence and abuse that resulted in the forced surrender of Armenian children and some children fleeing by themselves to Muslims to be saved can also be added to these points.

The "voluntary" conversion permitted to some Armenians at the beginning of the genocide is not within the scope of this chapter, but it should be mentioned that this practice was assessed as a "method of securing the disappearance of the Armenian race."¹⁴ The process of selection of individual Armenians by individual Muslims for absorption started at the initial stages of deportations and was carried out during the genocide. For this purpose, the Armenian children were not only absorbed by selected Muslim families, but the deportation caravans were also intentionally left unguarded so local Turks, Kurds, and Arabs were able to take women and children by force during the death marches or at the concentration places.¹⁵ Armenian children were distributed among

12 Shushan Khachatryan, "Halidé Edip and the Turkification of Armenian Children: Enigmas, Problems and Questions," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 49–79; Selim Deringil, "Your Religion is Worn and Outdated: Orphans, Orphanages and Halide Edib during the Armenian Genocide: The Case of Antoura," *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 12 (2019): 33–65.

13 Ara Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim Households as a Structural Component of the Armenian Genocide," in *Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Omer Bartov and Mack Phyllis (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 210–11.

14 Charles E. Allen to G. Bie Ravndal, report dated Adrianople, March 18, 1916 in Ara Sarafian (comp.), *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide: The Peripheries* (Boston: Armenian Review, 1994), document number 39.

15 For an abundance of evidence of this practice, see for example: Edita Gzoyan, *The Aleppo Rescue Home: 1464 Accounts of Armenian Genocide Survivors* (Yerevan: AGMI, 2021).

influential families as adoptees but most often as servants without any remuneration and they were frequently subjected to inhumane treatment.¹⁶ Survivors' testimonies and other sources refer to the involvement of governmental organizations and agencies in the process of transfer and assimilation. For example, the Red Crescent Society, its subsidiaries, and affiliated organizations were involved in the collection and distribution of Armenian children and young women to Muslim homes.¹⁷ The Society for the Employment of Muslim Women transferred hundreds of children to Constantinople (Istanbul), distributing Armenian girls to Muslim households selected by the Ministry of Interior and boys to factories, workshops, ranches, and small businesses.¹⁸ Children were also taken by the officials themselves.¹⁹

Utilizing the change of national identity as an explanation for the rationale behind forcible transfer and seeking to create a political culture where national identity was prioritized over family identity, the Turkish ruling elite pursued the assimilation of "valuable" Armenian children.²⁰ With this aim, the Ottoman government placed selected Armenian children in state orphanages, which were established as early as the beginning of the First World War with the long-term goal of assimilating transferred Armenian children.²¹ Surrounded by the population that had killed their family members and relatives, being told that there were no Armenians left alive, and living under latent threat, Armenian children had no choice but to adapt to the new situation. The youngest children easily forgot their past and assimilated, but the older ones, conscious of what was happening to them, were afraid to express their thoughts.

Miller and Miller's pioneering work on the oral history of the Armenian Genocide identified children and women as a separate victim group

16 League of Nations Archive at United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), Social Section, Classement 12, Document 9640, Dossier 4631. Report of Zaven Patriarch to Miss Rachel Crawdy, Social Section of the League of Nations.

17 UNOG, Social Section, Classement 12, Document 9640, Dossier 4631. Report of Zaven Patriarch to Miss Rachel Crawdy, Social Section of the League of Nations, also UNOG, Classement 12, Document 15100, Dossier 4631, Interim Report by Dr. Kennedy, August 25, 1921.

18 Nazan Maksudyan, "The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children," *Childhood Vulnerability* 1 (2018): 18.

19 UNOG, Interim Report by Dr. Kennedy; Maksudyan, "The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children," 19; Gzoyan, *The Aleppo Rescue Home*.

20 Vahé Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1, (2009): 60–80; Üngör Uğur, "Orphans, Converts, and Prostitutes," 173–92.

21 Üngör Uğur, "Orphans, Converts, and Prostitutes," 176.

who were differently treated and affected during the genocide.²² By prioritizing the study of childhood and recognizing the role and position of children in the landscape of the genocide, Nazan Maksudyan further placed children as “legitimate historical actors” giving rise to their voices and putting them at the very center of the historical narrative.²³ Although memoirs are stories written by individuals about their own lives, they have a broader dimension, containing elements of the history of the times and the community to which the authors belonged. In the words of Lorne Shirinian, in order to understand the memoirs, we must “ask what the survivors’ responses are to their experiences as they translate knowing into telling.” Shirinian further stresses the importance of showing their deep pain and teaching people the history through their lived experience, sometimes going beyond the personal and putting the Armenian Genocide in a wider human context.²⁴ Vahe Tachjian further stresses the importance of the survivors’ memoirs which present their daily life, inner mind, struggle, and resistance; topics that cannot be found in state documents.²⁵

It should be noted that there is an immense literature of memoirs, diaries, oral history, and novels about the Armenian Genocide already being written from 1916; others were written in the 1950s.²⁶ Among those testimonies (both written and oral) are those by survivors who passed through the forced assimilation during the Armenian Genocide and detailed the practices they went through with their personal evaluations as to what had happened to them. These testimonies help to build an overall picture and to understand the essence of this genocidal crime which was perpetrated against some Armenian children. They also help us to understand children’s actions and their agony.

22 Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, “Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide,” in *Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. by Richard Hovannisian (London: Macmillan, 1992), 153–68; Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

23 Nazan Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 161; Nazan Maksudyan, “The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children,” 16.

24 Lorne Shirinian, “Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide as Cultural History,” in *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard Hovhannisian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 167.

25 Vahe Tachjian, *Daily Life in the Abyss: Genocide Diaries 1915–1918* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 2–3.

26 Asya Darbinyan, “Recovering the Voices of Armenian Refugees in Transcaucasia: Accounts of Suffering and Survival,” *Armenian Review* 57, no. 1-2 (2020): 1–35; Maksudyan, “The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children,” 19–21.

Transfer and Assimilation in the Memoirs of Survivors

The process through which the selected Armenian children were incorporated into the Turkish community was by forcibly taking them from their Armenian community, isolating them, and preventing any future connection, thus stripping them of their identity and imposing a new one upon them. Rather than being physically destroyed, some selected women and children—who were often regarded as spoils of war, slaves, and objects of sexual slavery—were forcibly transferred and incorporated into the Muslim community, an official governmental policy intended to erase their Armenian identity.²⁷

These policies of transfer and assimilation have historical roots in the Ottoman Empire. Starting from approximately the fifteenth century, Christian boys were taken from their families, converted to Islam, and received special education in schools to serve in the Ottoman state and army. This policy, known as the *devshirme* system, comprised of conscription, followed by successful assimilation, and a new identity-formation process. The conscripted boys were either sent to palace schools to be educated as administrators, or sent to villages as agricultural laborers. In both cases, the children learned the Turkish language and Islamic traditions. Afterward, those who had been sent to villages were enlisted as soldiers in the Janissary army.²⁸ The age of the boys, their physical and mental health, as well as their appearance, were all important factors in the selection process.²⁹

Interestingly, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople referenced the Ottoman tradition of *devshirme* as a historical background for the forced transfer of Armenian children during the Armenian Genocide.³⁰ During the deliberations on the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and

27 Lerna Ekmekcioglu, “A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion during and after the Armenian Genocide,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 3 (2013): 522–53, 528; Tashjian, “Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion,” 65; Sarafian, “The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children”, 211.

28 Janissary Army was an elite corps in the Ottoman Empire’s Army from the late fourteenth century to 1826. The Janissary Army was originally staffed through *devşirme*.

29 Gülay Yılmaz, “The Devshirme System and the Levied Children of Bursa in 1603-4” *Belleten*, <https://belleten.gov.tr/tam-metin/248/eng#r2>, accessed June 5, 2023.

30 The Ottoman Empire developed a system of laws that recognized millets—communities based on religion. They were subject to the Sultan with some degree of autonomy in religious and social life. There were Armenian, Greek, and Jewish millets. The Armenian millet was led by the patriarchate that was established in 1461 in Constantinople. Report of Zaven Patriarch to Miss Rachel Crawdy.

Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the practice of *devshirme* was brought up by the Greek delegation to argue for the inclusion of “the forced transfer of children” in the Convention.³¹

State-run Orphanages

During the Armenian Genocide, Turkish authorities collected thousands of children and placed them in state orphanages, where their personal information was changed, they were converted to Islam, and they received a targeted education aimed at Turkifying them.³² The Ottoman government’s attempts to deal with the Armenian children in government-run orphanages were the most direct example of the state’s assimilationist policies. The changing of children’s names was the first step of assimilation and a new formation of identity after entering orphanages. The transferred children were given Turkish names and forbidden from calling each other by their Armenian names.

Yeranouhi Simonian was about eleven or twelve years old when transferred to Mardin Turkish orphanage, while her family was deported from Adana to a concentration camp at Ras ul Ain. Her narrative of orphanage life recounts the persistent attempts of the orphanage authorities to assimilate her and other Armenian children.³³ She was named Pehie and was forced to conform to the new surroundings. She wrote: “We all have Turkish names. In public, we were calling each other with the Turkish names, but when alone, we were using our Armenian names.”³⁴

Mari Grigorian, who was also eleven or twelve years old, was another female survivor from the same Mardin orphanage. She described her identity change as if “being thrown into the giant mixer, everyone should forget their identity and become a genuine Turkish citizen.”³⁵ She was

31 Philippa Webb and Hiran Abtahi, eds., *The Genocide Convention: The Travaux Préparatoires* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008), 1492–98.

32 For more about the Turkification of Armenian children in state-run orphanages see: Editia Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, Shushan Khachatryan, and Narine Margaryan, “In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in State Orphanages during the Armenian Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2023.2237700.

33 Yeranuhi A. Simonian, Իմ Գողգոթա [My Golgotha] (Antilias: Publishing House of the Great House of Cilicia, 1960).

34 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 27.

35 Mari Grigorian, Ատանայէն Մարտինի թրքական որբանոցը [From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin], AGMI archives, section 8, folder 248, no. 397, 74–5.

given the name “Ayşe.” Her two sisters, Verjine and Veron, who were with her in the same orphanage, respectively became “Bedriye” and “Adile.” In her memoir, Grigorian also details the changing of the Armenian children’s parents’ names.³⁶ The children were forced to remember their new Turkish names and the usage of Armenian and Armenian names was severely punished.

In an orphanage of Antoura, Karnig Panian (six years old), who was renamed Mahmud, recalls an episode when the older boys had angered their teachers and were severely beaten. At that point, the children demonstrated their understanding of the Armenian identity and resisted the forced identity change:

One of the orphans cried: “They want to make Turks out of us! But it’ll never work with me! My name isn’t Mehmet!” “We won’t turn into Turks!” “We won’t! We won’t! came the vociferous reply from others. It was an unequal battle between the administration and the students. Clearly, Jemal Pasha’s plan was to Turkify us, but we were determined to resist—not out of rabid nationalism, for which we were too young, but simply because we wanted to hold onto our identities, which were all we had left.”³⁷

The study of the Turkish language was the next stage of the cultivation of a new identity. Children were forced to use it in their everyday routine, parallel with the restriction of the Armenian language. Again, any disobedience was subject to severe punishment. Yeranuhi Simonian wrote:

One day our teacher has asked us [the Turkified Armenian orphans]: “Can you read and write in Armenian?” We were suspicious first, but finally gave a positive answer. She took her stick and started beating us. She was beating us right and left, without mercy.³⁸

Children were given compulsory Turkish language lessons; the language was presented by orphanage teachers as an “aristocratic” one worthy of learning. Interestingly, children again understood the real motivations for their being in the orphanage and their resistance to the forced identity change was remarkable:

36 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 74–5.

37 Ahmed Jemal (Djermal) Pasha was the Naval Master, commander-in-chief of the fourth Ottoman Army and one of the main perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide. Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 82–3.

38 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 30.

“Speak Turkish, boys. Turkish is a beautiful language,” they smiled at us. Some of these teachers were young and pretty. But the orphans were aware that underneath their kindness, they were trying to destroy our very selves. Therefore, we had a natural revulsion toward them.³⁹

The language requirement was one of the most difficult obstacles for the orphans to surmount. Mari Grigoryan recalls:

As the days passed, our Turkish language classes become more and more difficult. Then, Koran classes were added to this. We have to learn the prayers by heart. It was an unattained difficulty for me. Then we started learning *namaz* rules.⁴⁰

Survivor testimonies further reveal how religious conversion was an essential component of identity change in state-run orphanages. Children were coerced to disown their Christian religion and accept Islam. Memoirs reveal how violently this process impacted the children, who were pressured into religious conversion through both physical and psychological threats and coercion. Children were forced to do *namaz* and read the Koran.⁴¹ Boys were forcibly circumcised, while girls' hair was cut in a special way called *zilif*.⁴² Strategies of forcible religious conversion also included a strict ban on the cross and other Christian symbols and icons.

In describing an episode of forced religious conversion, Yeranuhi Simonian wrote:

A Turkish lady, named Fatma was called to teach and lead us. She stood in front of us: we were standing in line behind her. We had to repeat what she was saying. Her first words were: “Allahu Akbar,” we were seriously repeating it. But we had decided that we would address our words to our God, in Armenian. The turn of worshipping came: our girls were making the sign of the cross and praying. Fatma repeated the worshipping. The girls burst out laughing. Fatma went mad. She started threatening us: “You, khains [renegades] are not worthy of accepting hakki din [true religion], you are worth only being slaughtered.”⁴³

39 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 89.

40 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 78–9.

41 *Namāz* are the prayers performed by Muslims.

42 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 27.

43 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 27.

In the words of Panian:

But the project of Turkification was reaching a new level of intensity. On a daily basis, we heard lectures about Islam, its victories, and the virtue it imparted to the faithful who followed the way of Allah. Some of the boys had succumbed to the pressure already, while the others were under constant assault from the staff and the headmaster.⁴⁴

Some orphans, unable to resist the hardships of the orphanage life, fled. Others fled as they were unable to continue fighting for the preservation of their identity. One of the Armenian girls from the Mardin orphanage, Tigranuhi who became “Lamia,” was among those who could not bear the hardships in the orphanage and decided to flee, leaving her sister in the orphanage. She married a Turkish officer. Her Armenian friends in the orphanage were shocked. As Yeranuhi Simonian put it: “I was profoundly shocked. All the relatives of that girl were massacred by the Turks. Was it worth it to become a wife of a Turkish officer for a piece of bread?”⁴⁵

By completely erasing Armenian names, language, religion, and everything connected with the Armenian identity, as well as the compulsory imposition of a new identity through new names, language, and religious conversion, the authorities attempted to completely disconnect the children from their identity, detach them from the past, and thus facilitate Turkification.

Individual Transfers

Thousands of children were separated from their families and caravans and were placed in individual Muslim families through distribution, abduction, or purchase. The Turkish government distributed Armenian children to selected Muslim households, but children were also taken by the officials themselves. During the short stays and en route, deportation caravans were attacked by local Muslim populations who also selected and took young Armenian women and children. Children sometimes ran to local Muslims to be saved. At the same time, the escorting gendarmes were selling young Armenian deportees. Later, the purchased Armenians could be further sold to other locals (sometimes even several times).

44 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 109.

45 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 36–7.

Understanding that the deportations were actually death marches, many Armenian mothers gave their children to locals in order to save their lives or sometimes they sold them to be able to feed their other children.⁴⁶ The slave trade and slave markets were also flourishing.⁴⁷ There are accounts that many Turks visited deportation convoys with doctors to select Armenians, the strongest, healthiest, and prettiest ones, for their purposes.⁴⁸

The forcibly transferred children were exposed to exploitation and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. In the case of young women, forced marriages were practiced en masse. Like the children placed in state orphanages, those who were taken to Muslim households were also Islamized. They were similarly forced to disown their identities and assimilate into the Muslim communities. Again, the mechanism of absorption was the same—the transferred Armenians were given new names, converted to Islam, and absorbed as members of individual families. Although in some (very few) Muslim homes, children were well received and treated, in such instances, children were still forced to change their identity and assimilate into the perpetrator's group; this was, nevertheless, genocidal forced transfer.

Leon Surmelian's narrative details his experience during the Armenian Genocide and the manner in which thousands of Armenian children were separated from their parents and distributed to Muslim households. By the order of Turkish authorities, Surmelian was placed in a house with hundreds of other Armenian children who were then taken to the Armenian prelacy building in Trebizond, where they were joined by children from other places. The following day, these children were marched out of the city and the boys were separated from the women and girls, who proceeded on their march. The boys were exhibited before the local government building by the sub-governor of the city to be selected and adopted by Muslims. This is how Surmelian described the process:

We boys were put on exhibit before the government building, guarded by a few gendarmes, and shop keepers from the town, and peasants from the surrounding countryside loitered among us, eyeing us with

46 Gzoyan, *Aleppo Rescue Home*.

47 UNOG, Classement 12, document 9711, dossier 4631.

48 Report of Leslie A. Davis, American Consul, Formerly at Harput, Turkey, on the work of the Consulate at Harput since the Beginning of the Present War (New York, 9 February 1918), in Ara Sarafian (comp.), *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide: The Central Lands* (Boston, Mass.: Armenian Review, 1995), 79.

the shrewd appraising glances of sheep buyers. The Kaimakam, or sub governor of Jevizlik, a portly middle-aged man in a gray European suit, with a gold watch chain hanging across his ample waist, stood on the stone steps of the building and looked at us with a bored expression. Evidently, we were just another group of children to be disposed of according to the instructions of his superior, the governor-general of Trebizond. It was all a matter of official routine to him; he expressed no personal hatred toward us. This was like a slave market of captive enemy children, except that we brought no price and any Moslem could come and take any boy he wanted. There were several women among our visitors, some wearing stiff black veils, others half veiled or unveiled.⁴⁹

On the second day, the secretary of the sub-governor's office recorded Surmelian's adoption by an irregular soldier. "He will be a *cheta* when he grows up,' my benefactor said, putting his hand on my shoulder.⁵⁰ With repeated orders that the beggar take good care of me, he mounted his horse and rode away, to rob and kill more Armenians."⁵¹ One of Surmelian's friends, Michael, was adopted by a coffeehouse owner; another friend, Nurikhan, was adopted by a local scribe, while another, Simon, was taken by a peasant woman.⁵² Although Michael was satisfied with his master who treated him well, he still had to disassociate with Armenian boys, forget his past, and become a Turk.⁵³ Surmelian managed to escape from his master and was adopted by a Turk who named him "Jemal." Although the Turk's family treated Surmelian well, he wondered how they would treat him if they knew that he had not become a Turk, "and even if she [adopted mother] was a good woman, I could never forget my own mother and accept her in her place."⁵⁴

All children adopted into Turkish families faced the dilemma of whether or not to convert to Islam, as a next step of their identity change. Some converted out of fear or out of respect for the adopted family, others tried to avoid it by all possible means. This conversion included reading the Koran, Muslim prayers, *namaz*, and, in the case of boys,

49 Leon Surmelian, *I ask you, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1945), 111.

50 *Cheta* was the term for a soldier of the Turkish irregular forces/bands who were involved in killings and robbery during the Armenian Genocide.

51 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 116.

52 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 111-13.

53 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 115.

54 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 119-20.

circumcision. When the next stage of the identity change came, a village *mullah* came to circumcise Leon.⁵⁵ For Leon, the news was like “slapping me on my back with his horrible witch doctor’s hand.” He wrote:

I thought that once I let the *mullah* circumcise me, I could never become a Christian again, it would be the final, irrevocable act of renouncing my faith and nationality and family and Europe and civilization and everything else I cherished in my aching heart. After brooding over it for two days, I decided I would rather die than be circumcised.⁵⁶

Leon decided to flee.

Another Armenian boy Aram, who was deported with his family, became separated from them and appeared among the Muslims. This is how Aram describes his experience of identity change:

They called me by a Kurdish name Seito ... They began to question how would the neighbors understand that I was a Muslim, so I had to learn the Muslim prayer. When I played with children, they taught me; but not knowing Turkish well, I had difficulty reciting it. The children who played with me said, “The souls of those who kill seven gavur will go to paradise and you’re still a gavur, not a Muslim.” Every evening they would drag me forward and force me to recite “Laa ilaaha illallaah Mohamed ar-Rasool Allah” (There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet). I had great difficulty in saying this, which would annoy them. They did this for days on end, sometimes even beating me.⁵⁷

A year passed and according to Aram’s masters, “Seito“ had not yet become “a complete Muslim.” Therefore, he had to be circumcised.

They and I were dealt with together, but even with this they hadn’t achieved their aim: Seito’s heart wasn’t disturbed—Aram’s heart was full of Armenian blood. They believed that Aram was one hundred percent Muslim and had accepted “Hak din,“ [the true religion] but I

55 *Mullah* is an honorable title for Shia and Sunni Muslim clergy.

56 Surmelian, *I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 121–22.

57 Regina Galustyan and Robert Tatoyan (eds.), *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide*, 7. Aram Mantashyan, *Aram Could Not be Seito. Sokrat Mkrtchyan, Memoirs* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation, 2022), 32.

learnt the language very quickly and worked as if I was their son. I was very nimble and none of the others of my age could beat me up.⁵⁸

In another case, an Armenian boy, Vahram, and his sister, whose parents and four other brothers and sisters were killed, were adopted by a wealthy Turkish family. Interestingly, the brother and sister developed contrary feelings towards their Turkish family. While Vahram had deep sentiments toward his new Turkish family, spending many hours with his grandfather, learning the Koran, praying and fasting, his sister hated them and blamed them for the death of her family.⁵⁹ They were well received there but had to become Turks—this was a precondition of their survival.

Thus, the methods of identity change were very similar to those in the state orphanages—changing of personal information, language, and religious conversion. Sarafian rightly argues that by participating in the forced transfer and conversions and by monitoring the faith and actions of the converted afterwards, the Muslim families became crucial agents for what amounted to a centrally organized program of forced assimilation within a wider genocidal process.⁶⁰

Liberation and Return to Armenian Identity

On October 30, 1918, a ceasefire signed in Mudros between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain (representing the Allied powers) marked the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the collapse of the Young Turk dictatorship presented the Armenians and foreign individuals and organizations an opportunity to search for and liberate the Armenian survivors who were transferred and assimilated into the Muslim community. In accordance with the Mudros Armistice, Article 4 demanded the liberation of Armenian captives and prisoners, and the new Turkish government allowed forcibly transferred Armenians to be returned to their community.⁶¹ It took limited steps toward the surrender of Armenian children and women found in Muslim households and state or private institutions. Some Muslims, afraid of possible punishment or due to the dire economic

58 *Aram Could Not be Seito*, 33.

59 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 15.

60 Sarafian, “The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children,” 217.

61 Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 274.

condition of the post-war period, released their Armenian captives, while others, certain that the children had already forgotten their identity, continued to keep them. Some older children fled Turkish families or institutions on their own, although some of them also returned to their Turkish families.⁶² Armenian orphans also began to be collected from Turkish orphanages, Muslim homes, and institutions by Armenians.

The news of the armistice and possible liberation was received with joy and excitement. Mari Grigorian writes:

It was the beginning of November, when we have heard the news of salvation—armistice was signed between Turkey and the Allies and that the British and French troops have captured Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Cilicia. Now the occupation of Polis (Constantinople) was a new rising sun for the Armenians. It would bring freedom, breaking the centuries-old chains of captivity.⁶³

Yeranuhi Simonian presented her long-awaited liberation in the following words:

... We were brought outside, we entered a new world, a crowd of Armenians were gathered. We took our white headscarf from our heads and threw them away; we were now Armenians and were going to our nation and church ... Oh, that day, the day of freedom and cry of joy, I have never forgotten and will not, that day.⁶⁴

Panian also expressed his feelings emotionally: “There would be no more insults, no more beatings, no more endless lessons! It was a day of celebration! ... We had been saved. The Armenian orphans had been returned to their nation.”⁶⁵

After the liberation, these children had to be brought back to their Armenian identity. The older children remembered their names and the names of their parents, but some of the younger ones had trouble remembering. When it was impossible to verify the child’s name, they were assigned new Armenian ones. In the words of Panian, their “Turkish names were immediately forgotten.”⁶⁶ Simonian presented this as: “We entered the Armenian building [an Armenian orphanage], became Arme-

62 UNOG, Classement 12, dossier 4631, document 15100.

63 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 93.

64 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 44.

65 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*, 146–47.

66 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*, 149.

nians, have thrown off the names Emine and Pehie, that we have pronounced with a deep disgust for so many years in the grip of violence.”⁶⁷

Some of the children had forgotten how to speak and write in Armenian, others were hardly speaking. Vahram, like many child survivors, had lost his identity. After liberation, he was placed in an Armenian orphanage, relearned his mother tongue, started reading the Bible, rediscovered his roots, and was able to heal some of his emotional wounds.⁶⁸ Within four or five years, some of the transferred children had to learn the alphabet for a third time as, after liberation, they were instructed to speak Armenian. As Mari Grigoryan wrote, one of the Armenian women who came with a priest to liberate them from the Turkish orphanage, had told them: “Children from now on you will have to speak Armenian. I know it will be difficult at the beginning, but soon you will be able to remember your mother tongue and speak freely.”⁶⁹

During the next stage of returning to their Armenian identity, the liberated children were taken to the Armenian church to become Christians again. They were met with crowds of Armenians who came to welcome the “lost lambs of the nation” or search for their missing relatives. A grandmother from Kharberd found her grandchild among the liberated orphans from the Turkish Mardin orphanage. In the excitement and stress, a woman initially stood still while holding her grandchild, then she fell, madly repeating: “A whole family was massacred, only this one remains.”⁷⁰

Liberated children wrote sensitively about their first visit to the Armenian Church, which signaled their severance from Islamization and a return to their nation:

As soon as we entered, everyone burst into tears and were crying bitterly, remembering our past and sunny childhood, which was unfortunately lost on the day of disaster [the genocide]. We were happy that passing through the valleys of death and paths of deprivation, we were able to reach these days of hope. Our tortured bodies and hearts needed purity and only church could clean us by its holy water and blessed myrrh.⁷¹

Simonian presents her feelings in similar words:

67 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 44.

68 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 16.

69 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 94–5.

70 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 44.

71 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 94–5.

We entered a church, which was full of people. ... We feel like in heaven. Our childhood once again was returned to us with its sweet memories. We were longing for our church, our candles, incense, prayers and priests for years. We also prayed. We confessed to receive a holy communion next day. To become a new Christian, a new Armenian ...⁷²

Aram, who was not rescued but was able to escape, described his feelings in the following words:

The Turkish slave-owners' efforts and aims were useless; they couldn't break Aram's will and turn him into a real Seito. Aram couldn't deny his beloved Armenian nation and become Seito; I wasn't frightened, my will was strong and I was able to withstand every kind of ferocious beating, tortures and suffering from a very early age, until I set foot on my own, wonderful, fatherland's soil and completely became free.⁷³

It was soon evident that the methods of assimilation were quite successful in changing the identities of many of the affected children, who were later liberated; it often took considerable time and effort to revive their sense of Armenian identity. This was especially evident among the youngest, as some were infants when abducted by the Turks. Some children suffered great physical and psychological trauma, leading to cases of amnesia or repression. Others were old enough during the deportations and remembered being Armenian but, nonetheless, insisted on retaining their Turkish identity because of the trauma and suffering they experienced merely for being Armenian. Having been raised as "genuine Turks" and taught to hate their identity, many children vigorously resisted efforts to liberate them and rejected their Armenian identity long after being rescued. In some cases, it took three to four months to help lead children back to their cultural, religious, and national identity.⁷⁴ And while some were liberated and regained their Armenian identity, thousands remained trapped in their newly constructed identities and were lost to the Armenian nation.

For some of the liberated children, it took forty to eighty years to dare to speak about this forced identity change, as the memoirs were written

72 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 44.

73 *Aram Could Not be Seito*, 61.

74 Editia Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, and Shushan Khachatryan, "Reclaiming Children after the Armenian Genocide: Neutral House in Istanbul," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 33, no. 3 (2019): 395–411.

in late adulthood or at an advanced age. In all these memoirs, the children's struggle against Turkification is emphasized. It is difficult to say whether they were honest in their memoirs about secretly fighting to maintain their Armenian identity despite being physically and spiritually Turkified or if this perception developed during the post-genocidal years, as in the case of Vahram, who sometimes after liberation felt ashamed for being Turkified. However, they do seem authentic, at least when writing their stories of agony and survival.

Conclusion

Forcible child transfer is one of the five genocidal acts listed in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. It forbids forcibly transferring children from one group to another with the intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Operating in the nexus of cultural and biological genocides, forcible child transfer has a unique application in comparison with other genocidal acts as it forms a new identity for a targeted group through the destruction of its former one. The forced transfer and assimilation of Armenian children into the Muslim community was a genocidal act as defined by the Genocide Convention.

The idea of forced transfer and assimilation is also very closely related to Raphael Lemkin's understanding of genocide. According to Lemkin, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a group, but rather a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of the targeted group, which is aimed at annihilating these groups. Accordingly, the concept of genocide must be understood beyond the immediate extermination of the protected group to include nonlethal acts that target the group's "essential foundations" and eradicate the group's collective identity over time.⁷⁵ This could be achieved by preventing the group's capacity to have children and by abducting children at an early age to prevent the group from raising their own children as transgenerational heirs to their collective identity.⁷⁶

75 Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 80.

76 Douglas Irvin Erickson, *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 154; John Cooper, *Raphael Lemkin and the Struggle for the Genocide Convention* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 69–70.

Lemkin further observed that genocide is a two-phase process—the destruction of the national pattern of the targeted group and the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. Lemkin explained that the terms “Germanization” or “Italianization” are used to signify the imposition of one stronger nation’s national pattern upon another nation/group. However, this does not fully transfer to the concept of genocide, as by referring mainly to the cultural, economic, and social aspects of the notion, biological consequences, such as physical decline and even destruction of the targeted populations, are ignored. Thus, according to Lemkin, it is not enough to impose a national pattern of the oppressor on the targeted group—the targeted group should also be attacked in a physical sense, and be removed and supplanted by the population of the oppressor nation.⁷⁷

During the Armenian Genocide, which was accompanied by massacres and death marches, some selected members of the Armenian community—young women and children—were forcibly transferred and assimilated. Thus, in addition to physical destruction of Armenians, the Young Turk government imposed its national pattern on the target population. As well as being violently and systematically suppressed, changes occurred to the Christian religion, Armenian language, culture, and even the family names of the survivors, whether in private homes, government-run orphanages, or the public sphere, leaving only the biological “raw material” to be methodically Turkified.⁷⁸

Based on the testimonies of survivors of the forced transfer, this article reconstructed the process of transfer and assimilation carried out in state institutions and individual households, which included changing personal information, language, and religion. It also showcased the varied attitudes of children to the forced and mainly violent identity change. Their liberation and return to the Armenian identity was also discussed in the article—a process that mirrored the methods of assimilation: a return to their old or new Armenian names, learning or re-learning their mother tongue, and being baptized or re-baptized in the Armenian Church, a process that was mostly long-awaited and praised by the liberated children.

American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), Raphael Lemkin Collection, Box 7, doc. 3, Correspondence with Edit Besser, 5.

77 Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 79–80.

78 Matthias Bjornlund, “‘A Fate Worse than Dying’: Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide,” in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 16–58, 37.

Did the Turks succeed or fail in the genocidal transfer of Armenian children? The answer is both. Some were liberated and reclaimed, others remained and replenished Turkish society. Those who returned to the Armenian society were deeply impacted and suffered as a result of the identity changes, questioning their past and the future. As Karnik Panian poignantly put it:

We orphans were remnants of a vast nation. We constituted the new generation of Armenians. ... Many of my family members had died in the concentration camp. What had happened to the rest? Where were they now? I wondered, too, about my fate and my old home. Would I ever get back to Gurin? Would our house still be standing? Would the door be open or locked? I forced myself out of these daydreams. My friends were playing nearby. I joined their games, but my mind kept drifting back into the past and forward into the future. Would I really be back home soon, in the bosom of what remained of my family?⁷⁹

79 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*, 153–54.

Forced Maturity: Children's Experiences under German Occupation in Belarus, 1941–1944

A story by Andrei Platonov, first published in 1946 as “Sem’ia Ivanova” (“The Family of Ivanov”) in the literary magazine *Novyi mir*, recounts the soldier Ivanov’s return from the front to his wife and two children, whom he has not seen for four years. His little daughter Nastia and his wife Liuba seem distant, and Ivanov barely recognizes his son Petrushka: The eleven-year-old concerns himself with the preparation of meals, issues orders and instructions on business matters, metes out praise and blame to his mother and sister, and even assigns tasks to his father. His self-assured and decisive manner is disturbing to Ivanov. Speaking to his wife, Ivanov blurts out reproachfully, “Just what kind of person has Petrushka turned into? He grumbles like an old man, but he’s surely forgotten how to read.”¹ Later, when the parents are talking at night, they begin to argue after Liuba admits to her husband that she has carried on a relationship with another man. Again, it is Petrushka who is listening and intervenes. He lectures his father, saying that other families have similar wartime experiences but handle them with humor. One just has to be able to overlook them and go on living, he says.

Platonov’s story touches upon the phenomena of adultification and parentification, in addition to other signs of disintegration in Soviet families after the Second World War.² While adultification signifies a

1 Andrei Platonov, “Sem’ia Ivanova, Rasskaz,” *Novyi mir*, no. 10–11 (1946): 97–108, here 103.

2 Platonov’s realism was criticized in the Soviet Union as “sordid” and “slanderous.” “In the whole world, there is no purer and healthier family than the Soviet one,” a critic pointed out to the author in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on January 4, 1947. The story could not be published again until 1962, under the title “Vozvrashchenie” (“The Return”), but it remained largely forgotten and is less well known today than other works by Platonov, although the story was adapted in film in Russia the 1980s and 2000s.

rapid process of maturation, parentification refers to a reversal of social roles between parents and their children. Parentified children may perform everyday tasks within the family system, such as taking care of younger siblings, working, and running the household, and/or they may take on the emotional responsibilities of another family member by providing advice, comfort, or protection and, in the process, set aside their own need for attention, security, and care.³ The term and its associated theories, which come from the field of family psychology, began to be extensively developed and studied only in the 1980s, although psychoanalysts such as John Bowlby provided the earliest descriptions of such phenomenon in the 1950s.⁴ It is all the more astonishing that the phenomena of adultification and parentification during the Second World War have thus far received relatively little attention in historical research.⁵ In the context of the German-Soviet War,⁶ which redefined the roles and responsibilities of numerous Soviet children, this gap in the scholarship is all the more striking.⁷

- 3 For a good overview of the concept of parentification, the history of its development, and its interdisciplinarity, see: Nancy D. Chase, "Parentification: An Overview of Theory, Research, and Societal Issues," in *Burdened Children: Theory, Research, and Treatment of Parentification*, ed. Nancy D. Chase (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999), 3–33.
- 4 John Bowlby is considered the originator of attachment theory, which posits a close connection between the mother's affection and the child's healthy psyche. In his works, he also discussed the problems of the parentification of children, which he termed "role reversal" and viewed as a cause of agoraphobia and depression. See the following German editions of works first published in the 1950s: Bowlby, *Frühe Bindung und kindliche Entwicklung*, 7th ed. (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2016); Bowlby, *Verlust, Trauer und Depression* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2006); Bowlby, *Trennung: Angst und Zorn*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2018). For a summary of the essentials of his theory, see: Bowlby, *Bindung als sichere Basis. Grundlagen und Anwendung der Bindungstheorie* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2018); Claudia Moisel, "Geschichte und Psychoanalyse. Zur Genese der Bindungstheorie von John Bowlby," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 65 (2017): 51–74. In the project "Bowlby Revisited. Eine Geschichte der Bindungstheorie im 20. Jahrhundert," Moisel examines the life and work of the psychoanalyst. More at: <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/250301533>.
- 5 The elaborated exceptions focus mainly on children in Poland: Joanna Beata Michlic, ed., *Jewish Families in Europe. 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University 2017); Joanna Sliwa, *Jewish Childhood in Krakow: A Microhistory of the Holocaust* (London: Rutgers University, 2021).
- 6 The "German-Soviet War" is commonly used in German historiography, while Russian and Belarusian historiography speaks of the "Great Patriotic War." Following the former, I am using the term "German-Soviet War," with the "Eastern Front of the Second World War" in mind.
- 7 A single study of Stalingrad children by Russian historians offers a discussion of the problems caused by the blurring of age boundaries in wartime and the ensuing stress

Children of war often say that their childhood ended when the war began, and they grew up fast. By this they mean primarily the subjectively perceived disappearance of secure and safe environments and the ensuing redefinition of their own agency, culminating in a role reversal, as in the case of Petrushka. In his father's absence, Petrushka assumed the role of the male head of the family. The distortion of the generational order that Platonov observed, the blurring of the boundaries between adult and child, was indeed a formative experience for many war children throughout Europe.⁸ As a result of their wartime experience, most of them perceived the world in a considerably more sophisticated way than their contemporaries who had grown up under normal circumstances. The war accelerated their process of maturation. War children had to “function” as adults and, in so doing, frequently had to take on the function of surrogate partner or parent. The changes were particularly profound wherever the destruction of sheltered childhood environments was all-embracing, as in ghettos or camps, and the previously applicable criteria for what was age-appropriate in childhood had lost their authority. The reframing of the category of “child” and the phenomena of adultification and parentification were observable, however, even when children were lucky enough to belong to the so-called majority society of persons who were not systematically persecuted. Indeed, in the Soviet Union, it was expected and demanded that children grow up quickly, conforming to the model of “Sacrificing Childhood.”⁹ In the interior of the country, many children as young as twelve worked on behalf of the military front on equal terms with adults instead of going to school.¹⁰ The experience of losing childhood during wartime was so

for children. The study does not delve into conceptual details, however. Marina Ryblova et al., eds., *Detstvo i voina: Kul'tura posvednevnosti, mekhanizmy adaptatsii i praktiki vyzhivaniia detei v usloviakh Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny (na materialakh Stalingradskoi bitvy)* (Volgograd: University Press, 2015). An approach to the topic is offered by Julie K. deGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood: Children and the Soviet State in the Great Patriotic War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014); Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

8 Hartmut Radebold, Gereon Heuft, and Insa Fooker, eds., *Kriegserfahrungen und deren Folgen aus psychohistorischer Perspektive* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2009); Hartmut Radebold, Werner Bohleber, and Jürgen Zinnecker, eds., *Transgenerationale Weitergabe kriegsbelasteter Kindheiten. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur Nachhaltigkeit historischer Erfahrungen über vier Generationen* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2008); Michic, *Jewish Families in Europe*.

9 DeGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood*.

10 The directive issued by the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union in May 1942 lowered the official working age to fourteen for city dwellers and twelve

ubiquitous that it seemed commonplace, even normal, to many, and for decades, it was neither scrutinized nor discussed.

This essay examines the breakdown of the generational order, in the case of the occupied Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus (BSSR), as defined by the Soviet-imposed borders of the time. There, a redefinition of childhood took place as a result of the standards set by the occupation society and the subjective experiences, actions, perceptions, and feelings of those affected, who are the focus of this analysis. All children were affected, although the dimensions of the imposed adultification and the intensity of the concomitant role reversal varied from person to person.

This essay cannot offer an exhaustive account of these developments, nor can it offer a comprehensive discussion of their effects on those concerned or on society more generally. Instead, it focuses on the ubiquity and ambiguities of these psychological phenomena among Soviet children in the BSSR. As such, these phenomena are understood not merely as potential handicaps and pathological conditions but also as “resources” for survival and mechanisms for coping with postwar trauma. Furthermore, the essay considers external forms of adultification and parentification, as well as their gender-specific characteristics, and discusses whether and how the generational order that was suspended during wartime was articulated in and problematized by Soviet society. Platonov’s story, which after its initial publication in the literary magazine in 1946 was not allowed to be reprinted for some time, and the return to “postwar normality” frequently described by historians suggest, above all, a minimization or trivialization of the consequences of the phenomenon.

Since childhood is a social phenomenon and is historized differently depending on the time of study and society, any definition of a child and childhood is also relative. This means that childhood is not strongly linked to distinct and universal age phases but rather to structural characteristics that imply power relations. Accordingly, the definition of who is still a child and who is already an adult varies depending on time and the particular social and cultural context. Even though there are no universally valid criteria to distinguish children from adults, when I speak of children, I use the age limit of sixteen years old. In doing so, I follow a functional delimitation that results from the Soviet sources I worked

for farmers’ children, orphans, and children on their own. See Olga Kucherenko, “State v. Danila Kuz’mich: Soviet Desertion Laws and Industrial Child Labor during World War II,” *Russian Review*, no. 71 (July 2012): 391–412. Before the war, children were allowed to work starting at the age of sixteen, with some restrictions even from the age of fourteen.

with in the context of my research project.¹¹ The term “children” encompasses all minors, including Jewish children.

This article comes out of the research project “War Childhoods in Occupied Belarus (1941–1944): Experiences, Consequences, Remembrance”, which is based on a wide variety of sources. In addition to contemporary first-person documents and official sources, almost one hundred interviews from various oral history projects, self-conducted interviews with survivors, and published and unpublished testimonies were analyzed. In the following, I cite only some of these sources and deal with only one aspect of wartime Soviet childhoods, which affected Jewish as well as non-Jewish children to varying degrees.

The Dissolution of the Generational Order during the War

After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Belarus was completely conquered within two months. It remained occupied for three years. The western part (mostly consisting of the region annexed from Poland in 1939) of the country was fragmented and then—renamed the General Commissariat of Belorussia (GKW, Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien)—was incorporated into the Reich Commissariat Ostland (Reichskommissariat Ostland).¹² The eastern part of the country

11 In Soviet statistical compilations from the war and postwar period, adolescents under sixteen were usually referred to as children. I am guided by this age limit. Nevertheless, it is not the only definition and is, therefore, relative. For further information on the project, see: <https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/en/research/ea/ree/search/war-childhoods-in-occupied-belarus-1941-1944-experiences-consequences-remembrances>.

12 Hitler’s decree of July 17, 1941 placed the RK Ostland under the control of Reich Commissioner Hinrich Lohse, the governor and Gauleiter of Schleswig-Holstein, and subordinated it to Alfred Rosenberg, the head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories. Under German civil administration, around 2.5 million persons lived in an area of approximately 54,000 km² (20,850 square miles). The region around Hrodna went to the district of Bialystok, which was annexed to East Prussia on August 1, 1941. The areas around Brést and Pinsk were added to the Reichskommissariat Ukraine as parts of the GK Vollandia-Podolia. For more on the administrative partitioning of the occupied country and the history of the occupation see: Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrussland 1941–1944* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1998), 51–95; Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 128–214; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Munich: De Gruyter, 2008), 97 and the following pages.

remained under military administration. The entire region was supposed to become a colony of the Greater Germanic Reich of the German Nation someday.

Children never featured in the Nazi planning of *Blitzkrieg*. There were no concrete plans except for Himmler's megalomaniac ideas about the "sifting and screening of youth" for the purposes of Germanization, which he had first developed in connection with Poland.¹³ The only consensus that existed, and the one that largely drove Nazi policy, concerned the notion of the extraction and colonization of the east, and the fear that a future local intelligentsia would develop. Consequently, at the beginning of the war, there were no plans for schooling, educational work, or training for children.

From the beginning of the occupation, however, the established administrative structures issued regulations that also applied to minors—thereby redefining the generational order in the context of official instructions and occupation practices. In the zone under military administration, the November 1941 regulation on labor obligations beginning at the age of fifteen fixed this age as the biological boundary between minors and adults.¹⁴ In the GKW, the "labor service obligation" for male youths beginning at the end of their fourteenth year and for females at the end of their seventeenth year was one of the first measures introduced by Wilhelm Kube.¹⁵ In reality, however, even children under fifteen years old were forced to work; thus a normative concept of childhood as a "sheltered phase" no longer existed. Even though individuals under fourteen years old ordinarily were registered as "children" in the statistics and records of the local administrative structures and the General Commissariat (for example, in institutional children's homes or orphanages), this age limit hardly played a practical role in everyday life for those living under occupation. For the Nazi occupiers, an individual's ability to work was the decisive criterion. During the second phase of the war, even ten-year-old children were deported to Germany as "workers" and treated as adults. "From the end of their tenth year, children are deemed fit for work," according to an internal designation of the Second

13 Helmut Krausnick, "Denkschrift Himmlers über die Behandlung der Fremdvölkischen im Osten (Mai 1940)," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 5, no. 2 (1957): 194–98.

14 Verwaltungsanordnung Nr. 10, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter BA-MA), RH 23/270.

15 "An die Bewohner Weissrutheniens!" *Amtsblatt des Generalkommissars für Weissruthenien*, no. 2 (1941): 6.

Army (*Armee-Oberkommando 2*) dated January 1944.¹⁶ A further criterion was the occupiers' attribution of "racial biological" characteristics to children. The occupiers decided whether someone, as a "child of good race," would receive compassionate treatment.¹⁷ Rather than biological age and generally applicable standards, external and arbitrarily subjective criteria governed the status of "child."

It is undisputed that "childhood" is a social construct created in the process of ongoing social ordering within a society and is, thus, subject to natural change.¹⁸ Under the Nazi occupation, however, neither a new order nor a new definition of childhood was institutionalized by law or norms. Rather, a diffuse generational disorder arose and became an operational framework. This development affected above all the Jewish population, which was completely deprived of its rights. The killing of Jews began with the start of the war. As early as August 1941, the systematic mass extermination of Jews began, initially concentrated in the eastern parts of the country.¹⁹ Age was relevant only for identification and categorization. The first directive in the Army Group Rear Area, dated July 7, 1941, required all Jews over the age of ten to wear a yellow Star of David on a white stripe at least 10 cm (3.9 inches) wide on the right sleeve of their clothing. Alternatively, they could wear a large yellow patch at

16 *Armee-Oberkommando 2*, O.Qu., Erfassung der Zivilbevölkerung, January 31, 1944, in Anlagenband VII, 1. Teil zum K. T. B. Nr. 11, BA-MA RH 24-56/341, 54–55, here 54. On the forced labor of children, see: Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit. Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa 1939–1945* (Essen: Klartext, 2013).

17 Many witness reports indicate that children classified as "Aryan" were deported for Germanization. The history of the abduction of children from Soviet territories has not been researched, however, because of the lack of sources. For general information on the subject of child abduction, see: Isabel Heinemann, *Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut. Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003).

18 On the concept of childhood, see: Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London: Falmer, 1997); Michael-Sebastian Honig, *Entwurf einer Theorie der Kindheit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999); Michael-Sebastian Honig, *Ordnungen der Kindheit. Problemstellungen und Perspektiven der Kindheitsforschung* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2009). An excellent historical overview is offered by Martina Winkler, *Kindheitsgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

19 For a general overview, see: Bert Hoppe and Hildrun Glass, eds., *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, vol. 7: *Sowjetunion mit annektierten Gebieten I. Besetzte sowjetische Gebiete unter deutscher Militärverwaltung, Baltikum und Transnistrien* (München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011), and especially the introduction to the volume.

least 10 cm wide on their sleeve.²⁰ This rule enabled many younger children to move about unnoticed outside a ghetto. Being a child, however, offered no protection; quite the reverse. While a number of Jewish skilled workers in the GKW were allowed to go on living until 1943, the Nazis proceeded to murder Jewish women and children as early as 1941. No effort was spared in the attempt to seek out Jewish children in orphanages and shoot them.²¹

Maturation as a Compulsory Experience for Jewish Children and Adolescents: Resources and Limits of Adulthood

The vulnerability of children did not inevitably give rise to passivity. Indeed, their vulnerability could even be converted into a “resource.” Children had behavioral options and adaptation practices that adults lacked. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska, the Central Jewish Historical Commission staff member who conducted the first interviews with underage Holocaust survivors in liberated Poland, was one of the first to describe this paradox. In the source volume *The Children Accuse* published in 1946, she put on record her observation that children had been “tougher and more resourceful,” exhibiting greater physical resilience and quick-wittedness than adults.²² Children, she argued, had shown more will to survive and sometimes had also been more capable of survival than adults. Whereas adults were quicker to give up hope and surrender to their fate, some children seemed to develop diametrically opposite powers of resistance. Additionally, children are curious and flexible by nature. These characteristics alone helped them learn—faster than adults—to “organize things,” put on a false front, lie, or steal. They were able to leave a ghetto unnoticed, pass through checkpoints or roadblocks, escape from the group,

20 Verwaltungsanordnungen Nr. 1, BA-MA, RH 23/270, here 3. The forms of marking and age limits varied. In Gomeł, Jews had to sew yellow squares onto both sleeves of their clothing; in the small town of Kublichi (Kublichy), the letter “Z” was sewed; in many other towns, Jews had to wear white armbands and/or mark their houses with the Star of David. See: Gennadii Vinnitsa, *Kholokost na okkupirovanoi territorii vostochnoi Belorussii v 1941-1944 godakh* (Minsk: Kovcheg, 2014), 199 and following pages.

21 On the occupation and the Holocaust, see standard works by Gerlach and Chiari as well as *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, vols. 7 and 8 (Munich and Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2011, 2016).

22 Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds., *The Children Accuse* (London: Mitchell, 1996), xviii.

and find places to hide. The Jewish Belarusian historian Leonid Smilovitskii speaks of a “survival mechanism” that was reactivated in children in wartime conditions.²³ Jewish children who were condemned to death proved less passive than previously assumed, as recent studies on Jewish children in Poland have shown.²⁴ Anika Walke also demonstrates that adolescents in the Minsk ghetto had been “the most vulnerable and the most resourceful group within the ghetto.”²⁵ The status of “child” generally meant death, but it was children and adolescents who also found it easier to elude an extermination operation and locate a hiding place. Children were usually the ones who took up adults’ roles and procured food or medicine for other family members. As girls might be subjected to sexual violence, it was primarily male youths who performed these procurement tasks. In the meantime, the role of head of the family fell, unsought, to young sons or brothers, often when their parents were no longer alive and they were forced to assume responsibility for their younger siblings.

Examples of this imposed role change for children are numerous. Six-year-old Maia Krapina, who was in the Minsk ghetto with her mother, grandfather, two little sisters, and ten-year-old brother Iosif, was rarely allowed to leave the ghetto.²⁶ Her brother, however, was constantly on the move outside the ghetto and occasionally provided the family with food. After his mother died, Iosif completely assumed the role of head of the family and did so in full awareness of what this entailed—at least, this is how he describes it in his memoirs: “Now I was forced to obtain something to eat. I left the ghetto to go out and beg. [. . .] Sometimes I went to the Cherven market and bought a bucketful of potatoes there, which I then resold in the ghetto. [. . .] Then I started going far away from the city to the villages and didn’t come back until late in the

23 Leonid Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii 1941-1944* (Tel Aviv: Biblioteka Matveia Chernogo, 2000); Leonid Smilovitskii, “Voina, otrazhennaia v detskom soznanii. Peregovory evreiskikh detei so svoimi roditeliami, voennosluzhashchimi Krasnoi armii v gody sovetsko-germanskoj voiny 1941–1945gg.,” *Wschód Europy* 1, no. 3 (2017), 217–76.

24 Michlic, *Jewish Families in Europe*, and Slowa, *Jewish Childhood in Krakow*. See also the pioneering study by Deborah Dwork: Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children’s Lives Under the Nazis* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

25 Anika Walke, “Jewish Youth in the Minsk Ghetto: How Age and Gender Mattered,” *Kritika—Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 3 (2014): 535–62.

26 Maia Krapina, interview by author in Minsk, August 30, 2016. Many girls were not even allowed to leave the building in which they lived with other families in crowded conditions. See also: Alla Rakovshchik, Visual History Archive—USC Shoah Foundation Institute (hereinafter VHA), Interview Code 36510.

evening.”²⁷ A similar practice can be observed in the other ghettos of the occupied BSSR.²⁸ Other children signed up as “fit for work” or as skilled craftsmen so they could leave the ghetto in a work gang and support the family with the food they received as payment.²⁹ Children’s flexible role identity, i. e., their ability to adapt, was one of the central resources for the survival of entire families.

But even without taking on an active role in the family, children had to abandon the light-heartedness of their youth and grow up fast. Vladimir Trachtenberg, a survivor of the Minsk ghetto, had to master “everyday life” all on his own when he was just three/four years old because his mother was out working with other adults. When I asked whether he remembered “everyday life” in the ghetto and what it consisted of, he replied that he spent the whole time looking for hiding places and food. He knew many places to hide, he said, and could sit there, silently, for hours on end; he knew exactly how to play dead, how to get dressed on his own, with lightning speed, at any time of day or night.³⁰ Most small children, out of fear, probably developed similar behaviors that were uncharacteristic for their age. Berta Malomed, who was also held in the Minsk ghetto, writes in her memoirs that small children understood everything incredibly quickly and very seldom cried. “No screaming of children was heard. They sat meekly, there was no need to explain anything to them. They understood everything, did not ask for food. They knew: if there’s something to eat, then they’ll get it.”³¹ The freedom and playfulness of childhood was brutally replaced by existential knowledge of how they had to behave, what to do and what not to do, and by concern for family members.

To survive the Holocaust, children developed amazing powers of action and autonomy at which they themselves marveled decades later. Ten-year-old Kagan Zalmanovich managed to escape shortly before the

27 *Vospominaniia Levina Iosifa Isaakovicha*, 1931, Belaruski dziarzhauŋy arkhiiu-muzei litaratury i mastatstva, BDAML (Belarusian State Archive and Museum for Literature and Art), f. 490, vop. 1b, spr. 194, 32–36; Maia Levina-Krapina, *Trizhdy rozhdeniia. Vospominaniia bysbei uznitsy minskogo getto* (Minsk: Zmitser Kolas, 2008), 6.

28 According to Iurii Tsaretskii in Mihail Rywkin (Mikhail Ryvkin) and Arkadij Schulman (Arkadii Shul’man), *Chronik der furchtbaren Tage: die Tragödie des Witebsker Gettos* (Minsk: Medisont, 2007), 75–76.

29 According to Savelii Kaplinskii in Vladimir Levin and David Mel’tser, eds., *Cher-naia kniga s krasnymi stranitsami (Tragediia i geroizm evreev Belorussii)* (Baltimore: Vestnik, 1996), 202–3.

30 Vladimir Trachtenberg (b. 1938), interview by author in Minsk, September 3, 2017.

31 Berta Malomed, “Menia rasstreliali 2 marta 1942 goda. . .,” in *Vyzhit’—podvig*, ed. Inna Gerasimova and Viacheslav Selemenev (Minsk: NARB, 2008), 70–114, here 83.

extermination of the Jews in the Rahachou ghetto. In appearance, he resembled a Belarusian village boy and, thus, was able to survive the war. Nonetheless, today he is astonished by his behavior back then: “I was just twelve years old but already had to make serious adult decisions. Now, many years later, [. . .] I don’t understand how I succeeded in doing all that.”³² Due to the genocidal policies that the German occupiers directed at Jews, only very few Jewish children and adolescents survived the occupation in the region.³³

Children and Adolescents from the Majority Society

The distortions of the generational order were extreme in the case of Jews condemned to death. Concepts such as “child” and “adolescent” lost their meaning. In order to survive, however, almost all children in the occupied territories had to “function” as adults. Still, the lives of non-Jewish children were undoubtedly shaped by a lesser degree of brutality. They were neither confined into ghettos nor were they systematically killed. In some places, especially in the western part of the country, the “sheltered environments” of childhood such as schools and kindergartens even continued to exist. Non-Jewish orphans were allowed to remain in institutional children’s homes, whereas orphaned Jewish children were separated from their peer group and murdered.³⁴

However, non-Jewish children were subject to role changes and underwent an accelerated process of maturation as well. While fathers were mobilized for Red Army service after the onset of war, children stayed behind with their siblings and mothers and were confronted daily with hunger, wartime atrocities, and violence. Many state today that they lost

32 Leonid Rubinshtein, ed., *Deti voiny* (Minsk: Medisont, 2015), 25.

33 It is no longer possible to determine exactly how many there were because survival in many cases involved the loss of Jewish identity, and in postwar Soviet society, Jewish victims were not counted. The number of children killed also cannot be precisely determined. The data on the total number of Jewish victims varies widely. The Belarusian-Israeli historian Leonid Smilovitskii sets the total number of murdered Jews in Belarus by the end of the war in 1944 at a minimum of 800,000, whereas Franziska Exeler, in her recently published study, gives an estimate of 500,000 to 671,000. Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev*, 29 and the following pages; Franziska Exeler, *Ghosts of War: Nazi Occupation and Its Aftermath in Soviet Belarus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2022), 250.

34 Yuliya von Saal, “Mehr als Opfer. Kriegskinder und ihr Überleben in den Kinderheimen im besetzten Belarus,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 68, nos. 3–4 (2020): 403–31.

their “childhood” the first time they saw dead bodies or the act of killing itself.³⁵ In many recollections, early traumatic experiences such as death or separation from parents mark the boundary between their prewar “happy” childhood and their wartime childhood. Most frequently, the phase of imposed transition to adulthood is connected with the burden of responsibility for oneself and other family members and the need to make decisions and undertake physical labor.

Experiences of hard physical labor and the feeling of having been robbed of a childhood are expressed in almost all the oral and written accounts. Even children who retained both parents were forced to move into the roles of adults or caregivers. The parents of Arkadii Osipuk, for example, regularly went out in partisan areas in order to obtain food and other necessities while he, a nine-year-old child, stayed home alone with his little sister for one or two weeks at a time. Every day, he said, he chopped wood, heated the stove, and cooked meals all by himself. There was more to his adult role, however. Like many other children, he equipped himself with a pot and tried his luck at the German soup kitchens. If he got a ladleful of soup, he took it home to share with the others.³⁶ The historical records even include reports by adults that emphasize that their survival as a family was possible solely thanks to the actions of children, who went regularly to German soup kitchens and carried out minor tasks there.³⁷

Children were needed by their parents in the household, for work in the fields, and for the harvest, and they also were sent out to search for food and work.³⁸ Small children mostly looked after the livestock, and girls undertook the “rearing” of their younger siblings and performed

35 According to Vasilii Boikachev in S. Papara and L. Gramovich, eds., *Dzetsi vainy. Kniha narodnai pamiatsi* (Minsk: Iunatstva, 1993), 33.

36 E. Borshchevskaia et al., eds., *Deti voiny* (Vitebsk: Nash dom, 2009), 82.

37 See: Iaukhim Kipel’ (Jauchim Kipel), *Épisodes* (Minsk: Limaryus, 2013), 200.

38 The use of children in the household was often the reason parents gave for not allowing their children to attend school. By the same token, the Germans used schoolchildren for various tasks such as clearing snow, cleaning the streets, and helping with the harvest. See for example: Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht Einsatzgruppe B vom 1. 9. 1942 für die Zeit vom 16. 8.–31. 8. 1942, in *Die “Ereignismeldungen UdSSR” 1941. Dokumente der Einsatzgruppen in der Sowjetunion, I*, ed. Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Andrey Angrick, Jürgen Matthäus, and Martin Cüppers (Darmstadt: WBG, 2011), 381–405, here 391; Spravzdacha inspektara Narodnai As’vety menskaha pavetu za 1942–1943 navuch god. Dziarzhauñy arkhiv Minskai voblastsi, DAMV (Belarusian State Archive of Minsker Region), f. 623, vop. 1, spr. 484, st. 10–11; testimony of Regina Kazenko in Papara, *Dzetsi vainy*, 105–14. Some children preferred work to a German school. See: Uladzimir Kisialiou, *Askolki paranenai pamiatsi. Autabiagrafichnaia apovest’* (Minsk: Khursik, 2004), 61.

household chores.³⁹ Male adolescents often worked as shoeshine boys, baggage porters, newsboys, or peddlers in the markets. The Belarusian lyric poet Larysa Heniush, who came to Minsk in June 1944, was so appalled by the sight of the many children at the train station offering their services as rickshaw drivers that she called what she had seen “utter barbarism.”⁴⁰ What Geniush perceived as barbarism, and German government agencies and Einsatzgruppen interpreted in their reports as vagrancy and banditry—without revealing the underlying causes—was the fight for survival by orphans or children earning extra income for their family members at home.⁴¹ It is striking that a gender division of labor was retained in all the upheaval: girls were expected to assume typical women’s roles, whereas boys were more likely to perform physical labor and take on the appearance and manner of grown men (see Figure 1).

The disappearance of the notion of childhood as a protected period of development was a widespread experience during the war. It can be observed not only in photographs but also in egodocuments and interviews with contemporary witnesses, official documents, and in literature in which various aspects of premature maturation of minors were problematized. It should be noted that for many children in the Soviet Union, these experiences were not very new. The myth of the happy and protected Soviet childhood ran up against the harsh reality precisely in the Soviet Union’s rural regions, of which the BSSR was one.⁴² In these areas,

39 See the testimonies in the collective volume edited by Papara: *Dzetsi voiny*, here testimony of Zoia Nazarova, 63–74; Borshchevskaia, *Deti voiny*, here testimony of Mariia Dulinets, 34.

40 Larysa Heniush, *Spovedz'* (Minsk, 1993), 87. Geniush spent the entire war in exile in Prague, and as a lyric poet with a strong sense of national identity and an associate of the exiled Rada of the Belarusian People’s Republic established in 1918, she was forced to serve as a delegate to the so-called Second Belarusian National Assembly on June 27, 1944, only a few days before the city was retaken by the Red Army.

41 According to Vadim Vorob’ev (b. 1929), who worked as a newsboy and baggage porter, among other things, at the train station in Brest. Vadim Vorob’ev, *Vospominaniia ob uchastii v deiatel’nosti Brestskoi podpol’noi partiino-komsomol’skoi organizatsii*, 250 pp., dated April 26, 1974 (held by the archive of Brestski ablasny kraiaznauchy muzei/Brest Local History Museum), here 20 and the following pages. On neglected and parentless children, see the reminiscences of Kim Sokolovskii and Volodia Sokolovskii, *Detskii dom v tylu vraga* (Minsk: Belarus, 2008); see also testimonies in the collective volume edited by Papara: *Dzetsi voiny*, here the testimony of Zoia Nazarova, 63–74.

42 Along with the teaching of literacy skills and the promotion of the Belarusification of the country, there was an enormous push for industrialization and the associated

childhood was shaped by poverty, physical labor, violence, and the loss of parents (as a result of Stalinist repression). The prewar childhoods of most children were not “modern” and “happy” in terms of the Soviet notion of progress, nor were they easy and passive.

While many children could draw on their prewar experience of everyday life as defined by physical labor, and quite a few of them were already familiar with exclusion, the utter vulnerability caused by the occupiers’ war of extermination was undoubtedly new. The psychological stress was especially great for those children who had to take the place of mothers for their younger siblings. That was most notably the case in the Nazi camps located in the eastern part of the country, where entire families were interned as of 1943.⁴³ There, many children were subject to the high expectations of their family members, who asked too much of them psychologically and physically. Like Jewish children in the ghettos, only children and adolescents could crawl under the fence surrounding the camp in order to find food for the adults and younger children who remained imprisoned. Nina Rusachenko, in her notes from the Slutsk prisoner-of-war camp, described the pressure she felt on such occasions:⁴⁴ She regularly left the camp, she said, to beg in the villages nearby.

urbanization. As a result, at the end of the 1930s, 24.6 percent of the population lived in the large cities of Minsk, Vitsebsk, Homel’, Mahilioŭ, and Babruisk. Most of the country, however, remained rural. In the Kresy region, the urban population barely reached 12 percent in 1939. See Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 39; Pavel Tereshkovich, “The Belarusian Road to Modernity,” *International Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (2001): 78–93, here 83.

43 Research on the civilian population in camps that were converted from POW camps to civilian prisoner camps as of 1943 is largely nonexistent. I base my remarks here on my own research project “War Childhoods in Occupied Belarus (1941-1944): Experiences, Consequences, Remembrances,” which focuses on children’s experiences under German occupation and is affiliated to the Leibniz Institute for the Contemporary History in Munich. For more on the project, see: <https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/en/research/ea/research/war-childhoods-in-occupied-belarus-1941-1944-experiences-consequences-remembrances>. See also: Yuliya von Saal, “‘Bandenkinder’: Kinderlager im Spiegel der Quellen und Erinnerungen der Überlebenden im besetzten Belarus,” in *Kindheiten im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Francesca Weil, André Postert, and Alfons Kenkmann (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2018), 411–29.

44 The report does not indicate which camp Nina Rusachenko was in or for how long. According to her account, they first entered the camp in 1943 and were interned there for only a short time. In Slutsk between 1941 and 1944, there was at least one camp for POWs and the civilian population, one camp for refugees, and one prison. See: Vladimir Adamushko et al., eds., *Handbuch der Haftstätten für Zivilbevölkerung auf dem besetzten Territorium Weißrusslands 1941–1944* (Minsk: Gosudarstvennyi Komitet po archivam i deloproizvodstvu Respubliki Belarus’



Figure 1: Minor baggage porters waiting on the main square in Vitsebsk (Russian/English: Vitebsk) for the work (Source: Vitsebsk Regional Museum of Local History)

Sometimes, she returned empty-handed and beaten by the police until she bled, while her mother and brother, suffering from hunger, looked at her “in silent hope.”⁴⁵ Performing a similar role as caregiver, fourteen-year-old Valentina Belova looked after her sick nine-year-old nephew in the Russian camp in Idritsa.⁴⁶ She supplied him with food and, because

2001), 132. See also: http://nasledie-sluck.by/ru/sluchina/historical_dates/6259/; and Geoffrey P. Megargee, Rüdiger Overmans, and Wolfgang Vogt, eds., *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, vol. IV, *Camps and Other Detention Facilities under the German Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Indiana University Press 2022), 333, 365–66.

45 Borshchevskaia, *Deti voiny*, 102.

46 Evidently this was Dulag (*Durchgangslager*, transit camp) 150. Originally established in Poland, it was transferred to Idritsa in the autumn of 1941 and was not closed until September 20, 1943. See: *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 89.

he could no longer walk, carried him when they were sent on a forced march to Lithuania.⁴⁷ If parents were no longer alive or nearby, older siblings assumed responsibility for little ones. The dependent relationships arising from this situation could be both psychologically and physically burdensome.

Self-perception and Habitus

The children's sources contain numerous statements about the burden of responsibility, which was simultaneously accompanied by helplessness. It is striking that, looking back, the survivors do not describe themselves as "children" but rather as "adults," in accordance with their assumed roles. Vladimir Trachtenberg, who escaped from the Minsk ghetto at the age of five in the autumn of 1943, asserted in an interview that he was already a "grown man."⁴⁸ Ten-year-old Kagan Zalmanovich, who escaped from Rahachou and was given shelter by a farmer's wife, herself the mother of three children, describes his position there as that of the "only man in the household." He took on the burden of all the household work.⁴⁹ Twelve-year-old Petr Shnitko, in his postwar reminiscences, also describes his position as "head of the family." When the war began, he said, his father joined the partisans, leaving Petr, his mother, and two small siblings behind at home. From then on, it was his job to live in anticipation, stockpiling goods for periods of shortage or emergency. In the forest, he dug large holes in which he concealed food supplies and clothing.⁵⁰

Today, a large number of Soviet war children assert that even at the age of five or six, they were "a man," "grown up," "independent," "self-reliant," and "serious." They describe this development as something for which there was no alternative.⁵¹ Admittedly, such a self-perception can be deconstructed by reasoning that it derives from an ex post facto perspective.

47 Valentina and her nephew were able to find shelter with a Lithuanian family temporarily. Later on, they were taken to Germany in a transport but managed to escape. Only after liberation by the Red Army and the placement of her nephew in an orphanage did Valentina end her role as surrogate mother for the boy. Valentina Belova (b. 1929), interview by author in Moscow, July 3, 2017.

48 Vladimir Trachtenberg, interview by author in Minsk, September 3, 2017.

49 Rubinshtein, *Deti voiny*, 26.

50 Dziazhauŭny arkhiv Vitsebskai voblastsi, DAVV (State archive of Vitsebsk Region), f. 9742, vop. 2, spr. 36, 1–13.

51 Krinko, *Detstvo i voina*; Nadezhda Romanenko, *My rodom iz detstva, voennogo detstva* (Kamyshin: Kamyshin, 2003). See also the numerous interviews with survivors in the VHA: for example, Boris Ozerskii, 1936, Interview Code 37356.

Yet this interpretation does not alter the fact that children actually functioned as adults. The reversal of the generational order and the lowering of the age boundary between adulthood and childhood meant that boys as young as thirteen or fourteen were already regarded as “men” or “guys,” and girls as “women.” Children adopted the habitus, the appearance, and the language of adults. This was especially true of Jewish children, whose relationships with each other consisted of sharing what they knew about obtaining food, hiding places, and pogroms.

As mentioned previously, children also learned very quickly to suppress their emotions and rarely cried. Many children became emotionally “numb” in wartime—one of the typical symptoms of destructive parentification and traumatization. When speaking about it, they themselves use the corresponding vocabulary and imagery.⁵² They were serious and vigilant. Jewish children in particular, as well as those in institutional children’s homes, were characterized by a strongly pronounced seriousness and sternness. Many, looking back, describe this state of mind as a kind of “apathy” that was reinforced by malnutrition and illness.⁵³

War children also practiced a coarse style of speech, smoked, drank alcohol, and, of necessity, usually wore oversized clothing. Iakov Kravchinskii started smoking in the Minsk ghetto at the age of eight, he said. Like most of the other boys, he smoked at that age to suppress the pangs of constant hunger.⁵⁴ Additionally, some memoirs, communications of the Einsatzgruppen,⁵⁵ and Soviet and contemporary sources such as diaries contain indications that drinking alcohol was not unusual among minors.⁵⁵

52 Kazenko speaks of “numbness” and refers to her postwar life as a “thawing out.” In addition, she says she was used to looking at herself askance. Papara, *Dzetsi vainy*, 105–14.

53 See for example: the interview with Vladimir Sverdlov, Interview zao13, 15. 9. 2005, Das Interview-Archiv “Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945.”

54 Iakov Kravchinskii (b. 1933), interview by author in Minsk, August 30, 2017. The image of children smoking can be found in many photographs taken by Wehrmacht soldiers and in the press. On the photos, see: BA (Bundesarchiv), Bestand 101, Propagandakompanien der Wehrmacht.

55 Marat Kuznetsov writes that he was given his first moonshine for Christmas, at the age of eleven. *Eto tozhe nasha istoriia*, 227. See also: Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht Einsatzgruppe B vom 1. 9. 1942 für die Zeit vom 16. 8.–31. 8. 1942, in *Die “Ereignismeldungen UdSSR” 1941*. A further source is a report by the organization Belarusian People’s Self-Assistance (BNS, Belaruskaia narodnaia samapomach) dated December 13, 1941. It contains information about the forcing open of German storage facilities by institutionalized children, who stole alcohol and cigarettes. The report does not indicate, however, whether they sold the stolen goods on the black market or consumed them. The report noted that there were many such instances. Natsyianal’ny arkhiv Respubliki Belarus’, NARB (National Archive of Belarus), f. 384, vop. 1, spr. 11, l. 1.

Among neglected male adolescents and minors in institutional homes for children, alcohol was much in demand—and after the war, it was a problem. A report on the situation in institutional children's homes in the Vitsebsk region states that institutionalized children stole things in order to trade them for vodka; moreover, institutionalized children were encountered in a drunken state.⁵⁶

A further consequence of the distorted social and generational order was the sexual precocity of the adolescents and the increased incidence of sexually transmitted infections among them. Soviet postwar reports show a marked spread of sexually transmitted diseases between children living in orphanages. For example, in two children's homes in the city of Hrodna, up to thirty-six children under the age of fourteen were infected with gonorrhea in 1946.⁵⁷ At a meeting of the Central Committee of the Komsomol in November 1945, issues of precocity, coarsening behaviors, and widespread venereal disease were openly discussed. It was alleged that youths, starting at the age of twelve, drank alcohol on a regular basis and kept company with girls; beginning at the age of fourteen, many became sexual surrogates for absent men. In some rural areas, it was said, adolescents lived together with grown women.⁵⁸ This observation was very likely not the only one of its kind given that it was discussed openly at the party level. Furthermore, it indicates that adults, too, viewed adultified children as mature individuals and treated them as such.

For these reasons, in 1944, Soviet artists, writers, and filmmakers seriously debated which films and literary works were appropriate for the war children who, despite their young age, had become adults as a result of their experiences of violence. One filmmaker contended that “war children” should not be treated as children or adolescents according to a traditional understanding of the concepts because they were effectively “grown-up persons” at the age of thirteen or fourteen.⁵⁹ Ultimately, the suspended generational order was reflected in films and in literature, as in the story by Platonov described at the beginning of this essay. Similarly, the orphaned underage hero in a poem by Sergei Mikhalkov is given

56 See: *Spravka o sostoianii detskikh domov vitebskoi oblasti*, 22.8.1946, NARB, f. 4p, vop. 17, spr. 51, 54–61.

57 CK KP(b)Belorussii tovarishchu Ponomarenko P.K. o sostojanii ustroistva detei-sirot po respublike, NARB, f. 4p, vop. 17, spr. 51, 66–81, 75.

58 See: Record of the meeting in RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), f. M1., op. 2, d. 234, here 175–76. See also: Set Bernstein (Seth Bernstein), *Vospitannye pri Staline. Komsomol'tsy i zashchita sotsializma* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2018), 262.

59 Bernstein, *Vospitannye pri Staline*, 261–62.

no name and is called only a “ten-year-old man” rather than a child.⁶⁰ Even without the phenomenon of adultification being labeled as such, it was indeed tackled as a conflict between the reality of war and the actual age of children, especially by the children’s literature of the war years.⁶¹

The Return to “Happy Childhood” after the War?

When the war ended, by no means did most children return to their well-protected “happy childhood.” Apart from the fact that the notion of “happy childhood” was a Stalinist myth even before the war began, the official announcements of a rapid return to normalcy proved to be propaganda that was far removed from reality. Many children emerged from the war as orphans. In June 1945, the number of parentless children was at least 70,000 in the BSSR alone. In early 1946, as many as 91,000 parentless children were registered there, and by the autumn of that year, the number was at least 138,000.⁶² In the Soviet Union as a whole, at least three million children were orphans in 1948.⁶³ Several years after the war, these children still lived in intolerable circumstances. Small children and girls in particular were often adopted or found surrogate families, but older children had to continue to “function” on their own, regardless of whether they were Jewish survivors or not. At the age of fourteen, adolescents were treated as “grown-ups” and assigned to vocational schools. Alternatively, they had to earn their own keep. Valentina Belova, who had to look after her nephew during the war, did not return to civilian life as a “child”: as an adolescent fit for work, she was immediately sent to a vocational school and had to work.

But even children who had parents did not regain their sheltered existence as “children” or “adolescents.” Older youths still had a duty to continue on in parental or caregiver roles. Nina Bykova, who was deported to Germany for forced labor at the age of ten, did not attend school after

60 Sergei Mikhalkov, “Desiatiletanii chelovek.” Text: <https://www.culture.ru/poems/45353/desyatiletnii-chelovek>. “Danila Kuz’mich,” another poem by Mikhalkov, also addresses the adultification of children.

61 Less well-known is the story by Lev Kassil’, “Dorogie moi mal’chishki” (1944), whose hero, fourteen-year-old Kapka Butyrev, has the role of a grown man not only at the factory but also within his family. He has to take his father’s place and take care of two little sisters. The image of the adult child is reflected in a great number of other works.

62 NARB, f. 7, op. 3, d. 1494, III.

63 See: Mariia Zezina, “Sotsial’naia zashchita detei-sirot v poslevoennnye gody,” *Voprosy istorii* 1 (1999): 127–36.

her return; instead, she found a job: “I was the older one in the family, I had to help Mama.”⁶⁴ These are statements often heard from war children. Others, such as Arkadii Shkuran, who was only ten years old in 1944, continued to go to the villages or to encampments of Red Army soldiers, where they begged for food.⁶⁵ Boys took the place of absent men, much like Petrushka in Platonov’s novel. Together with elderly persons and women, children, and adolescents rebuilt the dugouts and villages and schools consumed by fire; they tilled the fields and ran the household. Many were unable to attend school because, like Nina and Arkadii, they had to work. Moreover, tuition fees, books, and clothes were usually in short supply. Children who had survived a camp, an institutional home, or the Holocaust often suffered from both physical and psychological effects such as severe headaches, permanent infirmity due to years of malnutrition, and illnesses that made regular school attendance difficult.⁶⁶ Older children would refuse to go to school out of shame because they were not placed in the sixth or seventh grade, in keeping with their age. Instead, they were put in the second grade, in a classroom with considerably younger children. At the age of sixteen, Wladimir Swerdlow was sent by his father to the third grade. He ran away from school on the very first day because other children had teased him, he recalled.⁶⁷ It was not a rare occurrence for children of thirteen or fourteen to be placed in the first or second grade. During the 1946/47 school year, children and adolescents with an age difference of ten years (between seven and sixteen years of age!) sat together in the first-grade classrooms of the Soviet Union. The fifth and sixth grades included pupils between ten and twenty years of age.⁶⁸

64 *Deti voiny*, 23, contains many additional examples.

65 Arkadii Shkuran and Anatolii Rozhkov, eds., *Deti Belarusi v voine 1941–1945 gg. Prestupleniia vermakhta: aktsiia “Seno,” 1944 god* (Minsk: Knigazbor, 2020), 290.

66 Larisa Lazavaia, in Kuz’ma Kozak, Mariia Zhukova, eds., *Voina prichiniaet mne bol’* (Minsk: Logvinov, 2012), 86–87.

67 Wladimir Swerdlow, Interview zao13, September 15, 2005, Interview-Archiv “Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945.”

68 Mariia Maiofis, “Predvestiia otpopeli v sovetskoi shkol’noi politike pozdnestalin-skogo vremeni,” in *Ostrova utopii. Pedagogicheskoe i sotsial’noe proektirovanie poslev-oennoi shkoly (1940–1980)*, ed. Il’ia Kukulin, Mariia Majofis, and Petr Safronov (Moscow: NLO, 2015), 35–106, here 60.

Postwar Processing

The postwar period was characterized by extreme material deprivation. Disease, high mortality rates, especially among small children and those in institutional homes, and dire poverty arising not only from wartime destruction but also from a revived Stalinism and mismanagement shaped the postwar period in the country.⁶⁹ In view of the widespread fatherlessness, material destruction, and intense deprivation, the early postwar years brought no restoration of the generational order.

Recovery was complicated by the way in which Soviet society dealt with its wartime experiences. With the victory over Nazi Germany, the mythologization of the war began. The loss of countless human lives was trivialized, and survival during the occupation period quickly aroused suspicions of collaboration. Experiences that failed to conform to the formula of the heroically sacrificing child—who, for example, fought on the side of the partisans against the occupiers—became taboo, and those children whose lives did not fit this narrative were stigmatized.⁷⁰ Jewish survivors wanted, above all, to forget the annihilation of their people. They were pressured into silence, and a similar model of such silence was offered by schools as well as postwar films and literature. As “happy Soviet children,” they were supposed to continue to “function” and produce proof of their industriousness, capability, and patriotism in the course of rebuilding the country.

In professional circles, by contrast, an awareness of children’s suffering arose quite early and was sustained by humanistic ideas. It even triggered a discussion among experts about the war’s possible physical and psychological consequences for minors. While the war was still underway, educators observed the phenomenon of role reversal and recognized it as problematic and burdensome, especially for older siblings.⁷¹ A study of children and adolescents carried out at the Kashchenko Psychiatric Hos-

69 Nikolai Ganson, “Detskaia smertnost’ i gosudarstvennaia politika v SSSR v gody poslevoennogo goloda,” *Dialog so vremenem. Al'manakh intellektual'noi istorii* 17 (2006): 377–96.

70 In the whole territory of the USSR, according to the estimation of British historian Olga Kucherenko, the share of minors in partisan units was between 10 and 16 percent. In Belarus, according to official data, children and adolescents under eighteen made up 9.48 percent of partisans. Expressed in figures, there were 25,003 minors involved with the partisans. For reasons of space, it is not possible to go into this aspect in detail. For more on this, using the example of the entire USSR, see: Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers*, 198; Belarus data: RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 18.

71 D. Averbukh, “Moia rabota s evakuirovannymi det'mi,” *Doshkol'noe vospitanie*, no. 12 (1941): 16–18.

pital in Moscow between 1943 and 1951 was unusually progressive. The head of the hospital, the Ukrainian Professor Grunia Sukhareva, detected in war children a psychological aging that reflected the change in the generational order: “The normally cheerful disposition of childhood disappeared entirely. The children became apathetic, listless, disinterested, real old men.”⁷² She and her colleague Tat’iana Simson observed numerous somatic and psychological disturbances, particularly in children who had directly experienced death and acts of war. They found the same symptoms (speechlessness, rudeness, agitation, irritability, antisocial behavior, etc.) as their colleagues in the West who were studying the psychological effects of war on orphaned children, especially on young Jewish survivors from continental Europe.⁷³

The question of the possible traumatization of children was only hesitantly posed in accordance with the prevailing understanding in the academic world of psychiatry. Generally, it was thought that the earlier children confronted an experience of violence, the more resilient and adaptable they became. At the same time, awareness of the phenomena of adultification and parentification was largely nonexistent. The very possibility that children could develop long-term post-traumatic disorders was not recognized until the mid-1980s, in the wake of changing Holocaust discourse and the emergence of the category of “child survivors.” Not until 1988, with the adoption of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)-III-R,⁷⁴ did the experts acknowledge the occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorders in chil-

72 Grunia Sukhareva, “Psychologic Disturbances in Children during War,” *American Review of Soviet Medicine* 5, no. 1 (1947/48): 32–37. Tellingly, this publication did not appear in Russian.

73 See, for example: Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud, *Infants without Families and Reports on the Hampstead Nurseries, 1939-1945* (London: Hogarth, 1949); Hans Keilson, *Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern. Untersuchung zum Schicksal jüdischer Kriegswaisen* (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2005); Keilson, *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel. Essays, Reden, Gespräche* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer-Taschenbuch, 2011). See also: Thérèse Brosse, *Homeless Children: Report of the Proceedings of the Conference of Directors of Children’s Communities, Trogen, Switzerland* (Paris: Unesco, 1951); Dorothy Macardle, *Children of Europe: A Study of the Children of Liberated Countries; Their Wartime Experiences, Their Reactions, and Their Needs, with a Note on Germany* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1951), here esp. chapters 20 and 21; See also the article by Anna M. Parkinson in this volume: Anna M. Parkinson, “Revisiting the ‘Talking Cure’: Capturing Children’s Wartime Experiences through Hans Keilson’s Work on Sequential Traumatization,” in *Childhood during War and Genocide: Agency, Survival, and Representation*, ed. Joanna Michlic, Yuliya von Saal, and Anna Ullrich (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2024), 177–204.

74 The 1987 revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

dren.⁷⁵ Sukhareva and Simson, by contrast, observed that even during the war, children and their psyches were much more unstable and easier to traumatize than was the case with adults. Additionally, they emphasized the close connection between mental and physical health. Pathologies, behavioral disorders, and social abnormalities among the children were interpreted as natural reactions to wartime events and separation from parents.⁷⁶

Together with the scholar E. Osipova, Sukhareva even sent a noteworthy position paper to the Ministry of Health of the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1943, in which the authors confronted the Soviet government apparatus with the growing incidence of “psychoses” and pathologies among minors. The authors singled out children and adolescents as a separate and especially vulnerable category of war victims, and they appealed to the Soviet People’s Commissariat for Health to take the war-related psychological damages of this group seriously.⁷⁷ They stressed the great vulnerability of small children, and especially those who had been under German occupation, which had led in many instances to speech disorders, somatic illnesses, and epileptic reactions. They identified adolescents as an additional at-risk group because they, like adults, had to perform heavy physical labor for the front and, as a result, could exhibit “pathological reactions.” Without identifying the phenomenon explicitly, the authors of the paper described the process of adultification—not yet established at that time—as well as its pathological psychological and physical consequences. They advocated for an early response of compassionate medical treatment and humane education. Such opinions, however, conflicted with both real-life medical practice and official Soviet discourse.

Consequently, no systematic clinical studies on Soviet war children are available to us today, studies that would have recorded the full extent of damaging events at the time according to age, gender, and individual and

75 Stefan Grüner, “Kinder und Trauma. Zur wissenschaftlichen Konzeptualisierung von kindlicher Kriegs- und Gewalterfahrung seit dem 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Zucht und Ordnung. Gewalt gegen Kinder in historischer Perspektive*, ed. Stefan Grüner and Markus Raasch (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2019), 321–70. See also: José Brunner and Nathalie Zajde, eds., *Holocaust und Trauma. Kritische Perspektiven zur Entstehung und Wirkung eines Paradigmas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011).

76 Sukhareva, “Psychologic Disturbances”; Tat’iana Simson, “Reaktivnye sostoiianiia u detei rannogo vozrasta v usloviakh voennogo vremeni,” *Pediatriia* 6 (1946): 47–48.

77 K voprosu o vozstanovlenii [sic] nervno-psikhiatricheskoi pomoshchi detskomu naseleniiu soiuza v usloviakh voennogo vremeni. Dokladnaia zapiska, Zamesiteliu Narkoma NKZ SSSR tov. Kovriginoi, 30.10.1943, GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. P8009, op. 21, d. 60.

group experience. Furthermore, we will never obtain the necessary empirical material because the traumatizing experiences and the related defense and coping strategies of affected persons were not verbalized at the appropriate time. Unlike, for example, the generation of war children in Germany, Soviet survivors have never undergone therapy. For the same reasons, we are unable today to separate the multiple traumatic experiences that were caused by the routine witnessing of violence and murder from the psychologically stressful process of parentification or adultification.⁷⁸ Hence, it is impossible to make a broad, data-based assertion about the long-term aftereffects of the premature transition to adulthood during the war. Nonetheless, conclusions can be drawn retrospectively, based on modern trauma research involving international and domestic military conflicts that has been undertaken since the 1980s.

Today it is known that the psychological defense mechanisms of children have narrow limits, and that emotionally parentified children are especially prone to depression and somatization.⁷⁹ It is also known that the events of war have an especially traumatizing effect on children if they become prematurely autonomous, that is, if they are exposed to traumatic wartime events in the absence of adult attachment figures and are no longer able to assimilate the events later on.⁸⁰ It is largely undisputed that the probability of developing PTSD is heightened if memories of the traumatic event are insufficiently elaborated or if they were only faintly embedded in the autobiographical memory or not at all.⁸¹

78 According to the definition in the DSM-V (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), diagnostic criteria are differentiated by age. In children older than six, the existence of a traumatic event is assumed if the individual was exposed to death, the threat of death, actual or threatened grievous bodily harm, or actual or threatened sexual violence. Other stressors include injury or threat to another person, the witnessing of an unexpected or violent death or of profound suffering, or the threat of death or injury of a family member or loved one. Also recognized as traumatic stress are events that go beyond the normal stress of daily life. The development of characteristic symptoms after confrontation with an extremely traumatic event is known as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. See Peter Falkai and Hans-Ulrich Wittchen, eds., *Diagnostisches und Statistisches Manual Psychischer Störungen DSM-5* (Göttingen: Hogrefe, 2015), 369–72.

79 Katarzyna Schier et al., “Parentifizierung in der Kindheit und psychische Störungen im Erwachsenenalter,” *Psychotherapie, Psychosomatik, medizinische Psychologie* 61, no. 8 (2011): 364–71.

80 See for example: Lynne Jones, *Then They Started Shooting: Children of the Bosnian War and the Adults They Become* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2013); John A. Shaw, “Children, Adolescents and Trauma,” *Psychiatric Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2000): 227–43.

81 The repressed experiences remain stored in the working memory and come back in flashbacks and nightmares. For this reason, the return of the memory and the inte-

Affected children generally withdraw and develop so-called dissociative symptoms: emotional numbness or a “frozen” spatiotemporal sense. Many also suffer from reduced affect, flashbacks, anxiety states, depression, feelings of guilt and shame, personality disorders, or overexcitability, symptoms that can be manifested in sleep disturbances and difficulties with concentration. Almost all of these symptoms appear to some extent in the oral recollections of Soviet war children.⁸²

Generally, it is thought that the younger the child, the more they react by engaging in emotional avoidance, which often leads to the false conclusion that the child is less affected.⁸³ There are also studies that indicate that very young children have a certain protection against trauma because they lack adult-like cognitive skills.⁸⁴ Today, most experts agree that children between five and nine display the greatest vulnerability because they already perceive events very consciously but do not yet have adequate coping mechanisms.⁸⁵ In older children, dissociative and somatic symptoms are likely to be diagnosed, and adolescents are increasingly

gration of the traumatic experience into the autobiographical memory represent a key element of therapeutic treatment. For an introduction to the subject area, see: Renate Volbert, *Beurteilung von Aussagen über Traumata. Erinnerungen und ihre psychologische Bewertung* (Berlin: Huber, 2004).

- 82 The naming of the symptoms above did not occur until decades after the war. As a rule, they were mentioned unconsciously and in passing during the interviews that were conducted with contemporary witnesses beginning in the 1990s. Conscious reflection did not occur. A rare exception appears in the recollections of the war child Marat Kuznetsov, who became a psychiatrist after the war and dealt with the psychological consequences of wartime experiences in war children in detail. Although he could not conduct any comparative longitudinal studies, his retrospective analyses reflect the state of knowledge of contemporary research on the traumatic effects of wartime events in children. He also pointed out the subjective factors as well as the negative consequences for personality development if there was no reprocessing of the traumatic experiences. See: Kuznetsov, *Eto tozhe nasha istoriia*; Kuznetsov, “Psikhoanaliticheskie aspekty formirovaniia sindroma sotsial'noi deprivatsii u malon letnikh uznikov natsional-sotsialisticheskikh presledovaniï,” *Vesnik Mahiliouskaba dziarzhainaha universiteta imia A. A. Kuliashova* 12, no. 2–3 (2002): 168–73.
- 83 Werner Bohleber, “Kriegskindheiten und ihre lebenslangen seelischen Folgen,” in *Kindheiten im Zweiten Weltkrieg und ihre Folgen*, ed. Harmut Radebold et al. (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2012), 55.
- 84 Joshua Barenbaum, Vladislav Ruchkin, and Mary Schwab-Stone, “The Psychosocial Aspects of Children Exposed to War: Practice and Policy Initiatives,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45, no. 1 (2004): 41–62. Interestingly, many Soviet war children share this opinion when they reflect on their early childhood experiences of the war. See: Krinko, *Detstvo i voïna*.
- 85 Gordana Kuterovac-Jagodić, “Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Croatian Children Exposed to War: A Prospective Study,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, no. 4 (2003): 9–25; Keilson, *Sequentielle Traumatisierung*.

prone to acting out with behaviors such as aggressive outbursts, delinquency, suicide attempts, and drug abuse.

Numerous studies have identified phase-specific consequences based on age and have concluded that the severity of the consequences of stress depends not only on age and the nature of the trauma but also on various cultural and social factors, as well as personal predispositions. Children can be resilient to some degree, provided they have certain protective factors (social/emotional support, “open” coping strategies) at their command. Above all, children can develop greater resilience if they have secure family ties and/or are convinced that they did not make sacrifices in vain.⁸⁶ Accordingly, not every experience of violence led to pathological findings, and a number of Holocaust survivors were able to process their experiences in a positive manner.⁸⁷ Historian Lisa Kirschenbaum follows the concept of resilience, even interpreting the use of official heroic narratives by Soviet war children as a way of processing traumatic war experiences. Kirschenbaum argues that the government propaganda about children’s willingness to make sacrifices should be regarded as part of the concept of resilience.⁸⁸ If we follow her interpretation, we must not automatically view every instance of imposed adultification and role reversal as pathological and, relatedly, all affected war children as damaged victims. After all, perhaps the early maturation process could be a source of upward mobility, enhanced status, and recognition within the social community for the child’s own family or the constructed surrogate family, as Platonov showed with the example of Petrushka. These considerations by no means lessen the severity of children’s suffering during the war and the psychological and physical stress placed on them. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the complexity of children’s

86 See for example: Brian K. Barber, *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lewis A. Leavitt and Nathan A. Fox, eds., *The Psychological Effects of War and Violence on Children* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1993), here esp. James Garbarino and Kathleen Kostelny, *Children’s Response to War: What Do We Know?*, 23–40; Bennett Simon and Roberta J. Apfel, eds., *Minefields in Their Hearts: The Mental Health of Children in War and Communal Violence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); John J. Sigal and Morton Weinfeld, “Do Children Cope Better Than Adults with Potentially Traumatic Stress? A 40-Year Follow-Up of Holocaust Survivors,” *Psychiatry* 64, no. 1 (2001): 69–80.

87 Jacob Lomranz hypothesizes that many Holocaust survivors were able to process their experiences well. See: Jacob Lomranz, “‘Aintegration’. Ein komplementäres Paradigma zum Verständnis von Holocaust-Überlebenden,” in *Holocaust und Trauma*, 223–41.

88 Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, “The Meaning of Resilience: Soviet Children in World War II,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 47, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 521–35.

functioning during and after the war, and to see not only pathological consequences but also the resources inherent in war-related role reversal, as well as the transformative effects of such a reversal on the society as a whole. The acceptance of responsibility associated with maturation was essential for survival during the war. Furthermore, it could be positively assimilated as resilience later on. How many survivors of the war succeeded in doing so, however, will remain unknown forever.

Conclusions

The study of wartime childhoods and the phenomena of adultification and parentification opens up a number of fresh perspectives on war and wartime societies. First, the active role of children in the everyday routine of war becomes visible. Rapid maturation and role reversal affected all children and adolescents regardless of ethnicity, religion, or location of experience (city, village, or partisans), but it especially affected those children who were concentrated in ghettos and camps. Adultification and parentification were a form of adaptation to the everyday routine of war; they were not solely life-saving measures for children and adults. Both phenomena could be positively assimilated by those affected during their subsequent efforts to cope with the consequences of war.

Second, the examination of childhood war experiences also reveals processes of change in wartime societies. It becomes clear that childhood itself is a relative category. It was not age but German regulations, occupation practices, and the war of annihilation that defined the meaning and experience of “being a child.” As a consequence, children of various ages, and especially Jewish children, were forced into adult agency, decision-making, and actions. Along with altered roles and generational parameters, wartime societies were transformed as well. Social and familial orders changed, as did social mores. However, the war triggered neither a new order nor a new definition of childhood but a generational disorder with far-reaching and long-lasting consequences.

Despite parallel prewar experiences of the Stalinist era on which both children and adults could build, the German-Soviet War signified an enormous social rift. As a result, in Soviet society as a whole, traditional families and family roles were profoundly shaken and replaced with new, alternative models of family.⁸⁹ In the process, children could attain a

89 For more on this, see: Yuliya von Saal, “Familiäre Gemeinschaften. Kriegsbedingte Familientrennungen und Neukonfigurationen in der UdSSR,” in *Familientrennungen*

higher social status in both the family hierarchy and society as a whole. Clearly, this generational break found widespread acceptance. Thus, as previously discussed, it emerges from postwar literature, discussions of creative artists, and the Komsomol, where fourteen-year-old adolescents entered into asymmetrical sexual relationships with adult women and were elected to serve as managers and leaders in kolkhozes.⁹⁰ In other words, they literally replaced men who had been killed in action. These observations are reason enough to question our view of children in wartime. Despite their traumatic experiences, they were not simply passive victims but active participants who influenced Soviet society even years after the war.⁹¹

Translated from German by Kathleen Luft

im nationalsozialistischen Krieg. Erfahrungen und Praktiken in Deutschland und im besetzten Europa 1939–1945, ed. Wiebke Lisner, Johannes Hürter, Cornelia Rauh, and Lu Seegers (Munich: Wallstein, 2022), 335–65.

⁹⁰ Bernstein, *Vospitannye pri Staline*, 261–62.

⁹¹ Juliane Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Echoes from Hell: Jewish Child Forced Laborers and the Holocaust

When Soviet soldiers liberated the three main camps of Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, they found around seven thousand Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners, most of whom were seriously ill.¹ Approximately five hundred were younger than fifteen years old.² Piero Terracina, born in Rome in November 1928, was part of the small group of Jewish child forced laborers liberated in Auschwitz.³ He had been deported to Birkenau in May 1944, where he first had to dig ditches outside the camp, and later worked on dismantling crashed airplanes in a workshop. A few days before liberation, Piero was sent on a death march, but the prisoners made it only from Birkenau to the Stammlager (Auschwitz I). When they arrived, the SS had already left the camp, and now the guards who had marched Piero's group to Auschwitz also fled. The survivors thus looked after themselves. Exhausted, ill, and surrounded by corpses, they ate whatever they could find. They melted snow to quench their thirst as the sounds of the battle came closer. On January 27, when it was Piero's turn to collect snow outside the building, he was surprised by a Soviet soldier dressed in white, who initially drew his weapon but then quickly understood the situation.

Piero remembered that there was no buzz of excitement but instead total apathy among the liberated prisoners. Nobody was able to cheer, and it took some time before the survivors realized they were free, and they began to weep. When he was liberated, Piero weighed only thirty-eight

- 1 Andrzej Strzelecki, "Evacuation, Liquidation, and Liberation of the Camp," in *Auschwitz: Nazi Death Camp*, ed. Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2002), 269–89, here 280 and the following pages.
- 2 See: <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/fate-of-children/the-fate-of-the-children/>.
- 3 On the following, see: Forced Labor 1939–1945. <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en/index.html> (henceforth Forced Labor), ZA127, Interview with Piero Terracina.

kilograms. Feeding by the Soviet soldiers started in an “uncontrolled” way, and many died from consuming the far too rich food proffered. Piero also recalled that he had to carry corpses into a cellar room before he was taken to a hospital.

The corpses were in and outside the barracks. [...] We brought them into these huge rooms that were packed with corpses. How can you forget this? That ... was my... story, then a new story started ... And I was taken by the ... Russians into a hospital. They treated me. My way back, it took me nearly a year, before I returned home. But that is a completely different story. Today they say: “Well, it happened but life goes on.” No. [distressed voice]. Life stops. Then it starts again ... a new life begins; it is no longer the same. A different life that too ... can be happy. However, it is a different life ..., that all of us can live by taking all the pain from the previous life with us. I think, I have finished.

With this remark, Piero completed his story about Auschwitz.

We do not know exactly how many Jews survived the Holocaust in Europe. It has been estimated that ninety thousand Jewish prisoners were liberated from concentration camps, of whom twenty thousand to thirty thousand died shortly afterward. Equally high was the number of Jews who survived in labor camps, in hiding, or with partisans, while two hundred and fifty thousand had found refuge in the Soviet Union.⁴ Unknown is also the number of child survivors. A contemporary estimate suggests that one hundred and fifty thousand Jewish children survived in Europe (outside the Soviet Union), whereas 1.5 million children were among the six million murdered Jews.⁵

The total number of Jewish child forced laborers remains unknown too; the statistics do not exist. Estimates depend on the definition of childhood, the boundaries of which are set anywhere between twelve and eighteen years in the academic literature. Most recent research tends to follow the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that “a child means every human being below the age of 18 years” (Art. 1). Using this criterion, it is safe to say that several hundred thousand Jewish children—most probably more than one million—had to endure longer

4 Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 19.

5 Leon Shapiro, *Jewish Children in Liberated Europe: Their Needs and the J. D. C. Child Care Work* (New York: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1946), 1.

or shorter periods of forced labor before being liberated or—more likely—murdered.

The survivors of the Shoah were shaped by external and internal wounds, scars, disabilities, and traumatic experiences. They had lost parents, family members, and friends. Child survivors had often lost trust in adults as well. Over months and years, their lives had been characterized by their proximity to death, forced labor, hunger, thirst, and humiliation. Many had been sexually abused, and some had to endure forced sterilization and medical experiments. In general, only the children the Germans had regarded as useful laborers had a chance of surviving the camps.

Jewish children worked in all branches of industry, in mining, agriculture, and construction work during the war and Holocaust. They were forced to build production plants, bridges, roads, railway tracks, barracks, airfields, defensive positions, and trenches. Over weeks, months, and years, they had to carry out exhausting work often far beyond their physical strength.

This article is based on the research project “Jewish Child Forced Laborers, 1938–1945.”⁶ Three areas of research are of particular interest: first, the experience of war, forced labor, and the Holocaust as constructed and narrated in former child forced laborers’ testimonies; second, the participation of German civil and military institutions in employing Jewish children; third, the various interdependencies between Jewish child forced labor and National Socialist ideology, occupation policies, and the Holocaust. The analysis focuses on issues such as the children’s living and working conditions in and outside the ghettos and camps; their contacts with other slave and forced laborers as well as with the perpetrators; sexual and sexualized violence; and forms of active and passive resistance.

After some remarks about children’s testimonies, this article will examine children’s “work in the vicinity of death” and their involvement in “clean-up work.” The final section will briefly analyze “survival” as a topic in children’s accounts.

6 Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit. Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938–1945* (Essen: Klartext, 2018). The project was generously supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, British Academy, Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future, Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies.

Children's Testimonies

In his path-breaking book *The Death of the Shtetl* published in 2009, Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer informs the reader in the very first lines that “this book was written as a contribution to the victims’ side of Holocaust history. [...] The events happened to real people, whose stories must be heard and analyzed.”⁷ Memory and remembrance are central categories that characterize and define Jewish life and Jewish identity, which explains the important role of testimonies in documenting the Holocaust for future generations.⁸ This, however, has not always been the case because the role of survivors and the role of their testimonies have changed dramatically since the end of the war. While the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was marked by the recording of testimonies—work that was done mainly by Jewish Historical Commissions in Poland and in the Displaced Persons camps in Europe—the 1950s and early 1960s can be seen as years of silence, or as Henry Greenspan put it, the “years of silencing.”⁹ Survivors stopped talking about their experiences, and hardly anybody wanted to listen to them, not even in Israel. It was only when Adolf Eichmann was put on trial in Jerusalem in 1961 that the world slowly began to listen to those who had survived the Holocaust.¹⁰

Fritzie Weiss Fritzhall, born in 1929, who after the war had emigrated to the United States, reported during an interview that for many years, she had kept her memories to herself because she wanted to live as a “normal” young woman. It was her son who finally forced her to talk: “And this is when the memories started to fall back into place. This is when I went back into the camp and started to relive all of this. The reason I’m telling you this is because many things are blocked out in my mind. One of the things is, crossing the threshold from the train station into the camp itself.”¹¹

7 Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 7.

8 For a more detailed discussion about survivors’ testimonies and its methodological implications see, for example: Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*, 15–22. Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-labor Camp* (New York: Norton, 2010), 8–12.

9 Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon, 2010), 48 and the following pages.

10 See, in particular: David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist, eds, *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (London: Routledge, 2012).

11 US Holocaust Memorial Museum (henceforth USHMM), RG-50.030*0075, Interview with Fritzie Weiss Fritzhall.

Such memory gaps—caused by trauma—are quite common in children’s testimonies. Fritzie was not the only survivor who simply could not remember what happened between leaving the train and entering the camp. Historian Joanna Michlic spoke in this context about a “lack of precise references to time, space, and social actors.”¹² The degree of traumatization was influenced by a series of factors, including the circumstances of deportation, the age, and the personality of the child. Although adults and children had to endure the same living and working conditions in the camps, some psychologists assume that teenagers and young adults were less traumatized and could recover more quickly after the war than older prisoners.¹³ On the one hand, younger prisoners could adapt better to the realities of the camps and the conditions of forced labor. Some could even “prove” themselves and present themselves as “model workers.” On the other hand, children appear to have suffered more than adults when they lost a relative.¹⁴ In a 1999 article, literary scholar Andrea Reiter states that “children not only experienced the camps in a different way, but they also remember them differently.” She characterized the children’s perception as “naïve but exact.”¹⁵ Social scientists and psychologists agree that children had a much longer-lasting memory of cruelty but also of friendliness and support received during their time in the camps and experience of forced labor.¹⁶

When analyzing testimonies, it soon became obvious that only a few child survivors centered their story around forced labor.¹⁷ This undoubtedly had to do with the fact that most interview projects focused on the Holocaust in general and not on forced labor. In such Holocaust-centered

12 Joanna Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as reflected in Early Postwar Recollections* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 15–16.

13 Shamaï Davidson, *Holding on to Humanity: The Message of Holocaust Survivors. The Shamaï Davidson Papers* (New York, 1992), 145–46.

14 Sara Ghitis and Ruth Weinberger, “Jüdische Sklavenarbeit. Lebensgeschichten aus den USA,” in *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh and Christoph Thonfeld, eds. (Vienna: Böhlau, 2008), 324–35, here 332–34.

15 Andrea Reiter, “Die Funktion der Kinderperspektive in der Darstellung des Holocaust,” in *Für ein Kind war das anders: Traumatische Erfahrungen jüdischer Kinder und Jugendlicher im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, ed. Barbara Bauer and Waltraud Strickhausen (Berlin: Metropol, 1999), 215–29, here 216–17.

16 Barbara Bauer and Waltraud Strickhausen, eds., *Für ein Kind war das anders: Traumatische Erfahrungen jüdischer Kinder und Jugendlicher im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Berlin: Metropol, 1999), 15.

17 For the following, see: Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*, 394–98.

interviews, the fate of the family was most important, as was the question of how the interviewee had survived the omnipresence of death.

Several child survivors placed their accounts of forced labor in the context of physical mistreatment, inadequate clothing, and a lack of protection against injuries and toxic substances. This lack of protection caused not only blisters but also mutilations, internal injuries like burns to the lungs, and other lifelong injuries. This happened, for example, in the ammunition factories near Auschwitz and in other German-occupied areas.

But there are also stories about work inside the camps and the often life-saving function of such labor. Children obtained these coveted positions through their own initiative or with the help of well-meaning or not-well-meaning adults, as was sometimes the case. Work inside the camps better protected the children against the weather; they did not have to endure the often-long marches to external workplaces and the beatings that occurred along the way. Work inside the camps made it easier to acquire additional food and clothing, and sometimes it enabled them to meet family members in other parts of the camp. Most popular was work in the kitchens, the transport of food, the mobile cart commandos, and the position of runner. Runners were positioned at the gates of the camp and delivered official messages.

Surviving the camps was often a matter of pure luck. However, some children tried to manipulate their physical appearance and their age to survive. This had to do with the fact that in general, younger children were immediately sent to the gas chambers. In many cases, parents or other adults advised and supported the children in this endeavor. Official documents and birth certificates could be falsified, personal details in camp registries could be changed. It is unknown how many lives were saved through bribery and document falsification, but the testimonies are full of such episodes. Some children acted on their own, driven by instinct, others on advice from adults or other prisoners at the ramp of Auschwitz, who—risking their own lives—urged incoming children to declare a higher age or a specific profession when asked during selection. The style of clothes and haircut also helped youngsters look older. Some parents tried to place their children between smaller adults during selections and pinched their child's cheeks to get some fresh color into their pale faces. There are also reports that boys were dressed in girl's clothing and vice versa to survive a specific situation.

Many testimonies clearly demonstrate that child survivors cannot be regarded as passive objects but as active individuals. Nevertheless, for most children, adults played a vital role in their survival. When adults

close to the children disappeared—whether they had been deported or murdered—children were often left without any protection in the camps. Some quickly became apathetic and mutated to *Muselmen* (walking skeletons), while others could recover from this loss once they found a new close contact, be it adult or child. Psychologists talk about “pairing and grouping” in the camps and regard this as essential for survival.¹⁸ Surviving without the help and support of others was rarely possible. However, although there are mentions of such close contact persons in many testimonies, it would be wrong to conclude from this that the camps were generally characterized by solidarity.

Children and adults alike were confronted with daily violence in the camps. Children’s testimonies contain numerous examples of what children witnessed and what they had to endure themselves. This included hangings and shootings, beatings, homo- and heterosexual abuse of boys and girls by adult Jews and non-Jews of both sexes, to name just a few such experiences. Most testimonies reflect the humiliation and desperation of children’s circumstances. Primarily girls remember their enforced public nakedness, body searches, delousing procedures, and the loss of their hair as most embarrassing. The same feelings accompanied the reduction of prisoners to a number without any rights.

Work in the Vicinity of Genocide

Jewish children were not only forcibly deployed in individual sectors of the economy and by the military; they also had to perform work that supported German crimes. This applies to the theft of Jewish property before and after deportations to ghettos, labor, and murder camps, as well as to all forced labor performed in the context of violence, murder, and genocide.

From the beginning to the end of the war, Jewish children were exposed to corpses. Children had to carry and transport corpses; some had to bury or burn them. In this context, most testimonies focus on the facts only—generally communicated without great emotion. Sixteen-year-old Abe Manik, for example, concluded his remarks about his traumatic experiences in the Kovno ghetto, where he had to help bury the dead bodies of Jews who had been shot when the ghetto was liquidated

18 Elmer Luchterhand, “Prisoner Behavior and Social System in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* (1967): 245–64; Davidson, *Holding on to Humanity*.

in 1943, with the simple remark: “You get used to it.”¹⁹ A year later, when Abe was imprisoned in a sub-camp of Dachau concentration camp, every day he had to go from hut to hut collecting the corpses of those who had died during the night and loading them onto a handcart. During an interview, he described this as a “good job” that allowed him to stay inside the camp, where he received a little more soup than his fellow prisoners who worked outside the camp.²⁰

In Birkenau, Sam Smilovic and Shony Braun worked for a while in a corpse unit (*Leichenkommando*). At that time, Sam was sixteen years old. In his memoirs, he named beatings, hunger, and broken hearts as the predominant causes of death in Birkenau (outside the gas chambers).²¹ Thirteen-year-old Shony, born in Romania, who after the war made a career as a composer and actor, remembered that his unit had to bring corpses from the huts to the crematorium daily. He also recalled that prisoners lay on the ground nearly starved to death, dehydrated, or because they had given up. When loading them onto the cart, he sometimes realized that some were not dead. When he wanted to save one of his fellow prisoners who was still alive, he received a terrible slap in the face from the *Kapo* of the crematorium.²² In his interview, Shony did not explicitly mention that the fellow prisoner was burned alive, but the context made it more than obvious. Similar remarks can be found in other testimonies.

Children were also forced to work in the direct vicinity of German atrocities. In Płaszów, children had to work at the mass graves. They had to dig the graves, put the corpses of executed Jews or Poles into them, cover the bodies with lime, and finally close the graves.²³ Some children had to search corpses for valuables and extract gold teeth and fillings. This happened before burying or burning but also after the mass graves had been unearthed to remove the traces of German atrocities.²⁴

Although most of those who were members of such work groups were killed after they had finished their work, there are a few testimonies from children who had been forced to do this labor in Płaszów concentration

19 USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive (hereafter Shoah Foundation), 2259, Interview with Abe Malnik.

20 USHMM, RG-50.030*0145, Interview with Abraham Malnik.

21 Concordia University Montreal, *Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors in Canada*, Sam Smilovic, Buchenwald 56466, 2001.

22 USHMM, RG-50.030*0036, Interview with Shony Alex Braun.

23 For example, Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, B 162/1127, Zeugenaussagen Mike Staner, 3194–98, 3207–34.

24 For example, Shoah Foundation, 695, Interview with Elizabeth Franklin.

camp. Whereas some child survivors described their work in great detail, fifteen-year-old Harriet Solz restricted herself to short remarks only, but she mentioned the “incredibly terrible stench” when the decomposing corpses were taken out of the graves and burned.²⁵ The most traumatic response was from twelve-year-old Renee, who during an interview, distanced herself from the event: “Let me explain something to you, as I’m talking to you about it, it did not happen to me. It happened to a different person. I’m like at a movie. I don’t associate myself with it at all. It’s the funniest thing. It happened to a child. It had nothing to do with me. Not me, nothing.”²⁶

In Birkenau, Jewish children also had to work at the ramp when the trains arrived. Sam Pivnik was sixteen years old when he was deported to Auschwitz in 1943. “The people themselves were so crammed in that they had no room to relieve themselves,” he remembered.

The lavatory was a bucket in one corner if they were lucky and most of them, even the tolerably well-dressed, arrived caked in shit and piss, horribly embarrassed about the whole experience. The stench in those trucks when they’d gone was indescribable. I’d try to hold my breath as I went in with the others, hauling out luggage—a battered suitcase, a child’s teddy bear, spectacles, false teeth. In the summer, with no water on boards the trains, people died of suffocation and dehydration—I knew what it was like to go without water. In the winter, they just froze to death.

Sam had to pile up the luggage of the arrivals next to the train cars. This was done to avoid any unrest among the deportees. Only after the end of selection did Sam and his unit load the bags and suitcases onto carts and bring them to the so-called Canada section, where they were sorted and packed by fellow prisoners.²⁷

It is not impossible that Sam met fourteen-year-old Henry Kanner while working at the ramp. Henry remembered that he too had to empty and clean the train cars before they left again. He also recalled that the Jews arriving from the Łódź ghetto were poor and brought no food with them, while Jews from Hungary had a lot of food, including roasted meat and chicken. When the guards did not watch him, he could eat a

25 Shoah Foundation, 1491, Interview with Harriet Solz.

26 The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Kestenberg Archive (hereafter Hebrew University), (257)22–17, Interview with RS [Renee].

27 Sam Pivnik, *Survivor: Auschwitz, The Death March and My Fight for Freedom* (London: Hodder, 2012), 122, 127–28.

bit and satisfy his constant hunger for a short while. Hungarian Jews also brought clothes and candles that could be pocketed and later swapped for food.²⁸

The so-called White House with its gas chambers, which had already been used from summer 1942 to spring 1943, was reactivated in May 1944 for the murder of the Hungarian Jews. After gassing, prisoners of the *Sonderkommando* had to take the corpses out of the gas chambers. According to historian Gideon Greif, pits about twenty meters long, four meters wide, and three meters deep were dug about thirty meters away from the place of murder and in these pits, the corpses, stacked between layers of wood, were doused with methanol and burned. Before burning, prisoners had to examine them for gold teeth and hidden valuables and had to cut off their hair.²⁹

Seventeen-year-old Roman Mayer had to bring in the wood needed for the burnings, surreptitiously appropriating the shoes of a dead man.³⁰ Zalman Finkelstein, about the same age, was part of a group that was responsible for cleaning up the area around the gas chambers and removing all traces that might have alerted newly arriving Jews.³¹ For two “endless” days and nights, Morris Kesselman, also seventeen years old, had to carry corpses out of the gas chambers. When he saw small children being thrown alive into the incineration pit, he collapsed. Morris was then transferred to the *Sonderkommando* and housed in the attic of a crematorium where he worked as a runner, kept the guards’ quarters clean, polished their boots, darned their socks, and was rewarded with plenty of food, which enabled him to participate in the camp’s black market.³²

David Faber, born in 1927 had to examine the corpses for gold teeth. He remembered the horrific screams from the gas chambers—which still haunted his nightmares decades later—as well as the sight of the corpses when the doors of the gas chambers were opened, and the fate of a baby who had survived gassing.

There were eight of us to pull out the gold from the mouths, to open up with a clamp and pull out the gold, and whatever gold anybody had on it. [. . .] There was a woman, and a baby was laying on top of her,

28 Shoah Foundation, 48193, Interview with Henry Kanner.

29 Gideon Greif, “Wir weinten tränenlos . . .”: *Augenzeugenberichte des jüdischen “Sonderkommandos” in Auschwitz* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1999), 29–30.

30 Shoah Foundation, 18279, Interview with Roman Mayer.

31 Shoah Foundation, 18520, Interview with Zalman Finkelstein.

32 Shoah Foundation, 14715, Interview with Morris Kesselman.

and I took off that baby to see if she has any gold teeth in her mouth, we were supposed to take that gold out, the baby was crying, the baby was alive because the baby was sucking the breast from the mother. And so the baby was alive, and I tried to hide that baby because not far, about half a block away, there was a women's camp, there were many, many camps, one next to the other, and the other guys were warning me, don't do it, you are going to be in trouble, and they will kill you. And I didn't listen. I tried to take that baby and smuggle it to the women, and what happened, I got caught, one of the Kapos caught me. He pulled me back inside the crematorium and he grabbed the baby, and he threw it into the fire.³³

Babies at their mothers' breasts were also present in the memories of Sándor Ländler-Losonci, born in Budapest in 1931, who had to hand out soap to those being murdered and collect it from the dead afterward. He described the sight of the corpses in the gas chambers and the difficulty of opening hands that had become entangled with the soap during the agonizing murder.³⁴

Additionally, children had to remove the ashes of the cremated bodies from the crematoria. Among them was Jehuda Bacon, born in 1929, who after the war recalled in detail the undressing room and the gas chamber of a crematorium. He had memorized these details when he was allowed to warm up there together with the other children of his commando during a work break. Children also had to "sprinkle the frozen streets of Birkenau with ashes so that one did not slip."³⁵

There are even accounts of children who survived the most notorious extermination camps of the so-called *Aktion Reinhardt*. This includes some testimonies from children who had to work in Sobibór and Treblinka, where small groups of Jews had to sort and pack the possessions of the victims; but there is, so far, only one short mention of Bełżec,³⁶ where only a very small number of Jews survived. Nevertheless, the testimonies from Sobibór and Treblinka demonstrate that Jewish children had to work in all parts of these camps, such as the small railway station, where they helped incoming Jews who were often totally unaware

33 Shoah Foundation, 10416, Interview with David Faber.

34 Shoah Foundation, 51831, Interview with Sándor Ländler-Losonci.

35 Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes, 21.220, Erinnerungsbericht Jehuda Bacon, 22. 2. 1959; Forced Labour, ZA398, Interview with Yehuda Bacon.

36 Shoah Foundation, 13035, Interview with Adam Drewniak.

of their fate and sometimes even gave the “porters” tips.³⁷ In their testimonies, former child forced laborers reflected on their survival under such extreme conditions and how they adapted to the situation. Some were well-liked by the guards, acquired better positions, and even engaged in black market activities.³⁸

Children also had to work in the so-called tube, a camouflaged passageway that led to the gas chambers, where they had to cut the prisoners’ hair. The stories about cutting hair are part of the most shocking episodes recalled in the testimonies. Berek Freiberg wrote his account immediately after the war, in July 1945. At the age of fourteen, he was deported to Sobibór in 1942, where he managed to survive for eighteen months before he could escape during the uprising in October 1943. According to his report, he stayed alive by instinct and intuition. Upon arrival, he immediately realized that the guards selected craftsmen and healthy-looking boys, and he somehow managed to join this group despite his lack of any professional experience. During his time in Sobibór, Berek had to work many jobs, including cutting the hair of women before they were gassed. “It took half a minute to shear a head,” he remembered. “We took the long hair and cut it quickly, leaving spots with hair on the head.” He also recalled short talks with some of the women who knew their fate and asked him to take revenge. Some even told him where they had hidden valuables before leaving the ghetto or home. He remembered mothers who refused to be separated from their children. “If you cut the mother’s hair, she kept the child close to her, so that they could stay together to the last minute. And some women, you simply could not shear. Even when the guards started to shoot and beat, it didn’t help. They sat down and didn’t move; they didn’t let you cut their hair and refused to go to the bath [!]. They were shot or driven alive into the flames.”³⁹

Many testimonies contain the recollection of a particularly traumatic experience. For Philip Bialowitz, who was deported to Sobibór in April 1943 at the age of thirteen, it was a transport from Minsk that he remembered intensely, and which brought him to the brink of suicide. When the doors were opened, he saw that the wagons were full of decomposing and badly swollen corpses, including a child who had died in his mother’s arms. While Philip wanted to die at this sight, the SS man who had assigned him to this work enjoyed the “wonderful picture” that presented

37 Shoah Foundation, 2533, Interview with Regina Zielinski.

38 Berek Freiberg, “Sobibór,” in *Nach dem Untergang. Die ersten Zeugnisse der Shoah in Polen 1944–1947: Berichte der Zentralen Jüdischen Historischen Kommission*, ed. Frank Beer, Wolfgang Benz, and Barbara Distel (Berlin: Metropol, 2014), 617–52, 638.

39 Freiberg, “Sobibór,” 621–23.

itself to him. With blows, he made Philip drag the corpses out of the wagons, sometimes causing the skin to come off and stick to his hands. This experience, Philip explained, haunted him and gave him nightmares.⁴⁰ For seventeen-year-old Regina Zielinski, the most horrific experience was finding a piece of her mother's clothing with her wedding ring sewn into it.⁴¹

Despite the hardships, children learned to adapt. "We became used to the nature of the internal regime," Dov Freiberg recalled at the Eichmann trial: "In some way, we became accustomed to it. To some extent, we got used to the way of life. I must also point out that new victims were always arriving. These suffered more than those who were called old-timers. In certain cases, the old-timers obtained particular jobs. I also received such a job, afterwards. I worked as a cleaner of the living quarters of the Ukrainians."⁴² Those who managed to survive for some time had the possibility of earning the goodwill of individual guards and moving up the camp hierarchy, polishing the SS men's shoes every morning or working in the officers' mess dressed in a special uniform.⁴³ Berek Freiberg even traded with some Ukrainian SS men whose quarters he had to clean and boots he had to shine: "We were fine, we had food, while in the camp there was literally starvation. We smuggled food into the camp. We gave them gold, they brought us sausage, schnapps, everything from the village."⁴⁴

Sixteen-year-old Regina Zielinski found herself in Sobibór in the knitting barrack, where socks and knee socks were made for the Wehrmacht in the winter of 1942/43. The material was obtained from the woolen clothes of those murdered. Regina received a pair of shoes that belonged to her murdered sister. Twelve women and girls worked in the heated barracks, she recalled, some preparing the wool, others knitting. The target was one pair a day. But there was solidarity: some were better with the heels, others with straight pieces. The group voluntarily made a sleeveless sweater for *SS-Oberscharführer* Gustav Wagner. At that time, Regina recalled, they did not yet know how bestial he could be.⁴⁵ Finally,

40 Shoah Foundation, 32788, Interview with Philip Bialowitz.

41 Shoah Foundation, 2533, Interview with Regina Zielinski.

42 Zeugenaussage Dov Freiberg, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 64, 15 June 1961. <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-064-01.html>.

43 Zeugenaussage Moshe Bahir, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 65, 5 June 1961. <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-065-01.html>.

44 Freiberg, "Sobibór," 638.

45 Shoah Foundation, 2533, Interview with Regina Zielinski.

reference should be made to fourteen-year-old Stan Szmajzner who survived because the camp commander Franz Stangl was impressed with his goldsmithing and had several pieces made by him.⁴⁶

Clean-up Work

Among the most common work related to the Holocaust was the sorting and packing of the possessions left by the victims. The theft of Jewish possessions had begun in Germany in 1933. In 1941, unemployed Jewish children had to gather at the deportation locations in Germany to help elderly and handicapped Jews with their luggage.⁴⁷ This also gave the deportees the illusion of normality. After the liquidation of ghettos, children had to help empty flats and houses. They had to carry furniture and household goods, sort the belongings, and load them onto trucks and railway cars. Sorting and packing accompanied the Holocaust from the very beginning to the very end, and Jewish child forced laborers could be found at all places where the belongings of the victims were being prepared and used to fill German state coffers as well as the pockets of guards and officials.

The exploitation of the victims continued even on their way to the gas chambers when the naked prisoners' hair was cut off to make industrial felts and hair-yarn footies for the crews of submarines and hair-felt stockings for employees of the *Reichsbahn* (German Reich Railways). Even the ashes of the burned corpses were sometimes used as fertilizer. In the ghettos and camps dissolved after the deportations, a clean-up squad remained behind; they were tasked with clearing out apartments and bringing furniture, household effects, and clothing to collection warehouses, where they were disinfected, washed, repaired, sorted, and prepared for shipment. Testimonies contain both sober and extremely emotional accounts of this work, which, for most of the survivors, offered an opportunity to remain longer in familiar surroundings and sometimes even with family members.

Among the less emotional narratives of this labor is that of Henry Kanner, who as a twelve-year-old was deported to the Sosnowitz labor

46 Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2013), 26.

47 Shoah Foundation, 18441, Interview with Kenneth Arkwright. Zeugenaussage Mordechai Ansbacher, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 38, 12 May 1961. <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-038-01.html>.

camp, where he remained for half a year, until the fall of 1943. In his account, Henry adopted contemporary German expressions when he reported that his group had “emptied the apartments of Jewish families who had been resettled [!]” and brought “the stuff” to a collection point. Only when asked during his interview did Henry become more specific, recalling that it was mainly furniture that he carried out and loaded onto a horse-drawn cart, and that no valuables, clothing, or linen were found in the apartments. He assumed “that someone had already been there before us to clear out the things or take them away.”⁴⁸

In contrast, Edith, who was born in Tomaszow in 1929 and who, together with her mother, was part of the clean-up squad after the dissolution of the local ghetto in October and November 1942, was highly emotional: “And then they put me to work, me and my mother and we had to go and clean up after they deported all the people. We had to clean out the houses after. So then we worked [...] where my grandmother used to live. It was so bad. We were crying and crying, touching things and, ugh, it was ... (crying).”⁴⁹

The clean-up squads did not always consist of local forced laborers. This became obvious in the memoirs of Vivian Chakin, born in Grodno in 1927, who was selected as a forced laborer in Treblinka in 1943 and was deported from there first to Majdanek, and then to the airport camp in Lublin. From there, she went via Milejow—where she worked in a food factory—to the forced labor camp Trawniki, where all Jews had been murdered under the codename “*Aktion Erntefest*.” When she arrived in Trawniki together with a group of girls and women in early November 1943, the camp was already deserted except for a group of Jewish forced laborers who had also just been deported to this camp. She recalled:

There wasn't a soul there. They put us into a barrack and then they brought the men that were working there, they brought also. And they put us together in the same barrack. And this we thought, well that's the end of all of us, because they never kept men and women together. [. . .] We came into the barrack. The bunks were all around the walls. And in the middle was a large table with benches. And there was still food on the table that people had started to eat and never finished. They did not put us to work right the first day. But the men were taken and they were divided up into three eight hour shifts. And they

48 Shoah Foundation, 48193, Interview with Henry Kanner.

49 Hebrew University, (257)19–44, Interview with EN [Edith].

were taken to burn the bodies of the [. . .] people [. . .] that were shot. [. . .] On this big heap of bodies, they worked for one week. And when they were all finished burning the bodies, the Ukrainians shot them and burned their bodies on the same flames.⁵⁰

Vivian and her group had to clean the barracks and sort the remains of those who had been murdered. Occasionally they came across corpses in the bunk beds; others were found in a factory where nine men had desperately tried to dig a hiding place. Vivian worked in fear for her life and with the certainty that she too would soon be murdered. She stayed a total of seven months in Trawniki. During this time, she performed a variety of tasks including sorting potatoes as well as auxiliary work in the bakery. At the beginning of June 1944, her group was deported to Majdanek concentration camp. There she worked as a seamstress before being sent on a death march a few weeks later. In the distance, she could already hear artillery.⁵¹

Frieda Feuer, who was born in 1929 and deported to Auschwitz in 1944, reported with great emotion that she and three fellow prisoners volunteered for the clean-up squad after the murder of the inhabitants of the Terezin family camp because she thought it would give them at least a temporary chance of survival. In the barracks, she found children's belongings scattered on the floor, including toys and shoes.⁵²

In 1944, the dismantling of Auschwitz-Birkenau began. Before the gas chambers and crematoria were blown up, special forced labor units searched for everything that could be transported to Germany. Children had to take part in this work, and groups of children were forced to pull the heavy handcarts. Born in June 1932, Izchak Reichenbaum, who was initially selected by Mengele for his experiments, worked in such a unit from October 1944 to January 1945. He helped dismantle storage buildings and even parts of the crematoria. He recalled that groups of ten children had to pull the handcarts loaded with construction materials to the railway station.⁵³ Andrew Burian, born in December 1930, helped remove the roof of the crematoria, handing down the roof tiles, which were carefully packed in straw.⁵⁴ They may still be on German roofs

50 Shoah Foundation, 7457, Interview with Vivian Chakin.

51 Shoah Foundation, 7457, Interview with Vivian Chakin.

52 Shoah Foundation, 3266, Interview with Frieda Feuer.

53 Auschwitz Archives, Wspomnienia, tom 203, Izchak Reichenbaum, Haifa, to Jerzy Wroblewski, Auschwitz, 3. 2. 1999.

54 Shoah Foundation, 38143, Interview with Andrew Burian.

today, just like the bricks from the crematoria and gas chambers that Arthur Brown broke down that were used for building construction in Germany.⁵⁵

Survival

In many testimonies, survivors reflected on the reasons they survived. Such individual thoughts can hardly be generalized, and it seems that so far, international research has produced more questions than answers about whether children or adults have greater resilience. Was it an advantage or disadvantage to be young? Can children adapt more easily to a specific situation than adults? Do children have greater willpower? Could children better cope with traumatic situations than adults? Or was it pure luck that some prisoners survived the ghettos and camps—a view that Abe Malnik, born in 1927, favored in his testimony?⁵⁶

From the day of liberation, child survivors became the object of psychological studies. However, it was extremely difficult to find coherence in the results, as Judith Hemmendinger and Robert Krell stated in their study about the children of Buchenwald, where some nine hundred children were liberated by the US army in April 1945. “For the most part, they were viewed as damaged beyond hope of repair, of recovery, of normality. [. . .] Some mental health workers considered them psychopaths, assuming they must have been selfish or manipulative or mean-spirited in order to survive when so many others died.” Yet, this group of children “have produced rabbis and scholars, physicists and physicians, businessmen and artists, as well as a Nobel Prize winner.”⁵⁷

Some children regarded their youth as the main reason for their survival. “I have overcome all this because I was young, but it is now a heavy price,” stated Lena Szeiner, born in 1931. She also stressed that she had worked in all circumstances, even when she had pneumonia and a high fever.⁵⁸ Others referred to their adaptability and the learning process necessary to survive a concentration camp. “By and by you get experienced,” explained Halina Birenbaum, born in 1929, reflecting on her time in Majdanek. “Your instinct sharpens, your vigilance increases, your reactions speed up. You had to learn that it is better not to be in the camp

55 Shoah Foundation, 497, Interview with Arthur Brown.

56 Shoah Foundation, 2259, Interview with Abe Malnik.

57 Judith Hemmendinger and Robert Krell. *The Children of Buchenwald: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Their Post-war Lives* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2000), 8.

58 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, B 162/20659, Zeugenaussage Lena Szeiner, 253–54.

at daytime, that even physical most exhausting work outside was safer than staying in the camp; you learned to distinguish between exhausting and less exhausting work units; you learned to bribe.”⁵⁹

As mentioned before, “pairing and grouping” are often used as central categories in psychology to explain how prisoners managed to overcome extreme situations in concentration camps. In the testimonies, however, the vital role of “pairing and grouping” is often not highly visible as survivors usually do not reflect on it when describing their individual survival.

Many former child forced laborers talk about their will and their desire to survive. For example, for Moshe Avital, born in 1929, his mental strength and the hope to take revenge at the end of the experience were the most important factors.⁶⁰ Kate Bernath, born in 1927, always thought that it was impossible that she would die in the camps. She dreamed that the Germans would lose the war and she could return home. “Never to lose hope” was her credo. “If you lost hope that was the end of it.”⁶¹

Anita Schorr, who was fourteen when liberated in 1945, slaved away from one day to the next. She was determined to survive and had the feeling there was a strong will in her to succeed.⁶² Liliane Segre, who was the same age, compared herself to a “greedy she-wolf, emaciated and egoistic. I didn’t have a female body anymore, I was one of the ugliest women, really ugly, almost dead. But still alive, alive, alive and determined: A day has past again, and I am still alive. A night has passed again, and I am still alive. I do not want to see anything, I do not want to watch. I do not want to know. Egoistic, closed up, lonely, lonely, very lonely.”⁶³

For some, it was their faith that helped them survive. Others did not “deal with it” at all—an expression Sara Weinryb, born in 1929, used in her testimony. For her, it was important “to watch,” accompanied by the will “to tell” later about her experience and suffering.⁶⁴ The desire to talk about their experiences dominated many survivors’ accounts. Some told their story immediately after liberation; others told it later, when the “years of silence” had passed. Some were only able to talk to their grandchildren but not their children.⁶⁵

59 Halina Birenbaum, *Hope is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age under Nazi Terror* (New York: Sharpe, 1996), 86.

60 Moshe Avital, *Not to Forget: Impossible to Forgive* (Jerusalem: Mazo, 2004), 141.

61 USHMM, RG-50.030*0023, Interview with Kate Bernath.

62 FU Hagen, Interview with Anita Schorr.

63 Forced Labour, ZA124, Interview with Liliane Segre.

64 Shoah Foundation, 13881, Interview with Sara Weinryb.

65 Margalit Bejarano and Amija Boasson, “Sklavenarbeit und Shoah. Ein Blick aus Israel,” in *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im inter-*

Nowadays, textbooks describe the lifelong psychological consequences of months and years spent in concentration or forced labor camps. In their interviews, survivors talked mainly about physical disabilities, nightmares, and feelings of guilt. Sara Weinryb compared her nightmares to a movie that repeated again and again: “You cannot sleep; you cannot get rid of it; you hear the children, you hear ... the selections; you hear this—these ramps; and everything again and again.”⁶⁶

Some former child forced laborers suffered feelings of guilt for the rest of their lives. Nesse Godin, who cried continually when liberated, always cried in her nightmares and felt guilty that she had survived: “Was I better than my friends and my cousins and my buddies and my uncles and my aunts and my father? Was I better? And then I was sitting there. And maybe I cried for me because I was all alone.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

Although academic research on forced labor during the Second World War has significantly increased since the late 1980s, the subject of forced labor performed by children had remained untouched for many more years. It was only some fifteen years ago that I began my research project on child forced laborers, which has resulted so far in various articles as well as books on Polish, Soviet, and Jewish child forced laborers.⁶⁸

With respect to Jewish children, the neglect of forced labor undoubtedly had to do with the fact that Jewish survivors were, from a scholarly standpoint, primarily regarded as survivors of the Holocaust (and most of them perceived themselves as such) but not as survivors of forced labor. In contrast to the life-historical significance ascribed to forced labor by non-Jewish victims, the forced labor performed by Jews inside and outside ghettos and camps was mainly interpreted within the context

nationalen Vergleich, ed. Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh, and Christoph Thonfeld (Vienna: Böhlau, 2008), 311–23, here 319.

66 Shoah Foundation (Transkript FU Berlin), 13881, Interview with Sara Weinryb.

67 USHMM, RG-50.030*0080, Interview with Nesse Godin.

68 Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit: Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa* (Essen: Klartext, 2013); Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*; Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Deportacja i praca przymusowa. Dzieci z Polski i ZSRS w nazistowskich Niemczech i okupowanej Europie Wschodniej w latach 1939–1945* (Warsaw: Pilecki Institute, 2021). See also: Katarzyna Person and Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Przemysłowa Concentration Camp: The Camp, the Children, the Trials* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

of Holocaust survival and as one of the various means to survive the genocide. When analyzing early testimonies of Jewish children, historian Boaz Cohen, for example, noted that these accounts were thematically characterized above all by the central role of the family, encounters with death, and relationships with non-Jews.⁶⁹

This article has focused on two of the many harrowing aspects of child forced labor analyzed in the research on Jewish children: first, “work in the vicinity of genocide,” which included deployment in the so-called *Sonderkommandos*; and second, “clean-up work” in ghettos and camps after the deportation of the Jewish population. Analysis of children’s testimonies has shown that children were excellent observers who watched the German atrocities with great precision. Depending on their age, socialization, and personal background—but regardless of their gender—it has been demonstrated that by far, not all children can be regarded as passive objects of German oppression and persecution. Many were individuals who tried to cope with the situation and developed resilience and a strong will to survive.

The testimonies examined here also underscore that with the liberation, a new story began, one that was neither free of conflict nor always positive. When the troops moved on, an unknown number of girls and boys became victims of sexual and sexualized violence conducted by members of military forces on all sides.⁷⁰ Those who returned home were rarely able to reunite with members of their families, but they often faced renewed antisemitism and violence. Most survivors entered a world that for many years was unwilling to listen to their stories and looked at them with suspicion and incredulity.

69 Boaz Cohen, “Representing the Experiences of Children in the Holocaust: Children’s Survivors Testimonies Published in Fun Letsten Hurbn,” in “*We Are Here*”: *New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, ed. Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 74–97, here 86.

70 Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*, 378–79.

Challenging Narratives: Unveiling Encounters between Jewish Children/Adolescents and Italian Military Units in Transnistria during the Holocaust

As Italian military units, in alliance with Nazi Germany, entered the former Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, their lives intersected with those of the Jewish population, weaving a complex narrative of encounters across specific locales and routes until Italy's capitulation in 1943.¹ Situated between the Dniester and Bug rivers and once a part of the Ukrainian SSR, Transnistria provides an important backdrop for uncovering these previously unexplored confrontations. In late August 1941, Romania, aligned with Germany, assumed control over Transnistria. Following the establishment of its administration in September 1941, provisional ghettos and labor camps were established, to which Romanian authorities brought local Jews and deported nearly 150,000 Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina; an additional 25,000 Roma were deported to the camps and ghettos of the region in 1942.² Postwar testimonies from

- 1 Italy participated in Operation Barbarossa under the leadership of Benito Mussolini. The decision to align with Nazi Germany was driven by a complex mix of ideological, geopolitical, and resource-related factors and ambitions. Integrated into the overarching German command structure, Italian military forces deployed in the Eastern Front included the CSIR (*Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Russia*), the ARMIR (*Armata Italiana in Russia*), which replaced the CSIR in 1942, and the *Carabinieri*, a military police force. When the Axis experienced defeats, Mussolini was ousted, and Italy allied with the Allies in 1943. See: Bastian Matteo Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front, 1941–1943: Operations, Myths and Memories* (Hempstead, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 87–89. For documents published in Italian, see: Nuto Revelli, *Mussolini's Death March: Eyewitness Accounts of Italian Soldiers on the Eastern Front* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).
- 2 On June 22, 1941, Romania joined the war against the USSR, aiming to reclaim Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, which had been lost as a result of a 1939 German-

Jews who survived the Holocaust in Transnistria are the sole sources to illuminate the intricacies of Jewish-Italian interactions in this region. In this particular geographical context, young survivors' accounts are more numerous and tend to emphasize Italians' affinity for children and their specific efforts to assist young Jews, suggesting deeper and more varied interaction than Italians' encounters with adult Jews in Transnistria.

This article questions the nature of the encounters between Jewish children/adolescents and Italians, exploring the complex spectrum of experiences and perceptions and the ways they were shaped by crucial factors such as age and gender. It also examines the tension between the almost uniform portrayal of Italians as kind-hearted and nuanced layers of interactions that reveal episodes of violence perpetrated by Italians and cases where Italian assistance to young Jews was the result of barter rather than humanitarianism. This study contends that Jewish children and adolescents, influenced by their age, gender, and circumstances, exhibited significant agency and self-rescue in their interactions with Italians, even during moments marked by childlike naïveté. Offering a micro-history that delves into the experiences of young Jews in Transnistria, this essay bridges a key gap in the scholarship and, thus, contributes to a more complex understanding of the Holocaust within the broader history of Italy's participation in the war against the Soviet Union.

Jewish encounters with Italians in Transnistria, informed by regional distinctions and evolving wartime contexts, varied widely, unfolding in the midst of the Italian combat units' movement toward the Donbas, soldiers' subsequent retreat from the Don region, and periodically near rear bases established across the region. Despite the relatively unknown history of the Italian military in Transnistria, certain key movements and

Soviet pact. With the Tighina Agreement on August 30, 1941, Romania gained administrative control of Transnistria to secure, govern, and develop the region economically. While Romania's treatment of Jews was less systematic than Germany's, Jews in Transnistria suffered from disease, mistreatment, forced labor, and sporadic killings. Romania's rule over Transnistria lasted until March 1944. See: Dennis Deletant, "Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the 'Jewish Problem,'" in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, ed. Ray Brandon et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 156–89; Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail E. Ionescu, *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania* (Bucharest: Polirom, 2005), 32–37. Among more recent studies are: Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Vladimir Solonari, *A Satellite Empire: Romanian Rule in Southwestern Ukraine, 1941–1944* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Roma Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

locations are clear from the existing sources.³ In 1941, as the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia (CSIR) traversed the region of Transnistria en route to Dnipro and engaged in their inaugural battle against the Soviets in August, Italian troops were perpetually mobile.⁴ It was not until the late autumn of 1941 that they established stationary positions, securing parts of the Donbas.⁵ Conversely, the aforementioned rear bases acted as vital logistical centers, connecting Italy to the Eastern Front. These bases served not merely as compact military stations but predominantly housed the *Intendenza*, the logistical branch of the military encompassing the *Comandi Tappa*.⁶ Such bases were established in various locations in Transnistria, such as Zhmerynka, Balta, Kryve Ozero, and Pervomajsk.⁷ Historian Raffaello Pannacci emphasizes that the Italians

- 3 Notably, the challenges refer to the lack of precise information in archival sources regarding the specific identification and numbers of respective units at certain locations, as pointed out by historian Raffaello Pannacci, email message to author, August 7, 2023. I would like to thank Raffaello Pannacci for the insightful exchange and expert guidance he provided me regarding the historical context of the Italian presence in Transnistria.
- 4 They commenced their journey from the Romanian collection zone in Cămpulung on July 12, 1941, traversing Transnistria and passing through Balta and Pervomajsk (Holta). The “Battle of the Two Rivers,” Dniester-Bug, in mid-August 1941, also played a crucial role in the early stages of the war. For this operation, the Italian division D. Pasubio, for instance, gathered near Yampil and proceeded via Vil’shanka, Olhopil, and Kryve Ozero. The D. Celere Division also moved through Transnistria during this period.
- 5 Including Horlivka and Yenakiieve, extending their reach back to Donetsk, and advancing even further eastward in the summer of 1942, the bolstered Italian army (ARMIR) progressed from Luhansk to the Don River. Ministero della Difesa Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni del C. S. I. R. e dell’ARMIR: Dal Giugno 1941 all’Ottobre 1942* (Rome, 1947); Costantino De Franceschi and Giorgio de Vecchi, *I Servizi Logistici delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo (1941–1943)* (Rome: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, 1975). Many thanks to Nicolas Virtue and Thomas Schlemmer for the suggestions provided in this context.
- 6 These were specialized command centers or offices assigned to oversee operations of specific logistical bases or waypoints (*tappe*) within the extensive logistical network, aiming to amplify operational efficacy for front-line combat units.
- 7 Zhmerynka hosted an Italian “*Comando Tappa*,” which was overseen by a higher command in Bucharest and tasked with providing support and accommodations to transitioning Italian troops, while also safeguarding communication lines and monitoring the local population. Balta served as a major Italian hub, hosting “*Tappa No. 16*” and a rail command to assist units and manage supplies during the war. It also housed a grain-collecting unit, the “*Sezione staccata per l’economia di guerra*,” until Italy’s 1943 armistice with the Allies. The latter also operated in Kryve Ozero or Pervomajsk. See: De Franceschi, *I Servizi Logistici delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo (1941–1943)*, 167–71; Archivio dell’Ufficio storico dello Stato maggiore dell’Esercito

maintained a presence in the rear areas of Romania and the former Ukrainian SSR significantly longer than along the Don River and in Russia itself.⁸

There has been increased interest in Italy's participation in the war against the Soviet Union among historians in the past two decades. Thomas Schlemmer's work has been groundbreaking in this regard, offering a thorough analysis of the Italians' motivations and effects of their presence on occupied populations, and contesting established beliefs and national myths.⁹ Raffaello Pannacci's recent monograph sheds light on Italy's understudied activities in Russia and Ukraine during the Second World War, challenging the view that it was solely a "German war." Pannacci stresses Italy's strategic goals in the Soviet Union and links them to the country's earlier colonial and Balkan campaigns.¹⁰ Historian Bastian M. Scianna's work contrasts the Italian army's actions with those of their German allies and examines the narratives that influenced postwar views of Italy's role in the war.¹¹ The latter refers to the construction of the national myth of "*Italiani brava gente*" ("Italians, the good people") in postwar Italy, which is linked to the participation of Italy in Operation Barbarossa.¹² Despite this pioneering research, there is still much work to be done concerning Italy's role during this period, especially the ways it intersected with the Holocaust.¹³

(Aussme), L/14, box 77, file 10: *Enti dell'Esercito Italiano istituiti fuori della Madrepatria per l'organizzazione logistica del CSIR*, document issued by the High Staff of the Italian Land Army (probably 1941); Raffaello Pannacci, *L'occupazione Italiana in URSS: La Presenza Fascista fra Russia e Ucraina (1941–1943)* (Rome: Carocci Editore – Studi Storici, 2023), 151–153.

8 Raffaello Pannacci, email message to author, August 7, 2023.

9 Thomas Schlemmer, *Italiener an der Ostfront 1942/43. Dokumente zu Mussolinis Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion* (Munich: R. Oldenburg Verlag, 2005).

10 Raffaello Pannacci, *L'occupazione Italiana in URSS: La Presenza Fascista fra Russia e Ucraina (1941–1943)* (Rome: Carocci Editore – Studi Storici, 2023).

11 Bastian M. Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front, 1941–1943: Operations, Myths and Memories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

12 This myth emerged to reshape Italy's wartime memory, promoting a narrative of heroism and moral righteousness in response to Italian Fascism and perpetration of wartime atrocities. Standing in contrast to depictions of Italians as Nazi collaborators, it painted Italian troops as honorable and humane, differing from their German allies. See: Filippo Focardi, *Il Cattivo Tedesco e il Bravo Italiano: La Rimozione delle Colpe della Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2016), 179–83.

13 A few dedicated studies are available for the areas of Italy, the Balkans, and Poland. See: Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); Davide Rodogno, "Italiani Brava Gente? Fascist Italy's Policy Toward the Jews in the Balkans, April 1941–July

By examining the connections between the experiences of Jewish children and youth in Transnistria and the Italian presence in the region, this study examines an overlooked chapter of history and links it to long-neglected dimensions of Holocaust historiography. For a long time, the experiences of children were largely ignored; historians denied them agency and relegated youths to the margins of historical research. There was a shift away from this perspective starting in the late 1980s and 1990s as new historical approaches led scholars to turn to previously neglected areas of research including the history of childhood.¹⁴ In any discussion about the history of children during the Holocaust, Deborah Dwork's pioneering work *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* deserves a special mention.¹⁵ While there is a considerable amount of scholarship on the occupation in the former Soviet Union, studies addressing the experiences of children are relatively rare. However, this has changed in the last decade, with notable contributions on children's experiences of war by Yuliya von Saal and Anika Walke on Belarus, Irina Rebrova on the North Caucasus, and Natalia Timofeeva on Russia.¹⁶ Among the few works specifically exploring children's experiences in Transnistria is Dana Mihailescu's study, which offers insight on the postwar accounts of Jewish orphans.¹⁷

For my analysis, I mainly draw on the postwar oral histories and written testimonies of Jewish survivors born between 1924–1937 (hereafter referred to as Jewish child survivors) that are held in the USC Shoah

1943," *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2005): 213–40; Giorgio Rochat, "Leopoli 1942–1943. Militari italiani dinanzi alla Shòà," *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 69, no. 2 (2003): 387–94.

14 Joanna Beata Michlic, "Mapping the History of Child Holocaust Survivors," in *No Small Matter: Features of Jewish Childhood*, ed. Anat Helman (New York: Oxford Academic, 2021), 81–82.

15 Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

16 Yuliya von Saal, "Mehr als Opfer—More than Victims: Kriegskinder und Ihr Überleben in den Kinderheimen im besetzten Belarus," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* H. 3/4 (2020): 403–31; Anika Walke, "Jewish Youth in the Minsk Ghetto: How Age and Gender Mattered," *Kritika—Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 3 (2014): 1–28; Irina Rebrova, "Oral Histories about the Daily Life Experiences of Children during World War II," in *Children and War: Past and Present*, ed. Helga Embacher et al. (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2013), 86–100; Natalia Timofeeva, "Minderjährige Häftlinge der NS-Konzentrationslager in der Gesellschaft und im Gedächtnis Russlands," in *Kindheiten im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Francesca Weil, André Postert, Alfons Kenkmann (Halle Saale: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2018), 500–14.

17 Dana Mihailescu, "Early Postwar Accounts of Jewish Orphans from Transnistria," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2022): 353–71.

Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA), the collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), and Yad Vashem, as well as in edited volumes.¹⁸ I supplement the analysis of oral testimonies with official documents when relevant. Given the precisely defined scope of my analysis, the VHA is an unparalleled resource. It encompasses a total of 632 testimonies that include references to encounters with Italians, broadly aligning with events associated with the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union, Romania, Italy, and Yugoslavia. Over half of these testimonies originate from Jewish survivors born between 1924 and 1937. A substantial portion of the testimonies, 162 to be exact, relate to Transnistria and involve survivors born during the specified period.¹⁹ However, only thirty of them were either born in or deported from Romania, Bukovina, or Bessarabia, resulting in a collection of narratives from interviewees who hailed from the former Ukrainian SSR and Moldavian ASSR. Consequently, many of the survivors grew up near the very ghettos they were forced into later on. The disproportionate representation of interviewees from the region presents a significant challenge for this study when comparing experiences related to encounters between Italians and local and deported Jewish youths. In total, I reviewed one hundred interviews from the VHA related to the Italian presence in Transnistria, most of which were conducted in Russian. Of these, forty-five testimonies—representing various age groups and genders, form this article's core source base. Although I found testimonies scattered across different regions of Transnistria, the bulk come from Balta and Jugustru counties (*județe*).

The emphasis I place on late postwar testimonies is due to the paucity of Jewish testimonies that address the Holocaust in Transnistria from the war and immediate postwar period. With the sole exception of Golda Wasserman's testimony from 1944, I was unable to uncover any information regarding interactions between child survivors and Italians in the early postwar accounts available to me.²⁰ Regarding the Italian view on

18 The VHA, founded by Steven Spielberg in 1994, serves as the principal repository for the testimonies examined in this study. As one of the world's most extensive digital collections, the VHA encompasses over fifty-five thousand video testimonies from survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides that were recorded between 1994 and 2000.

19 The VHA holds only a sparse collection of records related to Jewish-Italian encounters for localities within the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* under German occupation.

20 Wasserman's testimony belongs to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee collection at the State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF) and was subsequently included in "The Unknown Black Book" by Ilya Altman: Ilya Altman, *The Unknown*

Jews, I found few sources from military affiliates related to other locations within the Soviet Union. These illustrate Italian reactions to the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, but they do not detail Italians' direct interactions with Jews.

Historian Christopher R. Browning highlights the value of postwar testimonies in understanding the Holocaust and Jewish experiences but urges a critical approach. Personal histories, shaped by various factors like timing and circumstances, can be influenced by memory lapses or selective sharing, which affect the comprehensiveness of the information. The format of interviews and the interviewer's approach can further impact the testimonies collected from survivors.²¹ The incorporation of postwar testimonies from former young survivors into analyses proves to be an even more complex issue. Defining "children" and "adolescents" within the context of the Holocaust is challenging as varying experiences and settings can make age classifications fluid or subjective.²² However, in order to establish parameters for the analysis, I decided to concentrate on individuals between the ages of four and seventeen at the onset of the occupation in 1941.²³ I set four years old as the lower age limit based on research into the development of autobiographical memory, particularly the insights of Robyn Fivush and Jessica McDermott Sales, scholars of psychology and the behavioral sciences. They state that children starting at age three can accurately recount their personal histories and progressively enhance their ability to create clear narratives as they mature; at the same time, their memories are particularly shaped by emotional content, leading them to recall emotional details more vividly than non-emotional ones.²⁴

Robert N. Kraft, a cognitive psychologist, delves into how Holocaust survivors recall and share traumatic experiences via videotaped testimonies.

Black Book: Materials for the "Black Book" edited by Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg (Moscow: ACT: CORPUS, 2015).

21 Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 39–43, 84–85.

22 On this matter, see also: Susan R. Suleiman, "The 1.5 Generation: Thinking about Child Survivors and the Holocaust," *American Imago* 59, no. 3 (2002): 277–95.

23 In many cultures and scientific studies, a child is considered someone under the age of thirteen. The age of thirteen also holds historical and cultural significance in Jewish tradition. It marks the coming of age for boys (Bar Mitzvah) and girls (Bat Mitzvah), leading to a fluid distinction between children and adolescents in the context of this study.

24 Robyn Fivush and Jessica McDermott Sales, "Children's Memories of Emotional Events," in *Memory and Emotion*, ed. Daniel Reisberg and Paula Hertel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 242–43.

He highlights the lasting strength of these memories—which can remain vivid even after several decades—while differentiating between “core memory” (vivid sensory experiences) and “narrative memory” (structured stories derived from core memories for communication).²⁵ In the context of Starachowice camp survivor testimonies, Browning also highlights the concept of “core memory.” Despite testimonies collected from survivors in different regions over a fifty-six-year period, Browning notes a consistent and reliable shared memory. He argues this core memory allows for credible evaluations of individual memories based on clarity, detail, consistency, and historians’ insights.²⁶ Drawing on Browning’s work, historian Joanna B. Michlic examines the enduring emotional intensity of child survivors’ memories, asserting that key wartime events remain largely preserved over time. Although these memories, which often encompass both traumatic experiences as well as moments of positive emotional valence, might not be exact or detailed, Michlic emphasizes their vital contribution to understanding the emotional and experiential facets of survivors’ histories.²⁷ Given that Italians hold a special place in the memories of survivors who were children or adolescents in Transnistria, predominantly in a positively emotional sense but occasionally in a negative one, their recollections provide a valuable window into these unexplored encounters.

Italians and Jews in Transnistria: Encounters and Memories

To allow for a deeper analysis of Italians’ interactions with the Jewish population in Transnistria in subsequent sections, it is essential to understand the Italians’ attitudes toward Jews and determine the primary patterns of interactions between them as described in young survivors’ testimonies. The Italian occupation in Eastern Europe was marked by a mix of policies influenced by various factors such as regional differences, personal beliefs, Fascist propaganda, and combat conditions, all of which affected Italians’ feelings about and behavior toward Jews. Historian

25 Robert N. Kraft, “Emotional Memory in Survivors of the Holocaust: A Quantitative Study of Oral Testimony,” in *Memory and Emotion*, ed. Daniel Reisberg and Paula Hertel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 353.

26 Browning, *Collected Memories*, 46–47, 81–82.

27 Joanna Beata Michlic, “The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources: Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. Sara R. Horowitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 141–48.

Xosé Núñez Seixas concluded: “While some of their members were strongly motivated by fascism, anti-communism and/or anti-semitism, many others were simply conscripted soldiers, adventurers or even non-enthusiastic warriors who had enlisted for different reasons.”²⁸ The Italians played multiple—conflicting—roles in the Holocaust, with a marked difference between their influence and actions under German command in the Soviet Union and their independent policies in areas such as southern France or Yugoslavia.²⁹ While they did not establish Jewish ghettos or perpetrate mass killings under German command, scholarship has examined Italians’ collaboration and the range of soldierly behaviors in German-occupied Europe.³⁰ In short, many Italians were evidently aware of the atrocities perpetrated against Jews early on, although their depth of understanding varied.³¹ In terms of collaboration, historian Dieter Pohl cites the Royal Army handing Jews over to *Sonderkommando 4b* in Horlivka, while Thomas Schlemmer’s work delves into the *Carabinieri*’s 1942 internments of Jews.³² Further complicating the narrative, Scianna states that some Italian soldiers aided German extermination plans by

28 Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, “Unable to Hate? Some Comparative Remarks on the War Experiences of Spaniards and Italians on the Eastern Front, 1941–1944,” *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 2 (2018): 287. Similarly, historian Davide Rodogno affirmed that the attitudes of Italian military leaders were diverse and not all soldiers held the same antisemitic beliefs. See: Rodogno, “Italiani brava gente?,” 214–16. Pannacci examined antisemitism among Italians, intertwining gratitude for Mussolini’s defense against perceived threats like Bolshevism with a generic antisemitism that blamed Jews as war instigators and profiteers. See: Pannacci, *L’occupazione Italiana in URSS*, 245–50.

29 Nicolò Da Lio, “The Italian Soldier’s Journey in the Soviet Union,” last modified October 17, 2017, <https://www.swwresearch.com/post/the-italian-soldier-s-journey-in-the-soviet-union>.

30 Virtue, “Fascist Italy,” 62.

31 Within weeks, Italian soldiers reported on the German execution of Jews. There were also instances when Italian military members directly witnessed glimpses of Jewish camps and labor battalions. See: Virtue, “Fascist Italy,” 62–63. In 1941, the Ministry of the Interior received reports from returning soldiers who spread rumors about the summary executions of Jews. See: Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front*, 246.

32 Dieter Pohl, “Einsatzgruppe C,” in *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42. Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*, ed. Peter Klein (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 1997), 80; and AUSSME, L 14/85-5, Comando dei Carabinieri Reali dell’8a Armata: Activity report for the period 10.5.–30.9.1942, in Schlemmer, *Die Italiener an der Ostfront*, 36. This pattern was also evident in towns like Yenakieve and Donetsk. See: Natalia Terekhova, “Italian Policies Regarding the Jewish Population during the Military Occupation of Soviet Territories,” in *The “Jewish Question” in the Territories Occupied by Italians*, ed. Giovanni Orsina and Andrea Ungari (Rome: Viella Historical Research), 163–65.

categorizing Jews, while Pannacci underscores their exploitation, particularly in regions like Donetsk and Synelnykove, where illicit searches led to looting for personal gain.³³ Nonetheless, several authors, including Núñez Seixas, concluded that there is “not enough evidence to demonstrate that the ordinary Italian combatants were willing accomplices in the Holocaust.”³⁴ The majority appeared indifferent or bewildered by the methods of the Germans, but they did not defy German orders or actively oppose the persecution and murder of Jews.³⁵ At the same time, various authors have noted that acts of support and rescue of Jews were also part of the complex historical landscape. However, these episodes were not as prevalent as commonly believed and portrayed.³⁶ Rodogno emphasized that while some Italians aided Jews, it would be misleading to claim all persons were motivated by humanitarianism.³⁷ Historical research has revealed a diverse range of behaviors among Italian soldiers, with some strictly following German directives due to fear of reprisals, and others displaying varying levels of tolerance and protection for the Jewish persons they encountered.³⁸

In reviewing testimonies, particularly from the VHA, it became evident that discussions about Italians were rarely initiated by interviewers.³⁹ Rather, interviewees typically brought up Italians unprompted, either in chronological narratives or through open-ended questions focusing more on emotions and specific experiences than on sequential events. These narratives frequently contrasted the actions of different occupiers, thus

33 Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front*, 246; Pannacci, *L'occupazione Italiana in URSS*, 252.

34 Núñez Seixas, “Unable to Hate?,” 282.

35 Schlemmer, *Die Italiener an der Ostfront*, 36; Gladstone Virtue, “Fascist Italy,” 60.

36 This is particularly evident in the case of Italian–Jewish relations and the treatment of refugees in wartime Italy. See: Sullam, *The Italian Executioners*, 7; Joshua D. Zimmerman, “Introduction,” in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922–1945*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

37 Rodogno, “Italiani brava gente?,” 226–35.

38 Rochat, “Leopoli 1942–1943,” 387. The behavior toward Jews was also influenced by factors such as time. According to historian Jonathan Steinberg, the defeat further reduced the willingness of Italian soldiers to participate in the persecution of Jews, as their aim to preserve their self-esteem and avoid negative perceptions motivated them to prioritize fundamental values. See: Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941–43* (London: Routledge, 2003), 173.

39 The VHA was designed to chronologically explore prewar, war, and postwar experiences, with interviewers using a standard set of questions. This methodology encouraged survivors to provide details on significant narratives. Nonetheless, the structured format and the interviewer’s involvement could conceivably impact the interviews. See: Browning, *Collected Memories*, 45.

involving subjective and emotional dimensions, such as negative experiences with Germans, Romanians, and Ukrainians. In the few instances when a precise timeframe can be determined, the significance of the locations of Italian–Jewish encounters became apparent. For instance, recollections involving Italians in Olhopil (Balta *judet*)⁴⁰ predominantly pertained to the war’s initial phase, while for Balta (the administrative center of the Balta *judet*), they spanned the entire period between 1941 and 1943. Generally, specific Italian units were not identified and were broadly referred to as “the Italians” or “Italian soldiers/troops.” Interviewees typically followed up on survivors’ mentions of Italians, focusing on how they were distinguished and how they treated them personally or Jews in general. Based on these testimonies, the Italians were identified by their distinct uniforms, language, and physical appearance; for survivors who were young children at the time of the war, older children or adults pointed out Italians to them.⁴¹ Former young survivors integrated additional characteristics into their memories of Italians, predominantly details about their food preferences or the flavor, texture, and shape of foods associated with the Italians.⁴² This makes sense given that most interactions were tied to young persons’ search for food. Khasia Gringruz, then twelve, had an encounter with Italians in Yampil (Jugastru *judet*), which was embedded in her memory: “I remember their *makarony*.⁴³ I will probably never forget this taste, maybe I had much better and tastier food, but this taste will never fade from my memory and from my palate, and my understanding of kindness.”⁴⁴ Additionally, some interviewees remembered the Italians’ aversion to the cold, recounting how they

40 During the Romanian occupation of Transnistria from 1941 to 1944, the region was divided into thirteen administrative “*judete*” (counties): Anan’yiv, Balta, Berezivka, Dubăsari, Holta, Jugastru, Mohyliv, Ochakiv, Odesa, Ovidiopol, Ribnița, Tiraspol, and Tulchyn.

41 David Reznik (1935), Segment 46, Interview 24559, VHA, USC, Aug. 14, 1998; Boris Zaidman (1934), Segment 33, Interview 31952, VHA, USC, May 27, 1997; Roza Bronshtein (1924), Segment 42, Interview 44903, VHA, USC, June 15, 1998.

42 Ruven Sheinfel’d (1930), Segments 75–76, Interview 19068, VHA, USC, Aug. 18, 1996.

43 Probably derived from the Italian “*maccheroni*,” the term “*makarony*” in Russian and Ukrainian (and “*makaronen*” in Yiddish) broadly denotes various pasta types. Historically, when “pasta” was not a common term, “*makarony*” was utilized to describe all dough-based foods with distinct shapes. Most survivors used “*makarony*” in their testimonies, with a few instances where “*lapsba*” (more specific to noodles) denoted Italian pasta, and a singular case where the term “spaggetti” was employed in an English-speaking interview. For the etymology in Russian, see: Vladimir Lebedev, *Etymological Dictionary of the World Russian Language* (2019).

44 Khasia Gringruz (1929), Segment 43, Interview 24559, VHA, USC, Dec. 9, 1996.

would freeze and burn anything accessible to them during the winter. In particular, some interviewees recalled that Italians in Chechelnyk (Balta *judet*) endured winter conditions by staying in tents on the ground.⁴⁵ This narrative could indicate that the distinctiveness of Italians' origins (from warmer climates) possibly mirrored young Jews' own experience of the cold winter weather at the time, thus establishing an emotional connection between the two groups.

Most frequently, however, descriptions of the Italians in Transnistria focused on their attitudes and behavior toward the Jewish population. The narrative of benevolent Italians has deeply permeated recollections and emerges from testimonies offering varying degrees of detail. In some cases, this narrative was employed in a generalized sense, encompassing the entire Jewish community and declaring, for example, that the Italians were "friends of the Jews" and treated them very well.⁴⁶ Other testimonies proffered examples of the benevolent actions and aid extended by Italians to Jews. These acts included offering food and especially their compassionate treatment of children. Tatyana Dralyuk, who was four years old at the beginning of the war, recalled how she snuck out of the Kryzhopil (Jugastru *judet*) ghetto and was offered food by Italian soldiers, reflecting on the deep impression they left: "Ever since then, a deep respect for Italians has become ingrained in me, their representatives have left a warm imprint on my soul."⁴⁷ Some survivors explained the affection for children by suggesting that Jewish children reminded the soldiers of their own children or siblings back home.⁴⁸ The absence of violent acts perpetrated by the Italians was also highlighted.⁴⁹ For some survivors—such as Mariia Bronshtein, who was deported from Bessarabia to Olhopil at the age of eight—their interactions with Italians stood out as some of the few precious memories they had from that period of their lives: "They [the Italians] did what they could to bring joy to the children. Even though they were only there for a short time, those were the most pleasant memories of the war."⁵⁰ Larry Rotenberg, then six years old and deported from Bukovina, also stated that during the entire Holo-

45 Michael Beider (1927), Segment 96, Interview 6920, VHA, USC, Dec. 4, 1995; Iakov Dinovitsner (1929), Segment 28, Interview 38756, VHA, USC, Oct. 6, 1997; Iakov Leibman (1934), Segment 19, Interview 42774, VHA, USC, Mar. 31, 1998.

46 Miriam Auerbach (1926), Segment 30, Interview 14816, VHA, USC, May 2, 1996.

47 Tatyana Dralyuk (1937), Segment 43, Interview 23185, VHA, USC, Feb. 23, 1998.

48 Ada Shistik (1931), Segment 28, Interview 39307, VHA, USC, Nov. 19, 1996; Tatyana Dralyuk (1937), Segment 43, Interview 23185, VHA, USC, Feb. 23, 1998.

49 Aron Goreschnik (1933), Segment 25, Interview 19473, VHA, USC, Aug. 28, 1996.

50 Mariia Bronshtein (1933), Segment 104, Interview 22714, VHA, USC, Nov. 7, 1996.

caust in Obodivka (Balta *judet*), he experienced real compassion only once, during an encounter with an Italian who gave Rotenberg his ration of spaghetti.⁵¹ In light of their personal experiences, some juxtaposed their perception of Italian soldiers with Italy's Fascist history, which they discovered only later. Moisei Belotserkovskii, who was eight when the war began, was surprised to learn of Italy's Fascist history after the war. He recalled the Italian soldiers as compassionate and good-hearted and felt that their actions did not align with the reputation of Fascism.⁵² Others shared a similar view, noting that from their experience, most Italians did not want the war, and although there were Fascists among them, the majority were good people.⁵³

While analyzing interactions between child survivors and Italians, it is notable that VHA interviewers never asked about how communication took place. Some witnesses provided insights into this aspect on their own initiative. Local Ukrainian Jews explained that they dealt with the language barrier by relying on a combination of body language, the limited Russian proficiency of some Italians, and the assistance of those among the Jewish population in Transnistria who were familiar with the Romanian language.⁵⁴ Considering that a substantial portion of the testimonies originated from interviewees from the Moldavian ASSR, it is plausible to assume that some of these children or adolescents also possessed varying levels of proficiency in Romanian.⁵⁵ Some interviewees also noted that they gradually learned Italian or picked up key phrases for communication, while others already possessed knowledge of foreign languages that facilitated interactions.⁵⁶ It appears that familiarity with Romanian or another foreign language similar to Italian was especially important for initiating communication and accelerating the acquisition

51 Larry Rotenberg (1935), Segment 48, Interview 61026, VHA, USC, Nov. 4, 2022.

52 Moisei Belotserkovskii (1933), Segment 37, Interview 46931, VHA, USC, May 26, 1998.

53 Riva Altman (1929), Segment 52, Interview 38816, VHA, USC, Dec. 10, 1991; Aleksandr Cherner (1935), Segment 56, Interview 38965, VHA, USC, Dec. 12, 1997; Frima Flikshstein (1936), Segment 49–50, Interview 33816, VHA, USC, Sep. 8, 1997.

54 Fridrikh Soroker (1934), Segment 21, Interview 9400, VHA, USC, Feb. 11, 1996.

55 This included Boris Slepoi (1934), Segment 62, Interview 40879, VHA, USC, Jan. 29, 1998. The Moldavian ASSR, which existed from 1924 to 1940, was an autonomous republic within the Ukrainian SSR. The primary languages spoken were Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian, and Yiddish. The Soviet Union promoted the use of the "Moldovan" language, which was essentially Romanian written in the Cyrillic alphabet, as part of a broader policy to discourage Romanian nationalism and emphasize the separateness of Moldova and Romania.

56 Ada Lisi (1925), Segment 248, Interview 34471, VHA, USC, Oct. 20, 1997; Ida Umanskaia (1924), Segment 37, Interview 33447, VHA, USC, Aug. 11, 1997.

of Italian language proficiency.⁵⁷ The depth of communication in relation to age is also crucial to consider. Ada Lisi, who was sixteen years old at the time, illustrated how her proficiency in French allowed her to communicate with the Italians about the circumstances of Jews in Balta and the conditions of Italian Jews. She recalled having learned that although Italians expelled Jews, they did not kill them.⁵⁸ Sofia Linetzky, who was fourteen when she met the Italians, credited them for their efforts to engage in conversations with Jews, demonstrating an interest in their lives.⁵⁹ In these scenarios, language proficiency coupled with a certain level of understanding could have enabled more in-depth conversations, potentially shaping memories and perceptions reciprocally. It is vital to note, however, that language alone was not a definitive feature of Jewish-Italian interactions, and its significance could vary depending on the context and region. Finally, despite the varied backgrounds and experiences of both deported and local Jewish children and adolescents, there were no discernible differences in their memories concerning the portrayal of Italians or their treatment by them.⁶⁰

Children and Adolescents' Encounters with Italians: Labor, Barter, Begging

Beyond the narrative of Italians who helped Jewish children out of compassion, a substantial number of testimonies relate stories of bartering with, begging from, and working for Italians as part of children's or teenagers' experiences during the Holocaust in Transnistria. These experiences shed light on the agency of some young Jewish fugitives in their interactions with Italians. Several studies have shown that the Holocaust significantly impacted traditional family and gender dynamics. Harsh

57 Alexander Berkowits (1930), Segment 62, Interview 13792, VHA, USC, Mar. 29, 1996. As the war progressed, especially in areas like Balta where witnesses had prolonged contact with Italians, this effect seems to have waned as many young Jews increasingly learned and understood Italian. These experiences had a profound impact on some witnesses' memory, leading them to weave specific Italian terms or phrases into their interviews. Ida Umanskaia (1924), Segment 37, Interview 33447, VHA, USC, Aug. 11, 1997; Abram Kopman (1933), Segment 68, Interview 44163, VHA, USC, May 12, 1998; Semen Gol'dner (1931), Segment 74, Interview 28894, VHA, USC, Feb. 25, 1997.

58 Ada Lisi (1925), Segment 68, Interview 34471, VHA, USC, Oct. 20, 1997.

59 Sofia Linetzky (1929), Segment 17, Interview 6949, VHA, USC, Dec. 5, 1995.

60 However, it is important to reiterate that testimonies from those who were deported represent a smaller subset of sources used in my analysis.

conditions forced many children and adolescents to mature faster and take on new roles and responsibilities—ranging from breadwinners and caretakers to smugglers, resisters, and rescuers—much earlier than would normally be expected.⁶¹

Young Breadwinners and Narratives of Sustenance: Begging and Italian Aid

One of the ways especially younger children could interact with Italians was by begging for food. In numerous ghettos and camps in Transnistria, sneaking out was part of everyday life for many Jewish children. Leaving these areas without permission was not allowed and was severely punished in many places, making it much more difficult for adults to leave without being caught or recognized.⁶² Sneaking out resulted partly from childlike curiosity, but it mostly served to ensure survival by enabling children to smuggle food into the ghetto, thereby becoming breadwinners for their families. Children also begged from passing Italians or at Italian military bases to which they arrived either by chance—attracted by smells and sounds—or due to their previous contacts with the military. At the age of six, Menashe Karp ventured beyond the boundaries of the Balta ghetto in search of food. Reflecting on this experience decades later, Karp mentioned that his mother, who was frequently away because of forced labor, could not adequately care for him and his brother, often returning with no provisions. Outside the ghetto, the Italians occasionally offered him a roll, while Romanians ignored his pleas for food.⁶³ As news of the Italians' generosity spread, in some places, Jewish children started queuing up in front of their kitchens and begging for food.⁶⁴ It is worth noting that survivors occasionally mentioned separate groups of boys and girls, indicating the formation of gender-specific collectives of varying sizes. In Balta, a group of boys around the ages of ten or eleven

61 Sliwa, *Jewish Childhood in Kraków*, chap. 2; Barbara Engelking-Boni, "Childhood in the Warsaw Ghetto," in *Children and the Holocaust: Symposium Presentations*, ed. Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington, DC: USHMM, 2004), 41; Lenore J. Weitzman, "Resistance in Everyday Life: Family Strategies, Role Reversals, and Role Sharing in the Holocaust," in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present*, ed. Joanna B. Michlic (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 46–47.

62 Ovidiu Creangă, "Rabnita," 747.

63 Menashe Karp (1936), Segment 45, Interview 40670, VHA, USC, Mar. 6, 1998.

64 Michael Beider (1927), Segment 73, Interview 6920, VHA, USC, Dec. 4, 1995.

would regularly undertake the perilous journey across the Kodyma River to reach the Italian military base so they could obtain food for their families and community. The winter posed additional dangers, as recounted by Moisei Teper, who, along with others, fell through the ice but was saved by his peers, an experience that demonstrated the unity and friendship of the cohort.⁶⁵ Girls like Mania Tesler, born in 1931, also formed groups to traverse the challenging terrain to reach the Italian base in Balta.⁶⁶ Children also formed pairs, such as ten-year-old Ada Shistik and her friend Eva, who secretly left the Olhopil ghetto to beg the Italians for food. They would then distribute the rolls or soup to as many as eleven people in their ghetto housing.⁶⁷

Orphaned children without parents or extended family members also supported themselves through begging. Polina Sorkin, who was ten years old at the beginning of the war, was separated from her remaining relatives and eventually ended up in Balta, where a temporary orphanage was established in 1943. She recalled how some children from the orphanage would band together to beg from Italians passing by during their retreat and then share the food they collected with the other orphans.⁶⁸ A few other witnesses also recounted going out alone to beg from the Italians but eventually sharing the food with or distributing it to the Balta orphanage.⁶⁹ These examples illustrate different facets of children's individual and group/collective agency. They not only highlight collaborative dynamics but also point to the existence of support networks that were understood to be surrogate families.⁷⁰ In most of the cases recounted by survivors, the children experienced kindness from the Italians, returning with enough rations to sustain several people for days or even weeks. However, some young survivors also remembered instances of cruelty and violence in the context of begging, especially when there was a risk

65 Moisei Teper (1930), Segments 37–41, Interview 21592, VHA, USC, Oct. 20, 1996. See also: Aizik Reznik (1931), Segments 50–51, Interview 25253, VHA, USC, Dec. 12, 1996.

66 Mania Tesler (1931), Segment 36, Interview 37194, VHA, USC, Dec. 13, 1997.

67 Ada Shistik (1931), Segment 28, Interview 23185, VHA, USC, Nov. 19, 1996.

68 Oral history interview with Polina Sorkin (1931), Accession Number 1999.A.0122.161, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Sept 3, 1992, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508221>.

69 Ruven Sheinfel'd (1930), Segments 75–76, Interview 19068, VHA, USC, Aug. 18, 1996; Duvid Port (1933), Segments 42–43, Interview 35321, VHA, USC, Aug. 18, 1997.

70 Natalia Aleksion, "Uneasy Bonds: Jews in Hiding and the Making of Surrogate Families," in *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 85–103.

that the Germans would be able to observe the Italians' interactions with the Jewish children.⁷¹ Overall, when analyzing the phenomenon of children begging from Italians in Transnistria, it is essential to recognize the diverse factors, including the severity of enclosure, the securitization of the ghetto, and the proximity of Italian military bases, that influenced these interactions.

The Multifaceted Nature of Barter involving Young Jews and Italians

Bartering presented an additional avenue of interaction between the young Jewish population in Transnistria and Italians, serving as a key means of improving the chances of survival during the Holocaust. Italian military units' engagement in barter was influenced by various issues, including local circumstances, the dynamics between the Italians and their German allies, and developments on the front lines.⁷² Despite supply shortages that led to the violation of German-imposed regulations and resulted in the looting of local resources and the plunder of the local population, historian Maria Teresa Giusti notes that Italians frequently shared their scant food supplies with the needy, particularly children.⁷³ However, this sharing was, at times, reciprocal.

For several Jewish child survivors, the experience of bartering with the Italians during the Holocaust in Transnistria left a lasting impression. Italians were often portrayed as cultured and civilized, in contrast to Romanians or Germans, who were perceived as more likely to steal.⁷⁴ This more positive evaluation of Italians' behavior differs from what is known about the ways Italian troops acquired some of the resources they exchanged—i. e. through plunder or looting—but none of the interviewees reported being aware of these unsavory details. When he was sixteen, Moni Crivosei witnessed Italian soldiers near the Chechelnyk ghetto

71 Polina Sharova (1932), Segment 32, Interview 9780, VHA, USC, Feb. 16, 1996; Faina Mil'man (1934), Segment 67, Interview 37175, VHA, USC, Oct. 18, 1997; Mikhail Fridman (1936), Segment 70, Interview 29149, VHA, USC, Feb. 21, 1997.

72 Igor I. Barinov, "Italian Troops on USSR Occupied Territories in 1941–1945," *RUDN Journal of Russian History*, no. 4 (2011): 7.

73 On stealing and confiscating from the local population, see: Commander Falconi of the 52nd Artillery Regiment, 1942, in G. S. Filatov, *La Campagna Orientale di Mussolini: L'Odissea delle Truppe Italiane in Russia Vista dall' "Altra Parte,"* trans. Karina Kupsto Vigneri (Milan: Res Gesate, 2023), 124. On sharing food with children see: Giusti, *La campagna di Russia*, chap. 10.

74 Filipp Portianskii, Interview 43351, Seg 149.

coming to barter with Jews at night, noting that this enabled Jews to exchange valuables for food and other items offered by the Italians.⁷⁵ While this type of barter mainly involved adult Jews, bartering with children and teenagers occurred at different levels. Sources indicate that the primary mode of barter involved Italians trading food stuffs for captured or hunted animals, with mainly Jewish boys and male adolescents participating in these exchanges. Gerch Zayats, then thirteen, recalled how teenage boys used to catch frogs for the Italians in Balta:

It was good to meet Italians [...] Italians love frogs very much, and there was a river and so they said, 'Catch frogs'. We went in [...] and all together we caught frogs for them. We brought them the frogs, and in return, they gave us some bread rolls.⁷⁶

Younger boys also caught frogs in Balta for the Italians. Boris Khait, then five years old, described how older youths showed the younger boys how to catch frogs, which they then traded for cookies (*gallette*).⁷⁷ Anna Faingersch also noted the Italians' preference for sparrows. She recalled how boys in Balta, including her five-year-old brother, used to make improvised slingshots and meet up to shoot sparrows. They would exchange the birds with Italians in return for sugar or, occasionally, candy. She mentioned that the Italians' accordion playing initially attracted the children.⁷⁸ These examples underscore the pivotal role of community and inter-age collaboration. Manifestations of traditional gender roles also emerge from these recollections, with Anna Faingersch's younger brother hunting birds while she ensured the cleanliness of their ghetto dwelling and retrieved potato scraps from a hospital.⁷⁹ The Italians' shortage of supplies, particularly fresh meat, appears to have also prompted requests for cats.⁸⁰ While some Jewish survivors recalled witnessing Italians shooting cats on the street, there were also accounts of Jewish children catching cats and handing them over to the Italians.⁸¹ During a Yad Vashem interview, Grigory Majorov, then thirteen, re-

75 Moni Crivosei (1925), Segment 86, Interview 13158, VHA, USC, May 10, 1996.

76 Gerch Zayats (1928), Segment 34, Interview 5962, VHA, USC, Nov. 6, 1995.

77 Boris Khait (1937), Segment 13, Interview 14260, VHA, USC, Apr. 16, 1996.

78 Anna Faingersch (1935), Segments 55–56, Interview 18796, VHA, USC, Aug. 20, 1996.

79 Anna Faingersch (1935), Segments 55–56, Interview 18796, VHA, USC, Aug. 20, 1996.

80 Eating cats is also documented for the soldiers of the Spanish Blue Division during the Eastern Campaign. Valeria Possi, "La Narrativa Testimoniale nella Letteratura Spagnola e Italiana sulla Campagna di Russia," *Artifara* 16 (2016), 210.

81 Polina Kerber (1921), Segment 45, Interview 31982, VHA, USC, Jul. 29, 1997.

counted that he witnessed the Italians dismembering a cat right in front of him, after exchanging it for a roll.⁸² Narratives about cats in survivors' testimonies conveyed astonishment regarding Italian habits or justified bartering as a means of survival.

The final dimension of barter illuminates the role of gender in encounters between Jewish children and Italians. However, this is the most under-researched theme because of the limited number of sources and, conversely, the wide range of possible interpretations of the Russian term "*devushka*."⁸³ This term primarily surfaces in the testimonies of Russian-speaking Jewish survivors, with no evidence of its adoption by Italians. A few interviewees also pointed out two Italian terms for young females: "*signorina*" and "*ragazza*."⁸⁴ The use of "*devushka*" likely represents the survivors' own linguistic interpretation, which was molded by the dominant linguistic and interpretative paradigms that framed their postwar testimonies. Several survivors recounted Italians specifically seeking Jewish "*devushki*," sometimes linking this to narratives about engaging in relationships or sexual interactions in exchange for resources, termed as "sexual barter" by historian Anna Hájková.⁸⁵ Although relationships between Italians and non-Jewish Soviet women are well documented, references to Jewish adolescents and women engaging in similar types of relationships are almost nonexistent.⁸⁶ A rare exception can be found in a letter from a senior military official to Mussolini, stating that Italian officers

82 Testimony of Grigory Majorov, born in Lugansk, 1928, regarding his experiences in Lugansk, his escape from a killing pit, imprisonment in Cherkasskoye labor camp, and time wandering Transnistria, Item ID 4012190, File Number 11545, Tape Number V.T/2719, Testimonies Department of the Yad Vashem Archives, May 18, 2000.

83 In Russian, two terms are used: "*devochka*," referring to a little girl but also potentially including teenagers, and "*devushka*" (plural: "*devushki*"), which applied to a female person in the age of transition from adolescence to young adulthood or one who has reached sexual maturity but has not yet married. See: C. I. Ozhegov, N. Y. Shvedova, *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language*.

84 Based on the definition of the terms of the Italian Encyclopedia of Sciences, Letters and Arts, initiated by the Giovanni Treccani Institute, the first term, "*signorina*," designates an unmarried young lady and is a courteous form of address, similar to "miss." It can also describe the transitional period from childhood to adolescence, often highlighting the onset of puberty. The second term, "*ragazza*," predominantly describes young females in adolescence or early adulthood, and, in informal contexts, can mean a girlfriend or romantic partner.

85 Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 503–33.

86 Raffaello Pannacci, "Sex, Military Brothels and Gender Violence during the Italian Campaign in the USSR, 1941–3," *Journal of Contemporary History* 55, no. 1 (2020): 75–96.

in the Soviet Union had “taken Jewish lovers” and shielded them from German roundups.⁸⁷ Jewish accounts from Transnistria often mention sexual barter with Romanian occupiers and occasionally Germans, but narratives involving Italians are distinct. After emphasizing the sophistication of the Italians, Ilia Kogan, then fifteen, humorously noted that when the Italians took “the liberty to approach our Jewish girls, they weren’t *unsuccessful* as they were good-looking young men who sang charming Neapolitan songs.”⁸⁸ Similarly, Fridrikh Soroker mentioned sexual barter while highlighting the Italians’ good behavior and sophistication:

They [...] didn’t cause any harm to anyone [...]. The only thing was that they specifically sought out young, beautiful *devuschki*; those who were average looking didn’t capture their interest [...], and there were *devushki* who had been with them, both Jewish and local Ukrainians [...]. They thanked them, gave them food, or what else, I don’t know. So, but the Italians behaved very cultured with all of us.⁸⁹

Both survivors distance themselves from the Italians’ actions, using phrases like “taking the liberty” or “the only thing was.” But they also soften the narrative by emphasizing the Italians’ cultured demeanor. Notably, only male survivors have discussed sexual barter with Italians, raising questions about the role of gender bias in such testimony. Could surviving women have addressed this facet of Jewish-Italian relations with a similar sense of humor? Might they have also interpreted the Italians’ attempts to engage with them as crossing a boundary? How might the perceived sense of Jewish men’s inability to provide or their helplessness in preventing the exploitation of “their women” factor into this dynamic? The overall scarcity of accounts concerning this issue may also be rooted in the ongoing stigmatization of non-normative sexuality—including promiscuity—and abusive sexual behavior.⁹⁰ Navigating

87 AUSSME, H/1, p. 1, f. 14: undated letter by M. C., in Pannacci, “Sex, Military Brothels and Gender Violence,” 80.

88 Ilia Kogan (1927), Segment 66, Interview 38145, VHA, USC, Nov. 19, 1997.

89 Fridrikh Soroker (1934), Segments 22–23, Interview 9400, VHA, USC, Feb. 11, 1996.

90 Michlic also delves into the gender dynamics of rescuing Jews during the Holocaust in Poland, highlighting the social stigma faced by women and girls who were sexually abused. Notably, the postwar discourse was marked by silence on this issue, often with men recounting these instances rather than the female victims of sexual abuse or barter themselves reporting on their experiences. See: Joanna B. Michlic, “Gender Perspectives on the Rescue of Jews in Poland: Preliminary Observations,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 30 (2018): 407–26. On the stigma

the topic of sexual barter, particularly in relation to former young survivors, generates various challenges both for individuals who experienced or witnessed it and for scholars delving into this sensitive research area. Historian Nicholas Stargardt underscores the taboo of discussing wartime sexual experiences. Women, especially those who were children during the war, confronted significant problems when trying to articulate these encounters, occasionally opting to relay their experiences through more detached third-person narratives.⁹¹ Concerning Jewish children in the Theresienstadt Family Camp in Auschwitz, Hájková suggests not viewing their involvement in sexual barter as a moral failing. Instead, she sees it as evidence of adaptability in swiftly changing circumstances and calls for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of such acts instead of shallow judgments.⁹²

Between Coercion and Agency: Jewish Children and Youths Laboring for Italians

Forced labor was a fundamental part of everyday life for children and adolescents in Transnistria. With few exceptions, in the so-called “death camps” where Jews were left to die of hunger and disease or where those who were deemed unable to work (mainly the sick, the elderly, and children) were interned, the majority of the Jewish population was forced to perform labor.⁹³ Officially, men and women over the age of fourteen were considered capable of working, but unofficially, younger children sometimes worked as well. They would pretend to be older to increase their chances of survival or to take the place of other family members who were able to work. The circumstances of forced labor in Transnistria varied depending on the location, the local Jewish leadership, and the arrangements made by/with Romanian authorities.⁹⁴ Jewish survivors’

surrounding wartime sexual abuse victims in Hungary, see also: Andrea Petö, *Das Unsagbare erzählen. Sexuelle Gewalt in Ungarn im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021).

91 Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children’s Lives under Nazis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), Chapter II.

92 Anna Hájková, “Introduction: Sexuality, Holocaust, Stigma,” *German History* 39, no. 1 (March 2021), 1.

93 The term “death camp” in part derives from the terminology used by the survivors themselves, which includes references to places like the Pechera camp in Transnistria, among others.

94 Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 239.

memories of forced labor under Romanians and Germans were predominantly negative, marked by exploitation, violence, and emotional distress. In contrast, the activities that former child survivors referred to as “work” performed for the Italians generally had a positive connotation. However, the experiences and memories of this labor were not uniform; as with barter, gender and age played an important role in shaping how survivors interpreted these interactions.

In most cases recalled in testimonies, work involving younger boys and girls was connected to their initial contacts with Italians that had been established through begging or Italian offers of food. Adolescents’ involvement in work for the Italians primarily stemmed from two scenarios. While some youths took the initiative, offering their services in an attempt to improve their living conditions and ensure their survival, others were recruited. A few survivors noted that the Italians also asked the Romanian authorities for workers, and the Romanians then allotted Jews for the tasks. For the Balta ghetto, Gennadii Rozenberg, then fourteen, noted that the Jewish committee also allocated workers to “purchasers,” be they Germans, Romanians, or Italians.⁹⁵ Work under the Italians largely occurred beyond the confines of the camps and ghettos and was concentrated in Balta county. The first type of work usually involved male adolescents and included more physically demanding jobs. Gennadii Rozenberg recounted his experience of working for the Italians alongside other teenagers. They were tasked with loading sacks of wheat onto the vehicles of the Italians so that it could be transported out of Balta. Rozenberg expressed uncertainty regarding the existence of other peoples who were as sympathetic to him and the other young workers as the Italians, who provided the adolescents with food identical to their own, ensuring that the children were never afflicted with hunger during this period.⁹⁶ The other type of work primarily consisted of cleaning and was performed by children of both genders, although in certain settings, such labor was performed exclusively by teenage girls. Multiple Holocaust survivors from Balta who were between seven and twelve years old when the war began recalled how they would receive leftover rations as compensation for scrubbing the kettles used by the Italians. In this context, Riva Chernina highlighted the agency of her sister Dora, who was ten years old at the time, and elucidated the pivotal role Dora undertook in the daily battle against hunger:

95 Gennadii Rozenberg (1927), Segment 88, Interview 39548, VHA, USC, Dec. 18, 1997.

96 Gennadii Rozenberg (1927), Segments 89–90.

They [Italians] cooked huge kettles with *makarony* [. . .], and they took little children, put them in these kettles and children cleaned these kettles and scraped off the *makarony* [. . .], and our Dorochka was also, it was a very big luck, you can't even imagine it, she got. . . you could say, an incredible occupation. Thanks to her, our family didn't starve. She gathered all these scraps, and these Italians [. . .] allowed her to take them home, and she fed not only our family with them.⁹⁷

Riva Chernina's testimony stands out for explicitly emphasizing her sister's role as a breadwinner, a role that defies the traditional boundaries of childhood and underscores the forced maturation of children during the Holocaust. Additionally, she frames the opportunity to work for the Italians as an incomprehensible stroke of luck. This case demonstrates that agency and luck were not portrayed as mutually exclusive conditions for survival; rather, they were complementary forces that might be intertwined with one another.

Although the dominant narrative features children experiencing fair treatment while performing cleaning tasks for the Italians, the testimony of Motel Liubarskii, nine years old at the time, deviates from this pattern and sheds light on instances of violence perpetrated by the Italians against young Jewish workers:

The Italian soldier was given a kettle with food [. . .], and what was left of it he gave to one of us, and we ate it, and [. . .] you had to scrub out that kettle [. . .] and give the kettle back to the owner. I recall there was such a tragic case, that was the first time, and we didn't know yet what was required of us, and so a boy took this kettle, ate the food, and returned the dirty kettle. Yes, that was terrible, this Italian was wearing such shoes, which we called *stukalki* [knockers], [. . .] and so he hit him on the back with this *stukalka* and probably damaged his spine. Well, and after that, we already became more experienced and smarter and understood what was demanded of us.⁹⁸

Motel Liubarskii's testimony challenges the perception that the Italians' provision of food to Jewish children was driven solely by humanitarianism, revealing a complex reality in which acts of violence were perpetrated against children. Moreover, Liubarskii's testimony offers a narrative that

97 Riva Chernina (1937), Segments 58–60, Interview 45969, VHA, USC, May 5, 1998.

98 Motel Liubarskii (1932), Segments 18–19, Interview 2354, VHA, USC, Apr. 24, 1995.

moves from initial childlike naïveté and innocence to growing wisdom brought about by a profound, painful experience.⁹⁹

Another crucial aspect of relations between Jewish youths and the Italian military presence in Transnistria is closely entangled with the categories of age and gender. According to survivors' accounts, some teenage girls between the ages of fourteen and eighteen years old who worked for the Italians mainly performed duties aligned with traditional gender roles and ideology. First, the entrenched gender norms of Fascist Italy may have influenced the attitudes and behavior of Italian units toward this category of workers.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, within the sociopolitical and cultural landscape of the prewar Soviet Union, most of the Jewish child survivors who addressed their experiences of working for Italians had grown up in an environment that promoted secularization and assimilation into broader Soviet society.¹⁰¹ In Transnistria, the girls working for the Italians were primarily tasked with washing, sewing, ensuring the tidiness of accommodations, and assisting in the Italians' canteens and kitchens. Sarra Shvartsman, who was sixteen years old at the time, recounted her experience of being assigned by the Romanians—at the request of the Italians—to work in a section of Balta together with her

99 This perspective resonates with the findings made by sociologist and psychologist Barbara Engelking, who noted that “children’s roles were a parody of real childhood; nonchildren’s roles were a heavy burden.” See: Engelking-Boni, “Childhood in the Warsaw Ghetto,” 41.

100 During the Fascist era in Italy, there was a distinct tension between traditional and modern views of women. The regime simultaneously promoted the image of the “*donna madre*,” representing the traditional rural mother (the backbone of the family, bearing many children, caring for the home, and nurturing the family) and the “*nuova italiana*” or “New Italian Woman,” symbolizing modernity and progress. While Mussolini aimed to elevate Italy’s status to match other European powers, he remained rooted in traditional values, particularly concerning women’s roles. See: Jennifer L. Monti, *The Contrasting Image of Italian Women Under Fascism in the 1930s* (Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects, 1997), 35–38.

101 The 1920s and 1930s were transformative decades for Jews in the Soviet Union. The Soviet regime’s policies and campaigns aimed at diminishing religious influence and promoting secularism. On this, see: Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Regarding gender, although the state promoted gender equality by enshrining it in its laws and encouraging women to work in professions that were previously dominated by men, there were still deeply ingrained traditional beliefs about women’s primary role as caregivers and homemakers, often resulting in these laws being more symbolic than transformative. See: Jason Wahlang, “Role of Soviet Women in the Second World War in Comparative Perspective,” *International Journal of Russian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2021): 61; Martine Mespoulet, “Women in Soviet Society,” *Cahiers du CEFRES* 30 (2006): 7.

friend Ada. Their duty was to mend the sacks used for the transportation of wheat in order to prevent leakage. Sarra held mixed attitudes toward the Italians. She recognized the benefits of working for them but also noted the behavior of Italian soldiers, especially toward women and girls. While some would offer compliments like “*bella ragazza*” (beautiful girl) or sing for and with them, bringing a little joy into the girls’ lives, others “took pleasure in humiliating and teasing Jewish girls.”¹⁰² During their work, they would play tricks on Sarra and her friend, sending them to places for no reason, deriving amusement from the girls’ confusion.¹⁰³ Sarra Shvartsman’s testimony refers to the multifaceted nature of young Jews’ interactions with the Italians and the challenges associated with gender-related behaviors and attitudes. This references the unpredictable nature of interactions with Italians, where kindness and maltreatment could coexist, and experiences escalated beyond those usually confronted by young Jewish males. Young Italian soldiers, distant from home and seeking female contact, came from diverse backgrounds. Their origins—for example, rural or urban—influenced their perceptions of women, which likely led to a range of behaviors directed toward young Jewish females in Transnistria.¹⁰⁴

A stain marring the generally positive portrayal of Italians in Jewish testimonies relates to an unusual account of sexual violence. In 1944, survivor Golda Wasserman recalled how in the Tulchyn ghetto (Tulchyn *judet*) in 1942, young *devushki* were selected for Italian and Hungarian commanders under the guise of “work”:

About fifteen kilometers from the ghetto were Italian and Hungarian reserve divisions. When the commanders of these units requested it, the commander of the Romanian gendarmerie of Tulchyn would pick out healthy young *devushki* in the ghetto and send them to work in the kitchen and bakery of these divisions, as it was officially called. When the *devushki* returned, they had usually been raped and infected with venereal diseases. [. . .] Every time the commandant selected new *devushki* to go to “work”. [. . .] I was one of 25 *devushki* assigned to the “work” mentioned above. We were led by two soldiers, a Hungarian and an Italian. [. . .] Sonja Fux, Sore Wital, Klara Meidler and I decided to push the two soldiers into the swamp and run away.¹⁰⁵

102 Sarra Shvartsman (1925), Segment 44, Interview 23629, VHA, USC, Nov. 26, 1996.

103 Sarra Shvartsman (1925), Segment 44, Interview 23629, VHA, USC, Nov. 26, 1996.

104 On this subject, see Pannacci, *L'occupazione Italiana in URSS*, 275–76.

105 “The Escape of Twenty-Five *devushki* from the Tulchyn Ghetto: Memoirs of the Partisan Golda Wasserman,” in Altman, *The Unknown Black Book*, 83–84.

The survivor concludes her narration of this episode by recalling that, at great risk, they succeeded in pushing the armed soldiers into the swamp and escaping. By turning the usual portrayal of Italians and power relations—including gender hierarchy—upside down, she is asserting her and the other girls' agency and resistance. Golda Wasserman's account prompts questions about the effects of sexual violence on memory and the assumptions about Italians regarding such violence. Women who experienced sexual violence often used various coping strategies due to the trauma and associated stigma many victims of sexual assault experienced. Eva Fogelman, a psychotherapist and social psychologist, suggests that some Jewish women might have concealed or denied such experiences, regardless of their age when the incident(s) took place.¹⁰⁶ The role the Italians played in this particular context remains inconclusive. Several Jewish survivors noted instances of sexual violence disguised as "work" perpetrated primarily by Romanians across various Transnistrian ghettos, suggesting it was common during the Romanian occupation. Some Jews near the Tulchyn ghetto seemed aware of the potential threat of sexual violence disguised as "work" and may have associated this fear with Italians. In her testimony collected by Yad Vashem, Ida Bristechko recalled how the head of the ghetto in Kryzhopil in Tulchyn district reacted when the Italians requested young females for work:

They said, give us *devushki* to work in the kitchen. Musik Schneider, the head of the community, said, for the kitchen I'll give you experienced women, and he sent women, he wanted to see if that was true. We owe them very much, the Italians [...] these women started working there.¹⁰⁷

Ida Bristechko's account highlights a shift from initial doubt to gratitude toward Italians, marking a moment when they gained the Jewish community leader's trust. However, it is unclear whether this concern was merely precautionary, influenced by their experiences with Romanians, or whether it was based on actual incidents involving Italians. Golda

106 Eva Fogelman, "Sexual Abuse of Jewish Women during and after the Holocaust," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel (Waltham, MA: University Press of New England, 2010), 258.

107 Testimony of Ida (German) Bristechko, born in Krizhopol, Ukraine, 1924, regarding her experiences in the Krizhopol Ghetto, item Id 3564558, File Number 5464, Tape Number O.33.C/1119, Testimonies Department of the Yad Vashem Archives, May 9, 1989.

Wasserman's testimony appears distinct for explicitly referring to rape perpetrated by Italians. Musik Schneider's strategy to discern the Italians' intentions likely stemmed from wartime and postwar references to young females' vulnerability to sexual violence and the imperative to preserve their honor.¹⁰⁸

Overall, it is challenging to determine the extent to which Italians were involved in sexual violence. Although there are records of Italians committing sexual crimes against local civilians during the Eastern Campaign, no official reports mention such acts against the Jewish community.¹⁰⁹ However, the frequent interactions between Romanian and Italian militaries suggest possible unofficial cooperation.¹¹⁰ Golda Wasserman's account implicates Italian officers in sexual violence, behavior that was echoed in narratives concerning Romanians and potentially fostered within Italian Fascist ranks, as Steinberg's psychosexual theory suggests.¹¹¹ Assessing this in specific cases like Wasserman's is complex due to the lack of similar narratives and the scarcity of official records that address the subject, challenges compounded by military tribunals' tendency to ignore sexual violence. Moreover, Pannacci notes that certain atrocities committed by Italian troops in the Soviet Union, including sexual crimes, were often decriminalized or perpetrators were treated with leniency by their superiors.¹¹² Despite the problems generated by these approaches to sexual violence at the time, Scianna still concludes that Italians were generally not regarded as "prone to rape."¹¹³

Similarly, survivor testimonies concerning female adolescents working for the Italians consistently advance a positive portrayal of Italians in Transnistria. Ida Gaisinskaia offered her perspective on the treatment of young female Jews working in the Italian canteen in Balta, contrasting it

108 Monika Flaschka, "'Only Pretty Women Were Raped': The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in Concentration Camps," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, 77–93.

109 Bogučar agricultural attaché (f. to Hoppe) to Captain Köhler dated 29/8/1942, in Schlemmer, *Invasori, non Vittime*, chap. 3; Document 13, Report of the 221st Security Division to the Commander in the Central Army Region, 20 February 1943, in Schlemmer, *Die Italiener an der Ostfront*, 153.

110 For example, the Italians and Romanians exchanged officers, and some Romanians accompanied the CSIR to improve logistical and operational cooperation. Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front*, 196.

111 Steinberg noted that sexual brutality toward women was expected behavior within the fascist movement, especially for those in higher positions, which included many Italian commanders. Steinberg, *All or Nothing*, 176.

112 Pannacci, *L'occupazione Italiana in URSS*, 280–85.

113 Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front*, 247.

with her perception of the behavior of the Romanian occupiers: “There have been Jewish *devushki* working for them [the Italians], and they have not harmed them because Romanians [. . .] implied intercourse with her, but not the Italians; they were the kindest, the most cultured.”¹¹⁴ Polina Shtofmakher referred to a similar narrative, stating that her sister, who had just turned eighteen, cleaned rooms for Italians in Zhmerynka (Mohyliv *judet*), contrasting their gentleness with German aggressiveness.¹¹⁵ Finally, Petr Roitman’s account depicted Italian soldiers as rescuers as they intervened to protect the young Mania Dubirnaia from German soldiers attempting to rape her in the village of Obodivka.¹¹⁶ The accuracy of this account remains unverifiable and the potential for alternative scenarios is plausible since the precise historical context and timeframe is essential for interpreting such acts of Italian resistance to the German military in the region.

Conclusion

Historian Joanna B. Michlic contends that children’s Holocaust experiences were influenced by the following factors: their wartime location, age, the presence of parents, and their interactions with non-Jews.¹¹⁷ In Transnistria, complex regional dynamics combined with encounters with Italians, whose experience in the region was similarly complicated, deeply affected the memories of many Jewish child survivors. This essay has highlighted the multifaceted nature of interactions between Jewish children and adolescents and the Italian military in Transnistria. Delving into the nuances of these interactions offers insight into the diverse range of experiences of, responses to, and perceptions of such encounters.

One of the significant contributions of this analysis has been debunking the dominant historical narrative that assumes that children were treated with compassion by Italians, or that the assistance offered by Italians was driven solely by humanitarianism. This narrative suggests that children and teenagers played a passive role in these interactions, obscuring their agency. The presence of Italian troops in Transnistria created a unique landscape young Jews could navigate through a distinct

114 Ida Gaisinskaia (1920), Segments 141–142, Interview 39990, VHA, USC, Jan. 26, 1998.

115 Polina Shtofmakher (1932), Segment 58, Interview 21650, VHA, USC, Oct. 27, 1996.

116 Piotr Roitman (1928), Segment 65, Interview 6312, VHA, USC, Nov. 21, 1995.

117 Michlic, “Mapping the History of Child Holocaust Survivors,” 80.

set of opportunities that had the potential to increase their and their relatives' chances of survival. Whether it was catching and exchanging animals or scraping *makarony* from kettles, many Jewish children's experiences during the Holocaust were only possible in the context of their encounters with Italians, and these encounters, in turn, shaped these child survivors' memories of the Italians in Transnistria in the years and decades that followed. Moreover, various testimonies highlight the dynamics of agency and the prominence of surrogate families against the backdrop of Jewish children's interactions with Italians.

Concerning this background, despite the diverse prewar experiences and paths of both deported and local Jewish youths in wartime Transnistria, their testimonies offer a relatively consistent portrayal of the Italians and their treatment of Jewish children, with no significant divergence, although testimonies given by those who had been deported to the region were less represented in the analysis. Foreign language proficiency, particularly in Romanian or languages similar to Italian, fostered meaningful conversations and influenced mutual perceptions. However, its relevance shifted depending on the military context, region, and time, as local Jews increasingly acquired Italian language skills. Age and gender became increasingly important in the various contexts examined, shaping children's experiences and perceptions of their encounters with the Italians. The process of assuming new roles and responsibilities, along with the shifting dynamics of age and gender roles, shaped many different aspects of life during the Holocaust in Transnistria; yet, the effects of these aspects are especially visible within the spheres of barter and work, where certain particularities and demarcations emerged. Recollections of bartering between young Jews and Italians were influenced by gender: boys predominantly traded animals they hunted or caught, whereas girls were associated with sexual barter. Witnesses often portrayed Italians as cultured, especially in their interactions with Jewish women and girls. While deviations from this idealized image were acknowledged in accounts of sexual barter, their tone and word choice made these encounters seem less taboo as compared to narratives involving Germans and Romanians. Regarding the labor performed for the Italians, male adolescents typically handled physically demanding tasks such as the transportation of wheat, while smaller children of both genders and especially teenage girls were assigned cleaning duties, reflecting the preservation of a traditional gender division of labor, particularly during adolescence.

The impact of age and gender as key variables is also important for understanding experiences that diverged from the narrative of the "good Italians." Childish naïveté shaped survivors' memories of experiences that

did not conform to expectations of Italians' unconditional compassion for Jewish children, and gender influenced young female survivors' attitudes toward the Italians, especially if they had experienced the Holocaust during their teenage years. Some testimonies emphasized the intricate dynamics between Italians and Jewish females, the latter of whom experienced a spectrum of treatment from kindness to abuse, which was likely influenced by the diverse backgrounds and attitudes of Italian soldiers. Golda Wasserman's distinctive narrative about Italians as perpetrators of sexual violence also raises questions about the potential for other such cases of Jewish girls and adolescents who experienced sexual violence disguised as "work." Overall, this study reveals simultaneously Jewish youths' agency in the framework of the Holocaust and Italians' treatment of Jews in Transnistria in ways that were not uniformly benevolent. As such, it challenges monolithic generalizations and simplifications about both groups' experiences of the Holocaust.

From the existing sources and scholarship, both of which are limited in their comprehensiveness, Transnistria emerges as a particularly distinct setting to understand the Italian military's role in the Holocaust. The records do not suggest that Italians engaged in anti-Jewish actions in Transnistria. Moreover, the lack of Italian control and responsibility in the region, amplified by the Italian military's spatial distance from direct German supervision, likely provided Italian troops with a greater realm of action during their time there. This increased latitude might have led the Italians to adopt a more compassionate stance toward the Jewish community in general, and children in particular. However, it could also lead to different outcomes.

The abundance of positive memories about Italians in the testimonies of Jewish child survivors also prompts questions about the impact of the "*Italiani brava gente*" narrative. I suggest that this narrative may have reinforced survivors' pre-existing positive perceptions of their encounters with Italians in Transnistria without drastically altering their core recollections. Delving deeper into microhistorical research that emphasizes the regional dynamics of the Holocaust, and placing it alongside comprehensive comparative analyses of Jewish-Italian interactions in German-, Romanian-, and Italian-occupied territories like Yugoslavia, Greece, and France could offer important insights into the issues discussed here, as well as answer lingering questions.

Jewish Child Refugees from Central Europe in France and the United States: Transnational Perspectives on their Care, 1938–1945

The pogrom that swept across Germany and Austria on November 9–10, 1938 represented a turning point in the persecution against Jews.¹ Against this backdrop of unprecedented violence, and in continuity with the evacuation of children following the First World War and during the Spanish Civil War, plans emerged to evacuate Jewish and “Non-Aryan” children.² In total, 19,149 Jewish children and young people had left Germany without their parents by the end of 1939, 12,395 of whom left in the twelve months following the pogrom of November 1938.³

The German word *Kindertransport* is often used in reference to these evacuations. The term has strong associations with the United Kingdom, which played host to some ten thousand Jewish children, entrusting

- 1 Synagogues were burned, Jewish individuals were assaulted in the streets and in their homes and so-called “Jewish” businesses were looted. In Germany alone, at least one hundred people were killed, and thirty Thousand men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 122–23.
- 2 To read more about the evacuation of children following World War I and during the Spanish Civil War, see: Friederike Kind-Kovacs, “*The ‘Other’ Child Transports: World War I and the Temporary Displacement of Needy Children from Central Europe*,” *RHEI* 15, (2013), accessed February 1, 2023, <https://journals.openedition.org/rhei/3474>; Célia Keren, “*L’évacuation et l’accueil des enfants espagnols en France : Cartographie d’une mobilisation transnationale (1936–1940)*” (PhD Diss., École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2014).
- 3 Claudia Curio does not provide an exact age range and does not specify whether this figure includes “non-Aryan” children. Claudia Curio, “Were Unaccompanied Child Refugees a Privileged Class of Refugees in the Liberal States of Europe?,” in *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, ed. Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 169; Claudia Curio, “‘Unsichtbare’ Kinder. Emigration und Akkulturation von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Das Beispiel Kindertransporte 1938/39,” (PhD diss., Technischen Universität Berlin, 2005), 29.

them to Jewish and Christian families and foster and children's homes.⁴ While the example of the United Kingdom is exceptional in terms of the number of children saved and the widespread mobilization it incited, other countries also welcomed Jewish children fleeing the Third Reich. The Zionist organization Youth Aliyah (*Aliyat Hano'ar*) sent four thousand children to Palestine. Jewish communities in the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium also organized small-scale evacuations for these children. The United States attempted to follow in the footsteps of the United Kingdom but ultimately only welcomed one thousand children during the 1933–1945 period.⁵ My recent study, “Becoming Refugees: The Migrations of Central European Jewish Children through France to the United States, 1938–42,” uncovered a little-known fact: France also accepted approximately three hundred and fifty to four hundred and fifty unaccompanied Jewish children. For some of the children from Germany and Austria, France was only a stepping stone before a second evacuation to the United States in 1941–1942, funded by the United States Committee for the Care of European Children, and organized by the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers), the *Œuvre de secours aux enfants Union* (Children's Aid Society, OSE) and the American Joint Distribution Committee.⁶

This article focuses on a population that has not yet been discussed in the literature on *Kindertransport*: child refugees who migrated multiple times, to different countries, in their attempt to escape Nazi rule. It

4 Maggie Fraser Kirsh, “La politique de placement des enfants en Grande-Bretagne et en Palestine,” in *L'Enfant-Shoah*, ed. Ivan Jablonka (Paris: PUF, 2014), 51–66. For more general reading, see: Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back. The Jewish Refugee Children in Great Britain, 1938–1945* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2012); Vera Fast, *Children's Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2011) and Claudia Curio, “‘Unsichtbar’e Kinder. Emigration und Akkulturation von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Das Beispiel Kindertransporte 1938/39” (PhD diss., Technischen Universität Berlin, 2005).

5 Susanne Heim, “Immigration Policy and Forced Emigration from Germany: The Situation of Jewish Children (1933–1945),” in *Children and the Holocaust Symposium Presentations*, ed. Paul Shapiro (Washington, DC: Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), 11; on Belgium, see: Walter Reed, *The Children of La Hille: Eluding Nazi Capture during World War II* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011); on the United States: Judith Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise: Rescue and Resettlement of Jewish Refugee Children in the United States, 1934–1945* (Juneau: Denali Press, 1990).

6 Laura Hobson Faure, “Becoming Refugees: The Migrations of Central European Children through France to the United States, 1938–42” (Habil. diss., Sciences Po Paris, 2018), to be published as Laura Hobson Faure, *Rescue: The Story of Kindertransport to France and America* (forthcoming).

explores a key challenge for each country that hosted *Kindertransport* children, namely their care. This issue highlights the many stakeholders involved; men, women, children, Jewish, and non-Jewish organizations. It also raises the deeply political dimensions of caring for the children, since no placement decision was inconsequential. Each method was based on a view of what families and children should be like, with the goal of promoting certain values. As underscored by historian Tara Zahra, the challenges of placing these children in Europe and the United States were significantly different, as they drew on differing ideals on children and family life.⁷ For historians of Jewish life, this question is particularly interesting as it offers a rare analytic opportunity to grasp to what extent Jewish organizations followed the predominant placement methods in their countries, or whether Jews developed their own model to look after children fleeing Nazism. Furthermore, this article will show that such placement policies had real repercussions on the lives of refugee children.

The historiography of Jewish children who were refugees and survivors before and after the Holocaust particularly favors national, and sometimes comparative, approaches to research documents and demonstrates the extent to which their migrations represented a violent break, both from the original family environment and concerning language and culture.⁸ Judith Tydor Baumel's meticulous study, *Unfulfilled Promise*, focuses exclusively on the reception and resettlement of Central European Jewish youth in the United States, representing an important contribution to our understanding of the infrastructure and policies that determined the children's care, as well as the refugee children's experiences in

7 Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 70–8, 99–102.

8 See: Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*; Katy Hazan, *Les orphelins de la Shoah: les maisons de l'espoir, 1944-1960* (Paris: Belles lettres, 2000); Daniella Doron, *Jewish Youth and Identity in Postwar France: Rebuilding Family and Nation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015); Fraser Kirsh, "La politique de placement des enfants en Grande-Bretagne et en Palestine"; Beth Cohen, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust: The Youngest Remnant and the American Experience* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Françoise Ouzan, *How Young Holocaust Survivors Rebuilt Their Lives: France, the United States, and Israel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2018); for an exception to national case studies, see: Rebecca Clifford, *Survivors: Children's Lives after the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020); for an analysis of the recent historiography, see: Joanna Beata Michlic, "Mapping the History of Child Holocaust Survivors" in *No Small Matter: Features of Jewish Childhood. Studies in Contemporary Jewry. An Annual*. XXXII, ed. Anat Helman (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 79–102.

this country.⁹ Likewise, Maggie Fraser Kirsh provides an important comparative framework in her analysis of the care of Jewish child refugees in Great Britain and Mandatory Palestine.¹⁰ Building on this historiography, this article explores the placement policies applied to *Kindertransport* children in the United States and France, and proposes both a comparative and transnational perspective by raising a fact that is often overlooked—displacements are sometimes serial. A child could cross several borders in an attempt to survive the Holocaust or rebuild her life in the post-war period. When the same child emigrated again, she had to adapt to a new language and culture, but also a new social system. This could have a major impact on a child's life, shaping their experiences of exile and reconstruction. This article thus explores the issues related to care in the United States and France but then considers the intersection of the care policies in both countries through the case of two brothers who were first refugees in France and, subsequently, in the United States. These children experienced two placement “systems,” which had a dramatic effect on their lives.

Before addressing these topics, I must first raise the issue of sources. My work is chiefly based on the archives of Jewish, Christian, and secular organizations, but there are major disparities in sources between countries.¹¹ Turning to oral history with the “children” who were evacuated does not remedy the problem as they have little to say about the policies that dictated their care. However, this does help to gain a better understanding of how the children experienced these evacuations, showing the importance they place on these events with decades of hindsight.¹² Through

9 Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*.

10 Fraser Kirsh, “La politique de placement des enfants en Grande-Bretagne et en Palestine”; “The Lost Children of Europe: Narrating the Rehabilitation of Child Holocaust Survivors in Great Britain and Israel” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2014).

11 The archives of the main French *Kindertransport* organization the *Comité Israélite pour les enfants venant d'Allemagne et d'Europe centrale* were either destroyed or lost. On the pillage and destruction of archives during the Second World War in France, see: Sophie Cœuré, *La Mémoire spoliée. Les Archives des Français, butin de guerre nazi puis soviétique (de 1940 à nos jours)* (Paris: Payot, 2007). It should be noted that the archives of the Jewish community in Vienna on *Kindertransport* (the *Kultusgemeinde*) survived the war and can be used to study departures to France and other countries; see: Hobson Faure, “Becoming Refugees,” and Claudia Curio, “Invisible’ Children: The Selection and Integration Strategies of Relief Organizations,” *Shofar* 23, 1 (2004): 41–56.

12 I conducted forty oral interviews with fifty-five people and continue to correspond with the individuals in my study as I write this history, seeking their input and consent. One can also understand former children's perspectives through their

the interviews I conducted, I was able to obtain permission from individuals to access their social work files both in France and the United States. The value of this type of source has been well documented by historians.¹³ Case files give us a new perspective on the child's experience, as described by the adults in charge of their care and, more rarely, their parents. However, they only provide fragments of insight into the agency of the children themselves. Acknowledging the limitations of these sources, it is nevertheless possible to piece together a picture of the *Kindertransport* and compare the different ways in which adults attempted to care for these children. I will first consider the placement of these children in the United States, one of the first countries to establish a resettlement program.

The United States and Unaccompanied Jewish Children: A Preference for Family Placements

In the fall of 1933, American Jews started to worry about children in Nazi Germany. Three US Jewish organizations within the Joint Council on German-Jewish Persecution created a sub-committee focused solely on children in the autumn of 1933. At the same time, the National Conference of Jewish Social Workers also began to address the problem. In April 1934, these two initiatives merged to establish the German Jewish Children's Aid, which held talks with the United States government to obtain visas for unaccompanied children.¹⁴ This structure coordinated the care of unaccompanied Jewish minors throughout the Second World War and thereafter.

Jewish women played a key role in coordinating the arrival and fostering of Central European Jewish children in the United States, in particular

unpublished and published memoirs. See for example: Henry Schuster and Cynthia Orzes, *Abraham's Son: The Making of An American* (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2010); Eric Greene (Erich Grünebaum), "The Loneliest Boy" (unpublished manuscript, undated), <https://archive.org/details/loneliestboy/page/n141/mode/2up>; Hanna Papanek, *Elly und Alexander, Elly und Alexander: Revolution, Rotes Berlin, Flucht, Exil; eine sozialistische Familiengeschichte* (Berlin: Vorwärts-Buch Verl.-Ges, 2006).

13 Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston 1880–1960* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989). See also: Antoine Burgard, "Une nouvelle vie dans un nouveau pays: Trajectoires d'orphelins de la Shoah vers le Canada (1947–52)" (PhD diss., Université Lumière Lyon 2/Université du Québec à Montréal, 2017).

14 Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*, 16.

Cecilia Razovsky (1891–1968), an experienced social worker. As a former inspector of the Children’s Bureau, the federal agency founded in 1912 to ensure compliance with child labor legislation, she was a member of American child expert networks. Moreover, from 1934 she ran the National Coordinating Committee, the Jewish organization responsible for assisting German Jewish refugees.¹⁵ In this capacity, Razovsky set up the German Jewish Children’s Aid (GJCA) and became its executive secretary.

The GJCA followed United States standards for placements, preferring the family-based model. Indeed, while collective facilities, or orphanages, had become more commonplace in the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they were also criticized, with some preferring placement in a family environment. The two systems co-existed, though not without tensions.¹⁶ In 1909, the White House Conference on Children and Youth highlighted a strong preference to avoid any separation between a child and her family and, when necessary, to prefer placement in a family.¹⁷

While Jewish orphanages continued to operate in the United States in the interwar period, social worker Boris Bogen noted in his 1917 book, *Jewish Philanthropy*, a growing popularity for family placements:

While the results of the institutional treatment were satisfactory, still the general antagonistic attitude against congregate systems of child caring has also spread among the Jews. An institution necessarily lacks home atmosphere,—the most important adjunct in child life,—it

15 Bat-Ami Zucker, *Cecilia Razovsky and the American-Jewish Women’s Rescue Operations in the Second World War* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), 2–3.

16 Linda Gordon’s important study sheds light on these two competing methods and even family placements organized by orphanages. In the center stands Charles Loring Brace, the Protestant pastor who founded the New York Children’s Aid Society in 1850, who recommended family placements; Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). On Brace, see also: Bruce Bellingham, “Institution and Family: An Alternative View of Nineteenth Century Child Saving,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 33–57.

17 Robert Bremner, “Other People’s Children,” *Journal of Social History* 16, no. 3 (1983): 88; Sean Martin, “How to House a Child: Providing Homes for Jewish Children in Interwar Poland,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, no. 1 (2015): 29. On Jewish orphanages in the United States, see: Reena Sigman Friedman, “Founders, Teachers, Mothers and Wards: Women’s Roles in American Jewish Orphanages, 1850–1925,” *Shofar* 15, no. 2 (1997): 21–42, and Friedman, *These are Our Children: Jewish Orphanages in the United States, 1880–1925* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2002). More generally, see: Catherine Rymph, *Raising Government Children: A History of Foster Care and the American Welfare State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

neglects individuality and is detrimental to the free development of character.¹⁸

This opinion was also expressed among American social workers in the 1930s and 1940s, who looked to Freudian theory to justify their preference for family placement. As historians Tara Zahra and Dagmar Herzog have highlighted, Freud speaks to American individualism and conservatism. According to Zahra, family placements symbolized, “the children’s psychological ‘best interests’ [...] and distinctly American values of individualism, self-reliance and family solidarity.”¹⁹

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the GJCA preferred family placements in 1934. This policy was reinforced in 1941 by the Children’s Bureau, which drew up standards for the care of refugee children in wartime, clearly stating in its guidelines that placements with individual families were preferable in light of the “generally recognized values inherent for growing children in home and family life.”²⁰ Furthermore, United States guidelines on the placement of children required unaccompanied children to be fostered according to their religious affiliation, meaning that Jewish children had to be entrusted to a Jewish organization.²¹ This gave the GJCA additional legitimacy since it was the only Jewish organization that cared for child refugees from Central Europe. The GJCA hired Lotte Marcuse, a German-trained social worker (presumed to be Jewish), to oversee the placements.²²

18 Boris Bogin, *Jewish Philanthropy* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1917), 160.

19 Zahra, *The Lost Children*, 72. More generally, Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

20 Maternal and Child Health Library, Georgetown University, US Department of Labor, 1941. *Children’s Bureau, Care of Children Coming to the United States for Safety under Attorney General’s Order of July 13, 1940. Standards Prescribed by the Children’s Bureau*, Washington, 2.

21 Could this policy be a reflection of the American principle, analyzed by Linda Gordon, of respecting placements with families of the same “race”? While Gordon demonstrates Americans’ refusal to foster “white” Catholic children in Mexican Catholic families, the case of Jewish children is ambiguous because Jews were considered and often viewed themselves as a religious group and a race; Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, 307–13. On American Jews and the concept of race at this time, see: Eric Goldstein, “Contesting the Categories: Jews and Government Classification in the United States,” *Jewish History* 19, no. 1 (2005): 79–107.

22 According to Tydor Baumel, Marcuse arrived in the United States in 1921 with a diploma of social work from the Prussian Interior Ministry, see: Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*, 51.

Jewish organizations had another reason to prefer placements with families: sensitive to American antisemitism which peaked in the 1930s and 1940s, family placements were viewed as the quickest means of assimilating young Jewish refugees, thereby avoiding negative criticism.²³ Marcuse worked with many Jewish organizations to place the children throughout the United States. The GJCA oversaw the placements from afar, leaving the daily work to local Jewish family agencies, who identified families and monitored placements. However, few foster families met the strict criteria of the GJCA and the American State, particularly since the GJCA avoided any press coverage for fear of inciting antisemitism.²⁴ It was not uncommon for an ill-prepared foster family to change its mind and return the child. Children only exceptionally stayed with the same family until they reached adulthood. In addition, while the GJCA's policy allowed brothers and sisters to stay together, foster families were often only willing to take in one child.²⁵ This meant that brothers and sisters could be separated. Furthermore, Jewish refugee children were encouraged to assimilate quickly and were therefore dissuaded from maintaining contact with other refugees.

Such observations provide a partial explanation of the GJCA's initial difficulties when it brought its first group of nine children to the United States in November 1934. It should also be stressed that most of the Jewish parents in Nazi Germany were reluctant to be separated from their children. By March 1938, the GJCA was looking after only 351 children.²⁶ Nonetheless, the unprecedented violence of 1938, including the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in March 1938, followed by the pogrom of November 9 and 10, 1938, represented a turning point. Parents, previously against sending their children abroad, began to view the separation of their families as the lesser of two evils. They often turned to Jewish

23 Zahra, *The Lost Children*, 73; Haim Genizi, "New York Is Big: America Is Bigger: The Resettlement of Refugees from Nazism, 1936–1945," *Jewish Social Studies* 46, no. 1 (1984): 61–72; Laura Hobson Faure, "European Expectations, American Realities: The Immigration of Jewish Children from Occupied France to the United States, 1941–42," in *Gender, Families and Transmission in Contemporary Jewish Context*, ed. Martine Gross, Sophie Nizard, and Yann Scioldo-Zürcher (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 143–57.

24 Bat-Ami Zucker, *Cecilia Razovsky and the American-Jewish Women's Rescue Operations in the Second World War*, 35.

25 Laura Hobson Faure, "Siblings in the Holocaust and its Aftermath in France and the United States: Rethinking the 'Holocaust Orphan'?", in *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed. Eliyana Adler and Katerina Capova (Rutgers University Press, 2020), 103–14; Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*, 91.

26 Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*, 18–19.

communal institutions, looking for a solution to take their children to safety. Furthermore, new efforts across Europe emerged to evacuate Jewish or “non-Aryan” children from territories under Nazi control.

France: Placement in Collective Facilities

In France, Jewish organizations (in addition to other religious and non-sectarian organizations) had been addressing the German refugee crisis since 1933. Overstretched, those in charge did not attempt to evacuate more refugees to France.²⁷ The pogrom of November 9–10, 1938, changed perceptions and inspired new French initiatives to help those considered to be the most vulnerable: the elderly and children.²⁸ Several committees chaired by Jewish women worked to bring children to France, in particular the *Comité israélite pour les enfants venant d'Allemagne et d'Europe centrale* (Jewish Committee for Children coming from Germany and Central Europe), founded by Baroness Germaine de Rothschild in January 1939.²⁹ Together, the committees obtained three hundred visas for travel to France. They also helped legalize the status of children who crossed the border alone. It can therefore be estimated that a total of three hundred and fifty to four hundred and fifty arrived in France between December 1938 and September 1939.³⁰

Who looked after these children, and how? Little historiographical research has been conducted into the placement practices for Jewish children in France for the period preceding the Holocaust.³¹ The existence of Jewish orphanages in Paris, Strasbourg, Haguenau, and La Varenne (to

27 It should be noted that from 1933, Zionists were helping young Germans who had arrived alone to establish *hachsharot* (agricultural training schools) in France; Anne Grynberg, “Un kibboutz en Corrèze”, *Les Cahiers Du Judaïsme*, 30 (2011): 89–103. On the social welfare of refugees, see: Catherine Nicaul, “L'accueil des Juifs d'Europe centrale par la Communauté juive française,” in *De l'exil à la résistance: réfugiés et immigrés d'Europe centrale en France, 1933–1945*, ed. Karel A. Bartosek, René Gallissot, and Denis Peschanski (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Arcantère, 1989), 53–59. And more generally, Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999).

28 Archives nationales F7/16080, Letter from Amédée Bussière to the Vice-Président du Conseil, March 30, 1939.

29 The *Alliance Israélite Universelle* also took action in late 1938 but quickly stepped aside for Baroness Germaine de Rothschild; Hobson Faure, “Becoming Refugees,” 82–85.

30 Hobson Faure, “Becoming Refugees,” 95.

31 For an exception, see: Olivier Thiéry, “Entre bienfaisance et politique: l'œuvre des orphelins israélites de la guerre (1915-1932),” *Les Archives juives, Revue d'histoire des Juifs de France* 33 no. 1 (2000): 51–68.

name a few places) suggests the Jewish establishment's preference for collective placements, at a time when care in families was the standard practice in France, as in the United States. Indeed, the State-run *Assistance publique* of the Seine *département* (which included Paris) and other local child welfare services were entrusted with fifteen thousand to twenty thousand children per year during the *Belle Époque*. The State sent the children in its care to foster families in the countryside, a policy designed to help to repopulate rural areas, support smallholder families, and orchestrate an intentional and definitive break between the child and their original family.³²

Summer camps, which grew in popularity in France at the end of the nineteenth century, also favored stays with families, though collective facilities gradually replaced this system so that young girls could be better protected (or monitored) or for educational reasons.³³ Jews in Paris followed this national trend and organized their own summer camps from the end of the nineteenth century, in particular the *Œuvre israélite de séjours à la campagne*. As demonstrated by historian Erin Corber, this Jewish organization, founded in 1899, preferred collective facilities since it strove to maintain a "Jewish environment" for its charges, even though the organizers remained relatively vague on this matter.³⁴

Jews in France may have internalized the values surrounding them concerning children but showed a distinct preference for collective facilities. One can assume that a fear of conversion would be a motivation against placements in non-Jewish families, or simply due to a lack of Jewish foster families in the countryside.³⁵ At the same time, some

32 Antoine Rivière, "De l'abandon au placement temporaire: la révolution de l'assistance à l'enfance (Paris, 1870-1920)," in *Revue d'histoire de la protection sociale* 9, no. 1 (2016): 29; Ivan Jablonka, *Ni Père, Ni mère. Histoire des enfants de l'Assistance publique (1874-1939)* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

33 Laura Lee Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land: Working-Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 15-67. See also: Samuel Boussion and Mathias Gardet (eds.), *Les châteaux du social, 19-20ème siècles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2010).

34 As Erin Corber demonstrates, the *Œuvre israélite de séjours à la campagne* admitted non-Jewish children in addition to Jewish children and placed little emphasis on Jewish traditions in its program, though the meat was allegedly *kosher* after 1910. There was no Jewish education or practice, and apparently a Christmas tree was installed at the end of the year, implying that this camp also received children during school vacations. See: Erin Corber, "L'Esprit du corps: Bodies, Communities, and the Reconstruction of Jewish Life in France, 1914-1940," (PhD diss., University of Indiana, 2013), 165.

35 This motivated Jews in London to found Jewish schools; see: Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Great Britain, 1656-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 86-87.

first-person accounts also show that Jewish individuals found their own care solutions for their children in foster families. Others turned to non-Jewish organizations, such as the state-run *Assistance publique* even before the round-ups of Jews began during the Second World War.³⁶

This overview enables us to place the arrival of the first group of fifty-two German children in Alsace in December 1938 into context. They were looked after by the Jewish community in Strasbourg. While the community placed half of the children in collective structures run by Jewish organizations (*le Nid*, for the younger children, and the Jewish orphanages in Strasbourg and Haguenau), it is interesting to note that it attempted first and foremost to place them with Jewish foster families. This practice required justification in the Jewish press:

We still believe that the family setting is more beneficial for these children. It is there that they will forget their worries more quickly and most appreciate the Jewish environment they are in that will give them the most steadfast support.³⁷

Andrée Salomon, who organized the arrival of the children, remembered later: “We wanted these children to integrate as soon as possible, so that they could have a healthy life with prospects for the future. We did not want to fill the orphanages, arousing the pity of the good ladies of Strasbourg.”³⁸ One might add that the Jews in Eastern France experienced the rise in Nazism at close quarters due to their geographic and emotional proximity to Germany. Since Germany’s return of Alsace and Lorraine to France in 1918, entire Jewish families were separated by the border. Furthermore, German Jews sought refuge in the region in increasing numbers after 1933. Family placements therefore played an important role, giving Jews in Alsace an opportunity to respond to Nazism by welcoming the children of friends or relatives in their homes. These placements were

36 Author’s interview with René Lichtman, Ann Arbor, July 2015. Antoine Rivière, “Des pupilles ordinaires. Les enfants juifs recueillis par l’Assistance publique de Paris sous l’Occupation, (1940-1944),” *RHEI* 19, 2017, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://journals.openedition.org/rhei/4047>; E-mail correspondence with Antoine Rivière, February 9, 2021. Antoine Rivière’s ongoing research explores the presence of Jewish children under the care of the *Assistance Publique* in the interwar period; Conversation with the author, February 8, 2022.

37 “Nouvelles locales. Nos nouveaux hôtes,” *La Tribune Juive*, May 5, 1939, 278.

38 Andrée Salomon, Katy Hazan, Georges Weill, and Jean Salomon, *Andrée Salomon, une femme de lumière* (Paris: Fondation pour la mémoire de la Shoah, Le manuscrit, 2011), 90.

also facilitated by the strong friendship and family ties within the region, which remained intact despite the increasing migrations to cities such as Strasbourg, where ten thousand Jews were living in 1919.³⁹

Conversely, in the Paris region, collective facilities remained the standard practice for Jewish organizations welcoming children from the *Kindertransport*. Baroness Germaine de Rothschild, founder of the *Comité israélite pour les enfants venant d'Allemagne et d'Europe centrale*, continued the tradition of Jewish summer camps by converting the Rothschild family's hunting lodge in Villeneuve-Saint-Denis into a children's home, creating the *Œuvre de la Guette* in 1939.

The Russian-Jewish OSE Union (OSE) also favored children's homes, drawing upon the experience of caring for orphans following the First World War in Eastern Europe, where collective facilities were preferred to look after an entire generation of war orphans.⁴⁰ With the financial assistance of Baroness Yvonne de Gunzbourg, a cousin of de Rothschild, the OSE opened several homes to look after German and Austrian Jewish children in Montmorency and the surrounding area. The OSE had prepared to welcome traumatized children: "The horrors and the constant fear through which they lived in Germany have left a lasting impression on their physical and mental condition."⁴¹ OSE leaders, themselves foreigners, also anticipated that France would represent a "new and strange environment" for the children, and that their adaptation would not be an easy process. This logic justified the need for collective homes and doc-

39 Meredith Scott Weaver, "Republicanism on the Borders: Jewish Activism and the Refugee Crisis in Strasbourg and Nice," *Urban History* 43, 4 (2015): 599–617; Georges Weill, "Andrée Salomon et le sauvetage des enfants juifs (1933-1947)," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 30, no. 2 (2012): 89–112; Salomon, Hazan, Weill and Salomon, *Andrée Salomon, une femme de lumière*, 77–94.

40 The *Union des sociétés OSE* (OSE), a Jewish organization founded in Saint Petersburg in 1912, arrived in France in 1933 following a period in Berlin. OSE opened a French branch in 1934. On the history of the OSE, see the pioneering studies on France by Sabine Zeitoun, *L'Œuvre aux Secours aux Enfants (OSE) sous l'Occupation en France* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990); Martine Lemalet, *Au secours des enfants du siècle* (Paris: Diffusion Seuil, 1993); Katy Hazan, *Les orphelins de la Shoah: Les maisons de l'espoir, 1944-1960*, *Histoire* 46 (Paris: Belles lettres, 2000), and more generally, Hobson Faure, "European Expectations, American Realities." On childcare practices during the First World War. see: Jaclyn Granick, "Humanitarian Responses to Jewish Suffering by American Jewish Organizations," (PhD diss., The Graduate Institute Geneva, 2015), 333–40; Martin, "How to House a Child," 30; Jaclyn Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

41 American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York Office Archives (JDC-NY), AR 1933-45, France, file 610, "Care for Refugee Children in France," January 3, 1939.

tors, nurses, and teachers “who know the language of the children and intimately understand their mentality.”⁴²

In these “total institutions,” children had very little contact with the outside world, as almost all of their activities took place within them.⁴³ Under the supervision of educators, many of whom were interested in new pedagogical approaches, these homes became laboratories for utopian experiments. *L'Oeuvre de la Guette* and the OSE sought to recruit German-speaking staff and found themselves with educators marked by left-wing political struggles. Some had just returned from Spain, where they assisted the Republican faction in the Civil War. Baroness de Rothschild hired Ernst and Lida (Hellman) Jablonski (Jouhy), Alfred and Fritzi (Riesel) Brauner, and Harry and Irène Spiegel to work at the *Château de la Guette*. The OSE Union asked Austrian pedagogue Ernst Papanek to manage its homes.⁴⁴ While most, if not all, of these people were of Jewish origin, their approach was motivated by left-wing values and not Judaism. An in-depth analysis of their profiles suggests that the social conditions in Central Europe brought about this fruitful encounter between Jewish youth and leftist politics, and along the way, progressive pedagogy.⁴⁵

Ernst Jablonski, Alfred Brauner, and Ernst Papanek were particularly interested in “individual psychology” developed by the Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler, a critic of Sigmund Freud. Adler’s focus was the therapeutic power of groups. Following these principles, the educators created “children’s republics,” allowing the children to co-administer the homes. The children at *La Guette* elected their representatives, wrote a constitution, and even produced their own currency.⁴⁶ In this way, they

42 JDC-NY, AR 1933-45, France, file 610, “Care for Refugee Children in France,” January 3, 1939.

43 Irving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Random House, 1968). For the use of this notion in children’s homes, see: Chloé Maurel, “Yvonne Hagnauer et la Maison d’enfants de Sèvres, 1941-1970,” *Revue d’histoire de l’enfance “irrégulière,”* 10 (2008): 161–7, <https://journals.openedition.org/rhei/2968>.

44 Jean-Christophe Coffin, “Ernst Papanek (1900-1973): Une Pédagogie à l’épreuve de la violence,” in *L’Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants par-delà les frontières. Prévenir et Guérir dans un siècle de violences, 1912-1960*, ed. Laura Hobson Faure, Mathias Gardet, Katy Hazan, and Catherine Nicault (Paris: Éditions Armand Colin, 2014), 148–65; Inge Hansen-Schaberg, Hanna Papanek, and Gabriele Rühl-Nawabi, eds, *Ernst Papanek, Pädagogische und therapeutische Arbeit. Kinder mit Verfolgungs-, Flucht- und Exilerfahrungen während der NS-Zeit* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2015).

45 George Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1996).

46 USHMM, Eric and Fee Goldfarb Collection, 2004.362, *La Guette* constitution. See also: The Werner Matzdorff Collection at the Mémorial de la Shoah.

furthered a progressive pedagogical tradition which had proved successful in collective facilities in the United States, the Soviet Union, Poland, and Central Europe. Children's republics were also commonplace in Spain during the Civil War.⁴⁷ In France, the *Faucons Rouges* (Red Falcons), a socialist youth group with a membership reaching two thousand during the Popular Front, also organized children's republics in its summer camps.⁴⁸

The accounts of the children idealize their experiences in the homes, which ultimately did not last for long.⁴⁹ On September 3, 1939, France declared war against Germany, triggering the drafting and internment of several educators. It put an end to the children's republic of the *Château de la Guette*. The care of children became even more complex following the Nazi invasion of France in May 1940 with children having to be moved quickly to new homes. The children from *Château de la Guette* were moved to *La Bourboule* in Auvergne. Those from OSE homes were scattered across several new facilities in what became, following the Armistice, the unoccupied zone. Papanek was forced to flee France, as was Baroness de Rothschild. On August 26, 1942, French police came to these very homes to arrest children aged over sixteen. Eventually, it became clear that all Jewish children were targeted for deportation. Arrested children were interned, sent to Drancy, and then to the death camps, where they were murdered. The French Jewish model of collective facilities therefore became a target in 1942. To protect the children, the homes had to be closed and the children dispersed to Christian or secular institutions or foster families. These placement methods, in addition to flight to Switzerland or Spain, saved lives.

47 Till Kössler, "Children in the Spanish Civil War," in *"If you tolerate this ...": The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War*, ed. Martin Baumeister and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Frankfurt a. M. and Chicago, 2008), 118–25. On this pedagogy in the post-Second World War era, see: Samuel Boussion, Mathias Gardet, and Martine Ruchat, *L'internationale des républiques d'enfants, 1939-1955* (Paris: Editions Anamosa, 2020).

48 Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land*, 198.

49 Laura Hobson Faure, "Exploring Political Rupture through Jewish Children's Diaries: Kindertransport Children in France, 1938-42," *Journal of Modern European History*, 19, no. 3 (2021): 258–73.



Figure 1: The Chabannes home on the day of the August 26, 1942 round-up. (USHMM, Photo Archive Number: 37921)

Two Evacuations, Two Placement Approaches: The Gossels Brothers

After France was occupied, Papanek and Baroness de Rothschild found refuge in the United States. There, they reached out to people such as Cecilia Razovsky, who managed the GJCA, and also a new non-sectarian committee: the United States Committee for the Care of European Children (US COMM). After months of insistence from Papanek and the American Joint Distribution Committee, the US COMM decided to fund the evacuation of refugee children from France to the United States. The American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization, managed this project in France and selected Spanish and Jewish children for evacuation. The children left France on several transports between June 1941 and July 1942 (following this date, others left directly from Lisbon). A total of 309 children left France through this system, of whom at least 253 were Jewish.⁵⁰ A large share of the Jewish children were from Central Europe and had arrived in France via *Kindertransport*.

⁵⁰ Serge Klarsfeld, *French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 102–4.

These children therefore experienced a second selection and placement process, this time in the United States.

One example is the Gossels brothers, Claus (known as Peter) and Werner, born in 1930 and 1933 respectively, to a liberal, middle-class Jewish family in Berlin.⁵¹ Their parents were divorced. Their father fled Germany and, after being interned in France, obtained a visa for Venezuela. The brothers arrived in France on the last *Kindertransport*, in July 1939. Their mother could not find a way to flee Germany and was deported to Auschwitz in February 1943, where she was murdered.

In France, the brothers remained together in children's homes, first in Quincy-sous-Senart, then in the Jewish orphanage in La Varenne. In late January 1941, most of their group was transferred from the Paris region to the OSE's *Château de Chabannes* in the Creuse *département*. This is where the brothers were selected for evacuation to the United States.⁵²

The brothers arrived in New York on September 22, 1941, and were initially separated as Peter, the elder, had broken his leg on the boat and required hospital treatment upon arrival. In one of her last letters to her sons, dated November 1941, their mother wrote:

I hope [...] that you will soon be with your foster parents so that you two will no longer be separated from each other. [...] As I heard, you will be placed with a family and not into a home, but I don't know anything exact about it, and I am waiting for your exact answer concerning this. In either case, whatever it may be, whether a home or a family, always be obedient and work hard! And always care for each other because you both always belong together.⁵³

51 My observations on the Gossels brothers result from their files and the oral history interviews I conducted with them in July 2015, as well as our later correspondence and interview in December 2023. They provided me access to their joint OSE file, forty-two pages long, and GJCA files, containing 158 and 258 pages, respectively. See also: C. Peter R. Gossels, *Letters from our Mother* (C. Peter R. Gossels, 2019). I am using real names with the family's permission as this was important to them. For ethical reasons, I asked them to read this article before its publication and took their feedback into account. At times, I note our divergent views. This is the imperfect solution I have found to writing a history of children's experiences during the Holocaust while respecting ethical imperatives.

52 C. Peter Gossel's daughter, Lisa Gossels, directed a documentary with Dean Weatherell on this children's home, *The Children of Chabannes*, based on extensive interviews with the former Chabannes children (1999), which won an Emmy Award in 2000.

53 C. Peter Gossels' (CPG) private papers, Letter from C. Lewy to the Gossels brothers, November 10, 1941. Underlined in the original.

As their mother rightly commented, the brothers were set to be placed with a foster family. However, they were not placed together. The brothers were wards of the GJCA, and Lotte Marcuse, placement manager for this organization, was in charge of finding a solution for their care. The boys had a great-aunt and a close friend or aunt in the United States. However, according to Marcuse, these recent refugees had “nothing to offer.”⁵⁴ Marcuse’s goal was to “introduce” the brothers to a Jewish agency outside New York to avoid creating a surplus of refugees in this city. She therefore wrote to the Jewish child welfare association in Boston:

C.[Peter] is an attractive boy, with light complexion, brown eyes and brown hair; his impression is that of a “light brown” child. He has some freckles, a straight nose and well cut features. He looks quite mature, really, for his 11 years. Werner is a little “imp”, charming, bright and appealing. He is most attractive, has fine coloring and dimples. He does not seem worried about what we are going to do about him, but he would like to go into a family and go before his brother will be able to leave the hospital. This plan was most pleasing to Claus [Peter], and he too, was not troubled about our plans. The two boys look out for the other, and Claus [Peter] seems to take responsibility as far as any boy of his age can be expected to. [...] It seems to me therefore that you have here two brothers of 11 and 8 from a middle class family in Berlin; parents are divorced, each has poor prospects for a reunion with the children. The boys are “good material” as to background and personality.⁵⁵

The children’s files reveal the ambiguous assessment criteria of this Jewish organization. First, the importance of their physical appearance is clear, with emphasis placed on their (straight) nose and the color of their skin, which suggests concerns that some children may look too “Jewish” or have a complexion that is too dark. Second, the children are referred to as “good material” as they were middle-class and had little chance of reuniting with their parents. It is, however, interesting to consider why a “poor chance of reuniting with parents” seems to have been viewed positively.⁵⁶ Indeed, the policy of family placements reflected a larger belief in

54 YIVO, German Jewish Children’s Aid (GJCA) collection, file of CPG, Letter from L. Marcuse to Mrs. Margaret Esrock, October 15, 1941.

55 YIVO, GJCA collection, file of CPG, Letter from L. Marcuse to Mrs. Maletz, Jewish Child Welfare Association, Boston, October 3, 1941.

56 Werner Gossels and I debated this question during our discussion of this article. He felt it was normal that the agency would view non-unification positively, since

a child's right to a family. Nonetheless, a family did not necessarily mean *one's* family. Encouraging placements in foster families did not mean that keeping family members together was a priority for the GJCA and its partner agencies.

The Gossels brothers were ultimately placed in two different foster families in a Boston suburb. The younger of the two had a positive experience: his "foster mother" had a PhD in child psychology and he was fully integrated into the family unit. However, when Peter, the elder brother, was discharged from hospital, Werner's host mother found out that she was pregnant. There was no room for them to welcome the older brother into their home. He was sent to a foster family nearby. After three years, it was clear that this placement was not working out. There were discussions about reuniting the brothers. However, in November 1944, Peter was transferred to another placement, this time a home that welcomed three other refugee boys.⁵⁷

The separation resulted in two very different experiences of exile for the two brothers. Only one of them forged strong ties with his foster family, which facilitated his adaptation and encouraged a sense of belonging. The older brother sought out this family connection, but never found it with his first host parents, although they did remain in his life. Instead, he put his energy into his relationship with his younger brother. Despite their situation, the brothers enjoyed a very close bond throughout their adult lives, with Peter acting as the "memorial candle," carrying the grief for their mother.⁵⁸ Just before his own death in 2019, he published a collection of letters from their mother and told their story.⁵⁹

children without immediate family would be easier to place. I feel, however, that this attitude points to a contradiction in a social policy that presented itself as "pro-family." Online conversation with the Gossels family, June 13, 2023.

57 YIVO, GJCA collection, file of CPG, Form CC4, United States Committee for the Care of European Children, November 21, 1944; Evaluation for the study of Refugee Adjustment, May 16, 1945.

58 This concept was theorized by Dina Wardi, who suggests that one child in particular carries this burden among siblings. See: Dina Wardi, *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust* (London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1972). I also explore this issue in Hobson Faure, "Siblings in the Holocaust and its Aftermath in France and the United States," 103–14.

59 Gossels, *Letters from our Mother*.

Conclusion

Studied here through a comparative and transnational perspective, the care policies for unaccompanied Jewish children during the Holocaust demonstrate that there was no single solution in the Jewish diaspora to help these children, despite a shared religious origin. American Jews, following American social work practices, preferred placements with foster families, while Jews in France, drawing on French summer camp traditions, preferred collective facilities. This article suggests that children's migrations do not only entail an encounter with a new language and culture but also with new social systems. The children faced these challenges alone, without the assistance of their parents, only sometimes finding adults they could trust.

Some of the children who were sent to France on a *Kindertransport* were selected for a second evacuation to the United States in 1941–1942 and therefore experienced serial migrations. Many accounts idealize the stay in France in children's homes, compared to the placement conditions in the United States, suggesting that it was better to experience this migration as part of a group, with others who were going through the same situation.⁶⁰

Jewish children continued to migrate alone in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Indeed, a substantial portion of the one hundred and eighty thousand surviving Jewish children in Europe, often orphaned and displaced, looked for a new life in the postwar period, far from the Jewish children's homes of Europe.⁶¹ It is time to adapt our historical approaches to the transnational lives of these children, so we can give nuance to our understanding of the experiences of children during the Holocaust and its aftermath.

Translated from French by Barbara Banks

60 For example, Schuster, with Caroline A. Orzes, *Abraham's Son*, 122–83; 196–98. Werner Gossels, one of the only children in my study to remain in the same foster family until adulthood, emphasizes his positive experiences in foster care; oral history interviews July 2015, December 2023 in Boston, online conversation with the Gossels family, June 13, 2023.

61 Clifford, *Survivors: Children's Lives after the Holocaust*, 62, 89–109, and especially 110–29; Burgard, "Une nouvelle vie dans un nouveau pays."

The Best Interests of the Child in National Terms: Policies Concerning Children of Polish Female Forced Laborers and Displaced Persons in the Early Cold War Era

“I believe that the best interests of a child are always to be reunited with his mother and to return to his home country; in this case, there is no doubt that the child is Polish.” Zygmunt Radomski, a representative of the Polish Red Cross (*Polski Czerwony Krzyż*, PCK) in the American occupation zone in Germany, wrote the above words justifying his objection to the decision issued by the American court in Augsburg following a hearing about the repatriation of a child to Poland.¹ “For these reasons, the PCK does not consider the decision of the court to be correct, and if even the mother changed her position regarding the return of the child, the child should be repatriated, and upon return [to Poland], the care of the child will be taken over by the state, which, by maintaining the relevant care institutions, tries to come to the aid of citizens who are unable to provide their children with proper care and education.”²

The judge in Augsburg, based on the evidence, favored leaving the young girl with her German guardians. The Polish position, as represented by Jan Bikart, the Chief Delegate of the Polish Red Cross Germany, did

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in the introduction are from a single source: the report (with annexes) of the court hearing on the repatriation of the girl, drawn up for the Polish Military Mission by Zygmunt Radomski, the PCK delegate in Germany who attended the hearing. Archiwum Akt Nowych, AAN (Central Archives of Modern Records), Polski Czerwony Krzyż. Zarząd Główny, ZG PCK (Board of the Polish Red Cross), 227, Report on the court hearing on the repatriation of H. H., with annexes, Munich 26. II. 1951, 217–21.
- 2 AAN, ZG PCK, 227, Report on the court hearing on the repatriation of H. H., with annexes, Munich 26. II. 1951, 217–21.

not recognize the verdict. Bikart ordered that the child's legal guardianship be transferred to Poland and initiated a fight over custody to the bitter end. According to him, the Polish child should be brought up in Poland, whatever the financial—or moral—cost.

It was the end of November 1951. More than six years had passed since the end of the largest war in global history, which had completely transformed international relations. In Augsburg, which became part of the American zone of occupation in Germany after the war, the above hearing concerned the case of Hania, a Polish-born six-and-a-half-year-old girl who was to be taken away from her temporary German guardians and sent to Poland. The hearing took an unexpected turn for the Polish officials, who were convinced that they would leave the courtroom with an order stating that the child be returned to Poland immediately. They engaged a number of people and institutions to achieve this goal. They probably believed in the righteousness of the action they were taking: it was unthinkable for them to leave a Polish child in the hands of their enemies.

In the few weeks between the first and second court hearings, a campaign for the return of the child was launched on an unprecedented scale. At the request of Bikart, the PCK General Board in Warsaw forced the biological mother and her husband to sign documents demanding the “repatriation” of the girl and declaring that they were able to provide her with care and an education. The woman was tracked down in a village in the Opole region of southwestern Poland as early as 1948, when her permission was needed to “repatriate” a child found at a German orphanage. It is not known whether she was married at the time, but in 1951, she was living with her husband. Her life story and that of her husband remains unknown. The couple received three letters to sign: one addressed to the Polish Red Cross (in Germany) in which they ask for the “immediate return” of their daughter; and a second and third addressed to the American court and the *Jugendamt* in Germany, respectively—each “strongly requesting” that the girl be returned to Poland. The girl's mother also explained that she had not been able to take her daughter to Poland in 1945 due to her (the mother's) illness and stated that after she had “obtained suitable living conditions,” she had made efforts to bring her daughter back to Poland. The couple also assured American and German officials that they wanted to raise the child together “and devote themselves completely to her.”

Searching for the mother and attempts to contact her undoubtedly required making the matter public. The local authority—the Municipal National Council—in the territory where the family resided was respon-

sible for completing the documentation by certifying the reliability of the signatures of both spouses, among other things. The family's privacy was inevitably violated in this way. It is not known to what extent the mother had shared her experiences as a forced laborer with her relatives and neighbors. Did her husband know about her illegitimate daughter? How did he react? How did this knowledge affect the family, and how they were perceived by their local community? Today, these are rhetorical questions that emerge when considering the ethical dimensions of the actions taken by the communist regime in postwar Poland.

Equipped with the three letters, Zygmunt Radomski, certain of victory, asked the court for a positive decision regarding the "repatriation" of the child. However, there was an unexpected turn of events. The official guardian of the child (*Amts Vormund*) called a witness, the girl's foster father, who had asked Hania's biological mother for permission to keep the child in Germany after the first hearing. She, in turn, wrote a private letter to her daughter's foster parents the day after signing the documents for the PCK. From this letter, one can learn that the child's biological father was German, and for this reason, her husband did not want the child to live under the same roof with him. The woman also mentioned that they already had five children of their own, and one more would only bring problems. The letter ends with the statement: "so I agree that this daughter of mine should stay in Germany, and that you should take her."

In view of this plot twist, the judge decided, without any doubts, that "in accordance with the interests of the child and the will of the mother, the court considers that the child should remain with the present German guardians." In response to this verdict, the PCK Chief Delegate for Germany asked the Polish Military Mission (*Polska Misja Wojskowa*, PMW) in Berlin to take the following steps:

1. The child's mother should be held criminally responsible for misleading the Polish authorities.
2. The child's mother should be deprived of custodial authority over H[. . .] H[. . .], and the guardian appointed by the [Polish] court should apply for the repatriation of the child.
3. The [PCK] Representation [in Germany], being in possession of a court decision on the withdrawal of custody, the appointment of a new custodian, will apply to the US court to take up the case anew [. . .].

We do not know how this case eventually ended or whether the girl was forcibly brought to Poland. This information might be in her files in the

Archives of the PCK Information and Search Office (Archiwum Biura Informacji i Poszukiwań PCK, ABINF PCK), but only family members of the person in question have access to this information. However, it is possible to hypothesize that the child was not seized before the Polish Red Cross was ordered to leave the American zone, which occurred at the beginning of April 1952. Thus, this case was probably one of the last interventions of the PCK as the representative of the Polish state concerning the so-called “revindication and repatriation action” of Polish children.

The Revindication and Repatriation of “Stolen Children”

At least in the summer of 1945, the Polish authorities were aware that Polish children had been deported to the Third Reich for the purpose of Germanization.³ This was when the first concrete actions were taken to address the issue: the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare ordered its units throughout Poland to draw up lists of deported children.⁴ However, surviving documents show that local social welfare departments did not take this order seriously, and most offices failed to carry out this task. Almost simultaneously, in the early autumn of 1945, the topic of searching for Polish children in occupied Germany and Austria and repatriating them to Poland was taken up. The action was to be coordinated by the network of units of the Polish Repatriation Mission (*Polska Misja Repatriacyjna*, PMR), which was already active in the area and dealt with, among other things, the return of Poles to their homeland. However, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the plan did not develop.⁵ The explanation may be that, in view of the multitude of tasks facing the Polish authorities in the country immediately after the war, there was simply no one to take up this particular concern. When there was the realization that the Polish Red Cross was basically the only organization that could

3 For more on the policy of Germanization of Polish children, see, among others: Isabel Heinemann, *Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut. Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 508–30.

4 AAN, Ministerstwo Pracy i Opieki Społecznej, MPiOS (Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare), 371, Letter from the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare to the Social Welfare Departments of the Provincial Offices in Poland regarding a register of children deported to Germany for Germanization, Warsaw, 26.7.1945, 2.

5 AAN, MPiOS, 371, Note on the search for Polish children in Germany, Warsaw, 20.09.1945, 37–39.

logistically handle the whole action, it turned out that its realm of action was limited because of politics.⁶ During the war, the association split, and some activists remained in Nazi-occupied Poland while others left to operate wherever in the world there were Poles. Throughout 1945, the association in Poland was subjected to a gradual politicization (prominent activists were replaced by persons compatible with the goals of the Communist Party), and it was eventually subordinated to the new authorities. These new officials were not, however, accepted abroad, where the émigré branch of the Polish Red Cross, based in London, was still operating legally and was part of the umbrella organization that was the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The PCK in Poland, which had been taken over by the communists, was not recognized by either the ICRC or the Allies. In the territories of the former Third Reich, the Polish-based PCK cooperated with the “London” PCK, as the branch is known today. Although the delegates of the “Warsaw” PCK had been present in occupied Germany since the autumn of 1945, it must have taken months for them to be taken seriously. This convoluted process culminated with all of the Allies withdrawing accreditation from the “Londoners” and granting it to the “Warsawers.”⁷

The two circles were diametrically opposed in terms of their opinions on the fate of Polish citizens residing on the territory of the former Third Reich. The group associated with the Polish government-in-exile in London discouraged anyone from returning to communist Poland and encouraged them to remain outside their homeland, at least until there was a regime change in Warsaw. The “Warsaw” PCK, on the other hand, was keen to bring as many Poles as possible back to the country, which was being reconstructed after the war. During the first postwar months, however, this repatriation process was not organized from the top down. One impediment was the fact that Poles had to yield to Soviet citizens returning to the Soviet Union, who were traveling eastward along the same routes. Furthermore, the spontaneous return of Poles from German captivity remained outside the control of the state, which is why they are sometimes called “wild repatriations.”⁸ The system of assistance for

6 For more on the postwar fate of the Polish Red Cross, see: Joanna Szymoniczek, *W cieniu wojny. Polski Czerwony Krzyż w latach 1945–1972* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2016).

7 On the “London” PCK transformed into the Polish Aid Society, see: Anna Maria Stefanicka, *Spieszmy z pomocą. Historia Towarzystwa Pomocy Polakom* (London: Towarzystwo Pomocy Polakom, Wydawnictwo Non Omnis, 2016).

8 Janusz Wróbel, *Na rozdrożu historii. Repatriacja obywateli polskich z Zachodu w latach 1945–1949* (Łódź: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2009), 441–43.

refugees after crossing the border was created on an ad hoc basis, often only in response to emerging needs. Because the Polish authorities inside Poland could barely cope with the vast needs of returnees, it was natural that Poles in the occupation zones were dealt with by structures coordinated by the “London Government.” Delegates from Warsaw monitoring the situation in Germany and Austria reported that the “Londoners” were urging their compatriots to emigrate and were also willing to support the international adoption of Polish orphans.

Polish children left in the Allied occupation zones without parental care were not considered a priority by the Polish authorities. In the western zones, this multinational group of unaccompanied children came under the care of UNRRA, while in the territories occupied by the Red Army, assistance to children was not organized at all.⁹ Most of the children came from the prewar territory of Poland, but their territorial origin was not necessarily the same as their ethnicity or nationality. For this reason, the Western Allies in particular had to put much more effort into securing the fate of these orphaned children. UNRRA set itself the goal of repatriating minors to their countries of origin as quickly as possible. To carry out the operation, however, it needed collaborators in the countries to which the children were to be sent.¹⁰ In the case of Poland, the circumstances outlined above made logistics difficult and contributed to the delay of the entire repatriation action. This resulted in, among other things, a prolongation of the peculiar “state of limbo” in which the children were trapped, as well as reduced efficiency. In the end, only a small number of children staying in UNRRA special centers were sent to Poland.

As a result of the efforts of a few delegates of the PCK General Board in Warsaw (although most of them worked in the Katowice branch of the PCK on a daily basis), at the beginning of 1946, contacts were established with UNRRA, and the branch gained the trust of the Allied powers.¹¹

9 For more on UNRRA’s welfare activities directed toward unaccompanied children in the lands of the former Third Reich, see: Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). On children in the American zone, see: Lynne Taylor, *In the Children’s Best Interests: Unaccompanied Children in American-Occupied Germany, 1945–1952* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017). There is no study of child welfare in the Soviet zone beyond those related to UNRRA operations.

10 AAN, ZG PCK, 217, Report on the conference of representatives of the ZG PCK and UNRRA representatives, Arolsen, 27.02.1946, 24–27.

11 The process of establishing contacts and negotiations between UNRRA and the PCK on the issue of unaccompanied children considered to be Polish, as well as the changing relationship between these organizations over time (later IRO and PCK) is described in detail in my PhD thesis, published in 2022. See: Jakub Gałęziowski,

The challenges and formalities associated with the transfer of recognition and operations from the London PCK to the Warsaw PCK, and then the Polish side's prolonged lack of readiness to receive the children, resulted in the first child transport finally arriving in Poland only in June 1946. It, therefore, took more than a year after the end of the war for the first group of children to be repatriated.

Sources indicate that at first, only a handful of people were determined to take concrete action. It was no coincidence that the issue came to the attention of social welfare officials in Katowice and local PCK activists. UNRRA, encountering disorganization and stonewalling by the central government in Warsaw, established contacts directly in the region from which many of the children in the care of the United Nations had come. These were children transported from Upper Silesia by the evacuating Germans in 1945. They were wards of orphanages or other institutions like boarding schools, as well as kindergartens and nurseries. Representatives of the Polish authorities in the occupation zones had problems classifying these children as Polish because they often did not speak Polish—usually, they spoke Silesian or German. Few people from Warsaw understood the peculiarities of Upper Silesia, and for many months, it was the officials in Katowice who became the chief advocates for these children, seeking their return. In doing so, they also lobbied for closer cooperation with UNRRA, which they saw as an ally. As a consequence of this involvement in the repatriation process, the Katowice branch of the Polish Red Cross *de facto* took on the burden of coordinating the entire campaign.

A group of American women social workers particularly involved in the “Polish issue” took the opportunity to draw attention to another worrying phenomenon that their organization was encountering on the ground: the neglect and subsequent abandonment of babies born to unmarried Polish female displaced persons (DPs).¹² This was a major problem for UNRRA because the number of unaccompanied children with irregular citizenship status was increasing. The interventions of the Polish authorities in these cases initially had no effect, and their general lack of interest in the problem astonished the Allies. At the same time, already in the first transport of children that arrived in Koźle (town in Upper Silesia, 70 km from Katowice) in June 1946, as many as one-third

Niedopowiedziane biografie. Polskie dzieci urodzone z powodu wojny (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2022), 234–63.

¹² AAN, ZG PCK, 217, Report on the conference of representatives of the ZG PCK and UNRRA representatives, Arolsen, 27.02.1946, 25.

of these so-called “repatriates” had been born in the Third Reich or in the occupation zones.¹³ In other words, these were not children kidnapped by the Nazis; they were the abandoned offspring of Polish female forced laborers and DPs. However, no one in Poland problematized this particular issue, and propaganda from the time maintained the narrative of recovering “stolen children” from the enemy. In subsequent transports, too, this pattern persisted. It was also necessary to quickly relocate the assembly point for such transports from Koźle to Katowice because the premises of the original location were not suitable for children under the age of four.

From the very beginning, the action was chaotic, lacking—above all—a single, stable governing body on the Polish side; the result was that no one felt responsible for the outcome. It was only in the second half of 1946, after yet another intervention by UNRRA representatives, that decisions were made on the Polish side to take steps to improve the operation. The proper course of the action was to be guaranteed by Roman Hrabar, the former head of the Department of Social Welfare in Katowice, who was appointed Plenipotentiary of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration for the Repatriation of Children.¹⁴ This designation brought with it the hope that the disparate and overlapping actions taken by multiple offices involved in the Polish side’s repatriation efforts would now be coordinated by a single office. Hrabar took matters into his own hands and traveled around the Allied occupation zones in Germany for many weeks to get an idea of the situation on the ground and to directly supervise all activities. Although the circumstances are unclear, Hrabar was recalled to Poland in summer 1947 and sidelined shortly thereafter. On the basis of the available documents, individual conflicts with colleagues, mutual antipathy, and/or rivalries may have been behind this turn of events, but some scholars have also suggested that the special services were responsible for Hrabar’s marginalization.¹⁵ This thesis, however, requires thorough investigation.

13 Archiwum Biura Informacji i Poszukiwań PCK, ABINF PCK (Archive of the PCK Information and Search Office), Transports of children, 8305, List of children arriving in transport I from Germany to Koźle on 5.06.1946, Warsaw, 3.08.1946.

14 AAN, MPiOS, 371, Letter of the Deputy Minister Dr. E. Pragierowa to the General Government Plenipotentiary for Repatriation W. Wolski, Warsaw, 1.10.1946, k. 96–97.

15 Ewelina Karpińska-Morek et al., eds, *Teraz jesteście Niemcami. Wstrząsające losy zrabowanych polskich dzieci* (Crakow: Wydawnictwo M, 2018), 272–73. On Hrabar’s collaboration with the “security police,” see: Anna Malinowska, *Brunatna kobyła sanka. Historie uprowadzonych dzieci* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2017), 281–98.

The repatriation campaign never gained any momentum, peaking at the end of 1946 and the beginning of 1947, and as the months went by, fewer and fewer children arrived on each transport.¹⁶ The lack of progress in finding children or successfully bringing back those who had already been identified led to an increasing amount of propaganda around the campaign. In Poland, it was believed that children residing in Germany and Austria could fill the postwar demographic gap and that it was in the state's best interest—in principle—to retrieve as many of them as possible. This approach went hand in hand with the general ideologization of life in the Polish state, where the communist authorities increasingly restricted people's freedoms according to Stalinist patterns.

The Allies were initially positive about the expressions of willingness to care for orphaned and abandoned children coming from the Polish side. The dedication of UNRRA social workers was also confirmed in reports by Polish officials under the direction of Hrabar.¹⁷ At first, Allied military authorities who issued decisions regarding individual children also turned a blind eye to various deviations and irregularities in the repatriation process. Relatively quickly, however, the Allies realized that the Polish authorities were not fulfilling their obligations and were committing violations. Consequently, over time, the Allies began to harden their approach to the removal of children from Germany and Austria to Poland; this shift in attitude was met with consternation in Poland.

An example of these problems was the notorious violation of one of UNRRA's principles: the condition for sending a child to his or her home country was establishing contact with the child's biological family. However, some children waited for no one and were redirected to care institutions or organized foster care upon arrival in Poland. If at the beginning such transfers were not blocked, later on this rule was much more strictly enforced.¹⁸ When the Poles realized that it was in their vital interest to cooperate with UNRRA after all, it was too late to rebuild trust. Year after year, the paths of the two diverged, and mutual accusations of ill-will hampered the work of activists in the field even though each side believed that it was acting in the best interests of the children.

Although Hrabar himself no longer directed the action (after his return to Katowice, he worked as a lawyer), he never abandoned his interest

16 See, among others: AAN, MPiOS, 373, Report on the Inspection of the PCK and the Silesian-Dąbrowskie Provincial Office, Warsaw, 4.05.1948, 90.

17 AAN, ZG PCK, 218, Report of the DG PCK on Germany. Annex No. 9: The issue of the search for children, Arolsen, 3.2.1947, 160.

18 Marvin Klemme, *The Inside Story of UNRRA: An Experience in Internationalism* (New York: Lifetime Editions, 1949), 257–58.

in the fate of Polish children in the former Third Reich.¹⁹ He was involved in their commemoration as a member of the Central Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes and later, privately, as the author of many books on the subject.²⁰ Until the very end, he also legitimized the entire action by preserving the narrative about Poland's "stolen children." At the same time, he was interested in the fate of Polish female forced laborers in the context of their motherhood, drawing attention to the fate of their children, only some of whom survived the war as most were exterminated for racial reasons. It is possible that it was he who sparked the Polish authorities' interest in the fate of those who had survived and, thus, he who wanted to bring them to Poland at all costs.

In the end, only a few thousand children were brought to Poland between 1946 and 1951.²¹ Around 3,400 who arrived in official transports can be identified by name. When all the partial figures are added up, the total number of children affected by the campaign can be estimated to be somewhere between 3,500 to 4,500. It must be assumed that some of the minors returned on their own—younger children with relatives or foreign adults who took them in, and older children and adolescents on their own—and were not included in any official statistics. The campaign ended in failure for the Polish authorities. More than 80 percent of the children the Nazis deported from Polish lands during the war never returned to their homeland. Of those who did, about 20 percent had been born in German or Austrian territory, which does not change the fact that in the communist narrative, which did not recognize such nuance, all of these children were treated as having been "looted" from and therefore reclaimed by Poland.

Propaganda was used to conceal this failure. The greater the hostility of the Allies toward the Polish government, the more the Polish government accused the Allies of deliberately obstructing the search for and repatriation of Polish children. The numbers were meant to shock and frighten Polish society, so they were multiplied—200,000 children deported into the Third Reich; the repatriation of only 30,000 to 33,000 of them—and disseminated in public discourse. These publicity efforts were so success-

19 For more on Hrabar's later activities, see Malinowska, *Brunatna kobysanka*.

20 Roman Hrabar, *Hitlerowski rabunek dzieci polskich: uprowadzanie i germanizowanie dzieci polskich w latach 1939–1945* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Śląsk, 1960); Roman Hrabar, *Janczarowie XX wieku* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Śląsk, 1983), 166–67; Roman Hrabar, *Skazane na zagładę. Praca niewolnicza kobiet polskich w III Rzeszy i los ich dzieci* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Śląsk, 1989).

21 The calculations presented here were first presented in my dissertation. See: Gałęziowski, *Niedopowiedziane biografie*, 257–59.

ful that even today, manipulated data is cited²² despite the fact that reliable estimates have emerged in scientific research on the topic, as demonstrated by the work of Isabel Heinemann and Ines Hopfer, who claim that deportations to Germany involved about 50,000 children from the entire East Central European region, and approximately 20,000 from Poland.²³ In this sense, then, one can speak of the effectiveness of communist propaganda. But the fact also remains that the majority of children, both those deported from occupied territories and those born in the Third Reich to female forced laborers or prisoners from Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries, were never identified and remained in Germany or Austria, or were designated for (international) adoption.²⁴

Repatriation or Forced Relocation? The Children of Former Polish Female Forced Laborers and DPs

When it became known to the Polish communist authorities that there were potentially thousands of underage Polish citizens in the former Third Reich, the aim was to find and bring back as many minors as possible from among those who could be considered Polish. The origin of the mother was considered the primary criterion for determining Polishness; paternity played no role. This approach made it possible—in parallel with the search for children deported to the Third Reich during the war—to undertake the search for children born in the Reich to Polish forced laborers and later DPs. According to the fragmentary statistical record, many such children were believed to have been born throughout

22 Karpińska-Morek et al., *Teraz jesteście Niemcami*, 118–19; Józef Łaptos, *Humanitaryzm i polityka. Pomoc UNRRA dla Polski i polskich uchodźców w latach 1944–1947* (Crakow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego w Krakowie, 2018), 259; Szymoniczek, *W cieniu wojny*, 136–37, 152.

23 Heinemann, *Rasse*, 509–10. The researcher relied on publicly available partial data. See: Roman Hrabar, Zofia Tokarz, and Jacek Wilczur, *Czas niewoli, czas śmierci. Martyrologia dzieci polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Interpress, 1979), 135–37. Ines Hopfer repeated the findings on the scale of the phenomenon for Poland. Ines Hopfer, *Geraubte Identität, Die gewaltsame “Eindeutschung” von polnischen Kindern in der NS-Zeit* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 222–23.

24 According to Mark Spoerer, there are still several thousand Germans alive today who had a Polish or Soviet mother and did not even realize it. Mark Spoerer, *Zwangsarbeit unter dem Hakenkreuz. Ausländische Zivilarbeiter, Kriegsgefangene und Häftlinge im Dritten Reich und im besetzten Europa 1939–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt DVA, 2001), 207. A similar phenomenon was noted by Hopfer in Austria. Hopfer, *Geraubte Identität*, 249.

the war. The General Board of the Polish Red Cross collected 25,000 birth certificates of children born to Polish women in Germany and Austria by mid-1946.²⁵ However, much higher numbers have appeared in the literature,²⁶ but ultimately none of these figures can be confirmed.

At first, a forced laborer could be sent to her place of origin in order to give birth there and then return to work. In 1943, the Nazis recognized that this practice was unprofitable for the Third Reich. On the basis of an investigation, the fate of the child to be born was determined. If the father was another forced laborer, the woman would be sent for an abortion. The fact that a pregnancy was carried to term did not mean that the child would survive. Frequently, newborns were taken from their mothers and placed in special facilities where they were murdered (mainly through starvation and poor living conditions). In addition to those who were saved by their mothers, those whose fathers were Germans also survived. The latter were identified during the prenatal period and were taken away from their mothers immediately after birth. They were placed in German orphanages where, after their identities were changed, they were quickly put up for adoption. Usually, authorities lost track of them after that, but not always.²⁷

From the so-called children's envelopes that survived the "revindication and repatriation action" between 1946 and 1948 and are stored in the archive of the Polish Red Cross today,²⁸ it appears that UNRRA or IRO child welfare workers and Polish search services managed to track down individual children of former Polish forced laborers that were placed with German families. Some children waiting for adoption in German orphanages were also found. It should be noted, however, that there were situations where it was the mothers themselves who gave their children to

25 AAN, MPiOS, 374, Letter of the Director of the Office of ZG PCK S. Ostrowski to R. Hrabar, Warsaw 4. 12. 1947, 16.

26 Hrabar gave the figure of 40,000 Polish children born in the postwar American and British zones; Mark Spoerer related this estimate to the entire former Third Reich. Hrabar, *Skazane*, 70; Spoerer, *Zwangsarbeit*, 205–6.

27 Regarding maternity and abortion among female forced laborers in the Third Reich, see, among others: Heinemann, *Rasse*, 499–507. For the most recent work on the subject, see: Marcel Brüntrup, "Osteuropäische Zwangsarbeiterinnen und ihre Kinder zwischen Zwangstrennung und Familienzusammenführung, 1940–45," in *Familientrennungen im nationalsozialistischen Krieg. Erfahrungen und Praktiken in Deutschland und im besetzten Europa 1939–1945*, ed. Wiebke Lisner, Johannes Hürter, Cornelia Rauh, and Lu Seegers (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2022).

28 This collection concerns children whose details were recorded by the Katowice branch of the Polish Red Cross. Between 1946 and 1948, children's transports were directed almost exclusively to Upper Silesia. ABINF PCK, Envelopes of children.

German citizens they had befriended or with whom they were more or less acquainted. This happened in situations where they could not or did not want to take care of the children to whom they had given birth. After abandoning children, they often disappeared, leaving no trace, and then returned to Poland or chose to emigrate.

Polish female DPs also left their newborns either immediately after birth or, after some time, when they realized they were no longer able to care for them. This was especially common when women decided to leave Germany or Austria; the vast majority did so without their children. A similar pattern—of leaving the child behind when emigrating—characterized the choices of women who had relations with Allied soldiers.

Several hundred children born in the former Third Reich were brought to Poland, though the exact number is impossible to estimate (but it did not exceed one thousand). Only a handful of them had their father's nationality listed on the documentation. In most cases, the space is left blank or states that the father is unknown. Among this group, however, there are individuals whose fathers were foreigners. This is confirmed by other written sources and interviews. During my research, I came across several such cases. Knowing that a person might have been fathered by a German or Allied soldier, I returned to the envelopes of these particular children to verify this information. During the first search, which included analyzing about 2,700 envelopes, I tried to pick out those cases where the father's nationality was specified on the PCK's record sheet. When I had information from another source about a child's non-Polish nationality, I carefully checked the other documents in the envelope, especially those that had come with the child in question and had been produced by German officials or the Allies. It turned out that the nationality of the child's father had been indicated there, but for reasons that remain unclear, this information was not transcribed into the documents produced by PCK workers in Katowice. Did they deliberately conceal the identity of the children brought to Poland? On the basis of the available documents, it is impossible to confirm this interpretation unequivocally. I analyzed twenty such cases and found information on several more in other sources. I also looked at cases of children whose paternity remained unknown. These materials, coupled with the documentation of the search operation, allow several conclusions to be drawn.

First, the action was originally intended to apply only to children born on Polish soil and abducted by the German occupiers. The title of the questionnaire—"Registration sheet of a deported child" (*Arkusz ewidencyjny wywiezionego dziecka*)—which was completed for each child brought to Poland, as well as the individual headings in the document indicate

that this particular group of victims of Nazi policy was the focal point of Polish policy. Second, the issue of Polish children born in the Third Reich was brought to the attention of Polish authorities by UNRRA, which was the first organization to encounter this phenomenon. It was the employees of this organization who organized the first transports of unaccompanied children in their care. Documents show that Polish officials working on the ground (in this case, in the American zone) did not know until the very end which children would be included in the first group returned to Poland.²⁹ The Polish side did not immediately recognize the significance of the problem nor did it understand its potential for the country and its population policy. The one person who prioritized this issue was Roman Hrabar, who became personally involved in documenting what he later called “the crime against motherhood.”³⁰ Finally, at the end of 1946 and the beginning of 1947, on the basis of reports coming out of Germany and Austria by Polish officials involved in the search for minors, it was concluded that it would not be easy to find children who had disappeared during the occupation, neither those deported from Poland nor those born in the Third Reich. For this reason, attention was focused primarily on children born to Polish women after the war regardless of whether the women eventually returned to their homeland or not. As numerous cases show, these women’s wishes were not considered, let alone the fact that children did not have even the slightest say in where they would live.

As mentioned before, the most important criterion taken into account was the nationality of the mother, although Polish officials in the field were ordered to be interested in all cases if at least one of the parents had Polish citizenship.³¹ In the opinion of those involved in the action, Polish parentage was a sufficient argument for placing the child in Poland. Such children were considered the property of the state and the nation. The Polish authorities (as well as welfare workers, including PCK representatives) were convinced that the child would be best off in the mother’s country of origin. This, then, is how they understood the best interests of the child irrespective of whether the child would be brought up by the

29 AAN, ZG PCK, 218, Report No. 5 of Major B. Wiszniowski, PCK Delegate for the American Zone, Munich, 10. 6. 1946, 49–53.

30 Hrabar sought to introduce the term into official discourse, but these efforts were unsuccessful as it was never addressed as a separate topic in Poland. Hrabar, *Skazane*, 150.

31 AAN, Polski Czerwony Krzyż. Delegatury Zachodnie, PCK DZ (PCK Western Delegation), 110, Copy of Circular No. 1/Pr/46 signed by the head of the PMR, Lt. Col. Z. Bibrowski, Berlin, n. d. [31. 5. 1946], 11–12.

biological mother, by her close or distant family, by a foster or adoptive family or, finally, by employees of care institutions. Spending one's childhood in a Polish orphanage was seen as a better option than growing up in a German family, no matter how devoted they were to the child. The interest of the child was identical to the interest of Polish society and the state, which had to cope with wartime population losses. The entanglement of the child's interest with that of the nation contributed to the narrative of injustice Poland suffered, first at the hands of the Nazis and then, after the war, the Western Allies. No one mentioned the Red Army in this context, of course.

The positioning of the battle over Polish children within a Cold War framework contributed to the entrenchment of both sides in their non-negotiable positions. Tara Zahra has drawn attention to the politicization of the concept of the best interests of the child, which each side understood quite differently.³² In her view, all actors involved cared deeply about the fate of children but differed in their opinions on which solutions would ensure their (the children's) psychological stability. For the Allies, the actual context in which children found themselves as a result of the turmoil of war played a significant role; also influential was the individualistic approach to each case, which was based on Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's research on psychoanalysis and applied by American and British social workers employed in the occupied territories.³³

During the first months of the action, ambiguous issues were resolved in favor of Poland despite reservations. The Allied search services were guided by the principle of enforcing justice and redressing grievances: that is, taking the side of the weaker power. This was often done in a context marked by Allied military authorities' misunderstanding of the dynamics at play and in the face of mounting pressure from almost all sides. In August 1946, Eileen Blackey, a representative of UNRRA, addressed representatives of the Polish Red Cross and social welfare officials in Katowice:

When removing Polish children from German hands, we have difficulties from two sides: the Germans resist handing over the children—they are rather aggressive, while our military authorities are primarily interested in quickly eradicating the DP problem in the occupied territories. When a German claims that a child is German and the child's alleged country of origin does not resist—the occupation authorities are willing to recognise the German position, so as not to drag the

32 Zahra, *The Lost Children*, 18–19.

33 Zahra, *The Lost Children*, 18–19.

matter out. Only we, UNRRA, constantly attack our authorities in these matters; we sometimes hear remarks: why doesn't the Polish Government care about these children? It is its business.³⁴

Such determination must surely have been fostered by the gradual coming to light of Nazi crimes including the abduction of children with a view to their Germanization or the extermination of children of foreign forced laborers considered "unfit" for Germanization, both of which were recognized as war crimes and crimes against humanity during the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg.³⁵ How great must have been the disillusionment with the attitude of the Polish authorities if, by the end of the 1940s, they were no longer taken seriously. This only strengthened the Poles' sense of injustice.

The Allies' gradual tightening of regulations and more restrictive implementation of them when it came to sending Polish children to their biological mothers' homeland was grist for the domestic propaganda mill. There was no mincing of words: the Allies were compared to the Nazis as it was now they who were stealing Polish children only to transform them into a future low-cost labor force in their own countries. Moreover, data and figures were thrown around even though they contradicted information in official documents.³⁶ The case of the cooperation of Polish search services with Soviet officials in the latter's zone of occupation in Germany serves as a prime illustration of this phenomenon. Many sources show that coordination between the Poles and Soviets was practically non-existent, as stated by Hrabar in his reports and confirmed by data on the repatriated children.³⁷ However, this did not prevent communist propagandists in Poland from disseminating completely unrealistic figures. "From the beginning of the action until 1. 8. 1948, a total of 2,143 children were found and repatriated to Poland from the

34 AAN, MPiOS, 371, Minutes of a conference with the participation of a delegation from UNRRA headquarters and representatives of Polish officials and care authorities, Katowice, 17. 8. 1946, 82.

35 These issues were dealt with during the eighth trial of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (October 20, 1947–March 10, 1948). See: Kim Priemel and Alexa Stiller, eds., *Reassessing the Nuremberg Military Tribunals: Transitional Justice, Trial Narratives and Historiography* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).

36 AAN, MPiOS, 372, Memorial on the revindication and repatriation of "stolen children" in Poland, n. d. [1949], 272–77; AAN, MPiOS, 372, Revindication of children, n. d. [1949], 278–80; AAN, ZG PCK, 244, Memorial sent to IRO Headquarters in Geneva by J. Bikart, PCK General Delegate for Germany, Munich, 28. 3. 1952, 269–278.

37 Zahra, *The Lost Children*, 204.

West German zones [. . .]. At the same time, more than 20,000 Polish children were repatriated from the Soviet zone despite the fact that UNRRA and IRO did not operate in this area, or perhaps precisely because they did not.”³⁸ These words are from a press release disseminated by Polish authorities. The information about the repatriation of twenty thousand children was and continues to be reproduced by journalists and researchers to this day even though it comes from a source used in the information battle between blocs during the Cold War. There was a desire to cover up the failure of repatriation efforts and cast Poland’s new enemies in a decidedly unfavorable light. Any information detailing the fate of “returned” children would have undermined the whole narrative. For example, Hrabar’s books do not tell us that one-fifth of the children brought to Poland in the postwar period were born in the territory of the former Third Reich; that some of these children were fathered by foreigners/non-Poles; and that a large number ended up in orphanages or with foster or adoptive families. Nevertheless, the data produced by the Polish authorities in the context of the emerging Cold War has shaped the Polish discourse on “stolen children” for nearly eighty years, and it continues to be the reference point for most people dealing with the subject today.

As a result of “the revindication and repatriation action,” there were people living in Poland whose lives might have turned out very differently had it not been for political circumstances far beyond their control. The fates of the few children of Polish forced laborers and Black American soldiers are a good example of this. In the PCK archive, I identified two children whose files had “Negro” written in the “nationality” box. A third person I identified is named Janusz Majewski, who came to Poland in one of the final transports of children in October 1949. From the documents preserved in the archives, however, it would be impossible to identify him because starting at the end of 1948, the children who arrived in Szczecin and Poznań were not recorded in the same way as the children who arrived in Katowice in earlier transports. Luckily, Majewski, with whom I was able to conduct a biographical interview, was in possession of documents taken from the children’s home where he had been living.³⁹ As a result, the story of his early childhood, which he himself could not remember, can be partially reconstructed today. Born in Paderborn in

38 AAN, ZG PCK, 227, Revindication and repatriation of Polish children, “note for press conference,” n. d., 3–8.

39 Janusz Majewski, interview with author, Warsaw–Chicago (Skype), November 26, 2018.

February 1946, Majewski was abandoned in the hospital by his mother, who was not even twenty years old. After more than three and a half years in orphanages initially run by UNRRA and then by the IRO, he traveled to Szczecin in Poland; from there he was sent to an orphanage in Niechorze, and then Jastrowie. He stayed in Polish care institutions until he reached adulthood.

In her book, Lynne Taylor mentions dozens of children born to female DPs and African American soldiers.⁴⁰ According to her, the mothers of most of them were Polish women. It is not clear whether the estimate she gives is for the American zone only or whether she includes the other zones occupied by the Western Allies (for example, two of the three Polish “brown babies” I identified came from the British zone).⁴¹ I found many references to these children in the sources. However, it is difficult to make reliable estimates of how many there were altogether, let alone the number of such children who found their way to Poland. Majewski tried to contact people with similar experiences (and appearances). He had heard of five or six Black children living in Poland during his lifetime and had personally met three such people, all of whom were born after their mothers had already returned to Poland. Two had been raised by their mothers, the third had been given up by her mother to an orphanage. “What they experienced, only I could understand,” summarized my interviewee, without going into details.⁴² Thus, it cannot be ruled out that there were more such children, although certainly not enough for the presence of Black children in Poland to be more widely acknowledged. In Poland, unlike some Western countries, “brown babies” were not treated as a social problem. As Silvana Patriarca noted, in all the countries in Western Europe where this phenomenon occurred, it “was always cast in terms of a ‘problem’.” Patriarca links this directly to “racial prejudice in societies.”⁴³ In Italy and Germany, it particularly resounded when these children were about to start school, i. e., at the beginning of the 1950s. Before this, they lived in hiding, usually brought up by their

40 Taylor, *In the Children's Best Interests*, 93.

41 This term appears in sources (especially the press at the time) and literature, but recently its appropriateness has been the subject of discussion. See: Silke Hackensch, “Colorblind Love or Racial Responsibility? (Black) Adoptive Families in Postwar America and Transnational Civil Rights,” (unpublished manuscript, 2023), 21–22.

42 Janusz Majewski interview.

43 Silvana Patriarca, “‘Brown Babies’ in Postwar Europe: The Italian Case,” EUI MWP LS, 2016/03 Cadmus, EUI Research Repository, 6, accessed April 5, 2023, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/41165>.

biological mothers.⁴⁴ In Poland, children from such relationships were camouflaged almost perfectly by their own families and the staff of care institutions, and their numbers were so small that even when they entered school in the early 1950s, it did not provoke much reaction. The phenomenon did not appear in Polish public discourse at the time, and one could say that it still does not appear in the collective consciousness of contemporary Poland or in international scientific discourse in general. In a recent book on the children of Black Americans in postwar Europe, one searches in vain to find even a single mention of multiracial children birthed by female DPs.⁴⁵

Of the three Polish Black children mentioned above, only one was adopted; the other two ended up in institutional care. The fate of one of these children in particular is a harrowing testimony to Polish officials' misinterpretation of the best interests of the child.⁴⁶ Little Gienia was born prematurely in Augsburg in February 1946. Her father was an "American Negro soldier," and her mother, a Polish woman. Only a week later, the newborn was placed in a German orphanage because, according to a note, her mother was deemed unfit to care for the child (elsewhere there is a suggestion that her mother experienced shock from giving birth to a Black child); moreover, she left for Poland only three months after the delivery. The girl was placed on a list of children to be repatriated to

44 The subject of children born to European women as a result of their relationships with Black GIs stationed in Europe has been most thoroughly researched in relation to British and German women. See, among others: Lucy Bland, *Britain's "Brown babies": The Stories of Children Born to Black GIs and White Women in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Yara-Colette Lemke Muniz de Faria, *Zwischen Fürsorge und Ausgrenzung. Afrodeutsche "Besatzungskinder" im Nachkriegsdeutschland* (Berlin: Metropol Friedrich Veitl Verlag, 2002); Heide Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Austria and Italy were also affected by this phenomenon. Regina Fritz, Marion Kramer, and Philipp Rohrbach, "'Guter Dauerpflegeplatz gesucht.' Kinder afro-amerikanischer GIs und österreichischer Frauen in der Besatzungszeit," in *Besatzungskinder. Die Nachkommen alliierter Soldaten in Österreich und Deutschland*, ed. Barbara Stelz-Marx and Silke Satjukow (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2015); Tal Adler, Philipp Rohrbach, and Niko Wahl, *SchwarzÖsterreich: Die Kinder afro-amerikanischer Besatzungssoldaten* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2016); Silvana Patriarca, *Race in Post-Fascist Italy: "War Children" and the Color of the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

45 Ingrid Bauer and Philipp Rohrbach, eds., *Black GI Children in Post-World War II Europe* (Vienna: V&R Unipress, 2021).

46 ABINF PCK, Envelopes of children, G. S.; Archiwum Domu Dziecka w Rybniku, ADDR (Archive of Children's Home in Rybnik); Akta osobowe dzieci zwolnionych, AODZ (Personal files of released children) 1950, vol. 3, G. S.

Poland despite the recommendations of American child welfare workers who believed that she would be best off in the United States. Although slightly delayed in developing psychomotor skills, the girl was making rapid progress during her stay at UNRRA facilities, and her condition was promising. In November 1947, however, she was relocated to Poland and was placed in a home for small children in Upper Silesia. According to surviving documents, her health had already deteriorated during the long and uncomfortable journey and gradually worsened after her arrival in Poland. The girl fell ill a lot; she also did not receive adequate care in Poland. As she grew older, she started to become a problem for the staff of the institution, and when she was not admitted to an orphanage for older children (after the age of three), they did not know what to do with her. The official reason for refusing her admission was her health problems, but it can be hypothesized that the issue of her skin color was not insignificant. After several months of “limbo,” the now four-and-a-half-year-old girl was placed in the State Hospital for the Nervous and Mentally Ill in Lubliniec, and there, all traces of her disappear. The documents provide no insight into why her story had this unexpected ending. The impact of early childhood events on her physical and mental development remains a mystery. From the history of her life that can be pieced together from more than a dozen documents, it is clear that she never really experienced life conditions that would have promoted healthy development. Still, by far the best care she received was from American social workers in UNRRA children’s homes. At some point, though, someone decided that in order to compensate for demographic shortcomings, she should be brought to Poland. One can only ask rhetorically what her life would have been like had the advice of her first caregivers been heeded.

Two different scenarios were also considered for Janusz Majewski.⁴⁷ IRO documents show that, although not explicitly, British social workers suggested that the Black child’s transport to Poland was not the best solution, especially because no members of his biological family had been located. But Polish authorities “wished for the child’s return,” and the decision was made to respond positively to this request under the condition that Majewski would be provided with all the necessary care. This transfer took place in violation of the IRO’s procedures for “unaccompanied children,” which had been heavily criticized by the Poles. It was noted on the travel manifest that the boy was “returning” to an “orphanage in the country.” Decision-makers assumed that he would end up in

47 Private Archive of Janusz Majewski.

an orphanage, and no attempt was even made to look for a family that would foster him. Similarly, the question arises as to what his life would have been like if the scenario that was labeled “plan B” on the form had been chosen. Perhaps a partial answer to this question can be found in the fact that when Majewski reached adulthood, he decided to leave for the United States with his family; he still lives there today.

Conclusions

Thanks to an intense propaganda campaign organized by Polish authorities, repatriated children entered the national narrative as a phenomenon of great importance, and bringing them to Poland was considered compensation for the wrongs suffered by the Polish people during the war and became part of the country’s heroic struggle with the “Western powers” to stop their acquisition of Poland’s youngest citizens. Additionally, this group became embedded in the consciousness of Poles as children returning to their homeland after years of having been separated from their parents or abducted from Polish orphanages by the Nazis. It was in no one’s interest to be specific about who the “repatriated” children were and how many eventually ended up in Poland.

The media at the time presented only a small selection of the most emotionally moving stories in order to legitimize the actions taken by the authorities. This was certainly the content presented in the *Polish Film Chronicle (Polska Kronika Filmowa)*—the title of the newsreels shown in Polish cinemas prior to the start of the feature—as well as other media. For example, one episode of the *Polish Film Chronicle* showed footage of the baptism of eleven infants brought to Poland from Germany who had “luckily avoided Germanization.” The information might even appear plausible were it not for the fact that the baptisms took place at the beginning of 1947 and the children were a few months old, i. e., they were born after the war.⁴⁸ The episode also shows how these national declarations concerning repatriated children worked in practice and who promoted them. Prominent communists like the Silesian Voivode Aleksander Zawadzki and Vice Voivode Jerzy Ziętek acted as godfathers to these new Polish citizens and were blessed by the Catholic Church in Poland. Although far from reality, the story of “stolen children” that was introduced into public discourse in the early postwar years and repeatedly

48 *Children of the PCK. Baptism of Children Repatriated from Germany*, PKF, 20.3.1947, accessed April 5, 2023, <http://repozytorium.fn.org.pl/?q=pl/node/4799>.

reproduced in the decades that followed has persisted to this day and has not yet been challenged by any Polish researcher.

There was no room in the propagandistic narrative for acknowledging the diversity of the newcomers or the actual numbers of repatriated children as this information could have undermined the sense of urgency around the issue promoted in the propaganda and its overall effectiveness. Moreover, publicizing the true origins of many of the children, the progress of the action, and the real conditions awaiting these children in Poland would have undermined those responsible for organizing the action and, by extension, Polish authorities.

The facts, however, told a story that was vastly different than the official narrative. From reading the memoirs of the “stolen children,” one can conclude that despite the diversity of their origins and twists of fate, all of these people faced stigmatization and rejection upon arriving in Poland and, thus, were united as a peculiar community of experience. The psychological consequences, including breakdowns and depression, were felt by individuals well into adulthood.⁴⁹ Younger children often had no knowledge of the Polish language, and older children had very limited proficiency. This was enough for Polish society to view these children primarily as “hated Germans.”⁵⁰ The actual origin did not matter; the children of Poles and children of foreign men were treated identically. I include the latter in the category of children born of war (CBOW),⁵¹ but their identity as CBOW was rendered invisible as a

49 Hopfer, *Geraubte Identität*, 246.

50 Malinowska, *Brunatna kołysanka*, 45, 66, 73, 85, 331; Hopfer, *Geraubte Identität*, 227–30.

51 These are individuals who were born in situations marked by war, occupation, forced labor, or captivity. Their biological parents were on opposite sides of the barricades: one parent, usually the mother, was a member of the invaded (occupied or captive) community, while the other, usually the father, was an invader, occupier, or captor. For more information about this transnational phenomenon, see: Sabine Lee, *Children Born of War in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Ingvill C. Mochmann, “Children Born of War: A Decade of International and Interdisciplinary Research,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 42, no. 1 (2017): 320–46; Sabine Lee, Heide Glaesmer, and Barbara Stelzl-Marx, eds., *Children Born of War: Past Present and Future* (London: Routledge, 2021). For more about Polish CBOW, see: Jakub Gałęziowski, “Researching Global Phenomena in Local Circumstances: Polish Children Born of War in the Context of CBOW Research,” in *Children and Youth at Risk in Times of Transition: International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Baard Herman Borge, Elke Kleinau, and Ingvill Constanze Ødegaard (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024), 115–38, <https://doi.org/10.1515/978311010649-006>. Jakub Gałęziowski, *Niepowiedziane biografie*.

result of being merged into the group of “stolen children” or “children, victims of Germanization.” These extremely inadequate and illegitimate labels applied both to those children whose fathers were Germans or Austrians as well as to the “children of the Allies.” Although they did not experience discrimination from the state like other Polish CBOW, if they were aware of their roots, most of the difficulties they encountered were largely limited to their private lives and were caused by their loved ones. Many of these children also had problems with the subjective perception of themselves as “other” and with accepting their own “entangled” identities. Health issues remain a separate issue as they largely stemmed from the difficult conditions in which those who ended up in Polish orphanages had to live. My research has shown that the lack of proper medical care and poor nutrition left a permanent mark on many of the children who were brought to Poland from the former Third Reich.

Another pattern emerges from the story of these children: the nationality of the father, even if he belonged to the enemy camp, did not matter to the Polish authorities. It was not seen as a problem, unlike in Western countries such as France, the Netherlands, Belgium, or Denmark.⁵² Neither was there any reference to eugenics: the mothers of these children were not viewed as deviants as was the case for women in postwar Norway who had children with Wehrmacht soldiers.⁵³ In fact, there was no concern that the genes of the parents or the circumstances of conception (rape) would negatively affect the development of these children or prevent them from becoming full-fledged Polish citizens in the future. The desire to reclaim, or rather acquire, as many children as possible who could be transformed into Polish citizens at one point outweighed all other factors. At the same time, repatriation was one small piece in the larger political game that played out against the backdrop of the Cold War. The ends justified the means, and results were to be achieved through humanitarianism as well as political calculations that took into account the demographic losses incurred during the war and the need to fuel political confrontation on the international level. The intensification

52 The first volume of the various CBOW cases: Kjersti Ericsson and Eva Simonsen, eds., *Children of World War II: The Hidden Enemy Legacy* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

53 Kjersti Ericsson and Eva Simonsen, “Introduction,” in *Children of World War II*, 9. It should be noted that there are entries in the children’s files indicating that their biological mothers had psychiatric problems and they had to undergo treatment for this. This was one of the reasons given as to why the mothers were separated from their children. Such diagnoses are, however, not scientifically neutral and were socially shaped—the interpretation of such records thus requires special attention and sensitivity, not only replication of the source language.

of the dispute was also intended to cover up the mistakes and failures of the authorities. In short, the welfare of the children was overshadowed by the needs of the Polish state, as evidenced by the stories of individual children.

Returning to the trial described in the introduction, Hania's fate was determined by chance. She came very close to ending up in Poland after living in Germany for almost seven years. The questions that arise are: Would her biological mother's family have taken her in if the girl had been brought to Poland? Or would they have been assured that if only they signed declarations, child welfare services in Poland would take care of the girl? Only the information provided by the German foster parents tipped the scales and left the American judge in no doubt about how to decide the case. Documents stored in the Arolsen Archives shed even more light on the case. First, they confirm the biological mother's lack of interest in her daughter. Shortly after Hania's birth, the mother gave Hania to a local orphanage and left for her home country, offering no sign of life when first the German authorities, and later the IRO search service repeatedly contacted her about the girl. Second, these sources not only confirm the paternity of the father—a farmer (*Bauer*) with whom the woman worked—but also show that the man paid for his daughter's maintenance until she was taken in by a foster family. Third, they show that after three years in foster care, the girl found a permanent home and dedicated caregiver. Fourth, they reveal the level of manipulation the Polish officials resorted to in order to bring the child to Poland. Indeed, at the trial, it was proven that the handwriting used to write the official declaration of the biological mother differed from that of her private letter to the girl's foster father. Documents signed by the woman found in a German office provided the point of reference for the handwriting comparison. The report from the trial states that:

It is the court's opinion that the private letter in the private envelope reflects more the true facts than any official letter [. . .]. It was obvious that the letter on 12.10.51 was written by another person than that dated 13.10.51. It was also acknowledged that the mother of the child wrote the letter on 13.10.51. Considering the contents of the last letter, it would clearly serve the child's best interest to leave her with the Family G [. . .].⁵⁴

54 Arolsen Archives, AA, Notes on continued Court hearing by L. Weissmueller, copy of doc. 84188358#1/2, Augsburg, 16.11.1951. .

What is striking here is that in the mother's letter quoted in the report to the PCK, Radomski omitted a significant sentence that was included in the copy intended for the IRO: "The child understands the German language, what shall I do with her now? The father of the child is German, therefore, let her be in Germany."⁵⁵ While it might seem like a small detail, it clashed with the "Polish idea" in the case of Hania. Nevertheless, the Polish state ignored the "best interests" of the child in the service of its nationalist population policies.

55 Arolsen Archives, AA, Notes on continued Court hearing by L. Weissmueller, copy of doc. 84188358#1/2, Augsburg, 16. II. 1951.

Revisiting the “Talking Cure”: Capturing Children’s Wartime Experiences through Hans Keilson’s Work on Sequential Traumatization

In what kind of century do we live, when in the hour of need and danger, parents are denied the right to protect their children, and when children must learn to imagine the violent death of their parents and siblings and, nonetheless, don’t understand!¹

Hans Keilson

In the wake of catastrophes of racialized violence and wars that continue to mount in the twenty-first century, the question arises: how, in the path of man-made disasters, might we elicit, listen to, record, and react responsibly and with care to children’s experiences of persecution and violence? The citation I opened this essay with suggests a chilling disparity between imagining (possible) and understanding (impossible) violent death—a lacuna that sits at the heart of every new act of war or destruction, especially when the recipient is particularly vulnerable to harm. This is one of many incongruities particular to violent experiences explored in psychoanalyst Hans Keilson’s work on trauma with Jewish child orphans in the Netherlands after the Second World War. Thinking of trauma as an uneven process with multiple stages and intensities rather

1 The translation is my own. The original reads: “Was für ein Jahrhundert, in dem es Eltern in der Stunde der Not und Gefahr verwehrt ist, ihre Kinder zu beschützen, und Kinder in der Phantasie den gewaltsamen Tod ihrer Eltern und Geschwister lernen müssen und dennoch nicht begreifen!” “Die fragmentierte Psychotherapie eines aus Bergen-Belsen zurückgekehrten Jungen,” in *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel: Essays, Reden, Gespräche*, ed. Heinrich Detering (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Verlag, 2011), 92.

than as a punctual incident that consumes the imagination while obliterating understanding insists on the historicity of experience among other modes of temporality (such as those of deferral and belatedness) associated with earlier Freudian conceptions of trauma.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, therapists and social scientists of many stripes struggled to understand the relationship between war and childhood experience when faced with the flood of child survivors. Indeed, it would take some time until individual stories were shared, and often only at a significant temporal remove from the events that shaped their lives.² The type of information sought—often recorded piecemeal, initially factual information required for bureaucratic or organizational purposes for the most part—shaped the form of questions. For example, whereas survivors themselves might be interested precisely in mining the lacunae or seeking to understand gaps and inconsistencies in their biographies or the broader impact of their childhood experiences on the trajectory of their lives, in the late 1950s, lawyers providing legal representation to Holocaust survivors in reparations cases required coherent autobiographical narratives in forensic psychological assessments, without which their claimants were unlikely to receive compensation from the West German government for injuries suffered during the Nazi regime.³ Thus, aspects of mediation and cultural contextualization are of

2 For an introduction to the history of child survivors of the Nazi genocide in the early postwar years, see the collection of essays: Sharon Kangisser and Dalia Ofer, eds., *Starting Anew: The Rehabilitation of Child Survivors of the Holocaust in the Early Postwar Years* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, the International Institute for Holocaust Research, the Diana and Eli Zborowski Center for the Study of the Aftermath of the Holocaust, 2019). One better-known archive of child survivor testimony in the US-American context is the Kestenberg Archive of Testimonies of Child Holocaust Survivors. This archive encompasses interviews conducted with child survivors immediately after the Second World War, copies from JIH depositions, as well as a vast archive of adult testimonies by former child survivors, which was created in 1981 by psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg and her husband, attorney Milton Kestenberg. See the essay collection Sharon Kangisser Cohen, Eva Fogelman, and Dalia Ofer, eds., *Children in the Holocaust and its Aftermath: Historical and Psychological Studies of the Kestenberg Archive* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017). The Kestenberg Archive of Testimonies of Child Holocaust survivors was originally called the Jerome Riker International Study of Organized Persecution of Children in 1981. As Kangisser Cohen, Fogelman, and Ofer explain in their introduction to the volume, the Kestenberg Archive is unique in at least two ways: first, because many child survivors were telling their stories to someone for the first time; and second, because the interviews were conducted by mental health professionals. 1–12.

3 For a historical account of the vicissitudes of meeting the very specific prerequisites measuring the mental health of Holocaust survivors when they applied for reparations from the German government, see Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psycho-*

the essence when we ask about childhood experiences, particularly under conditions of genocide or other forms of racialized state violence.⁴

My essay elaborates on evolving understandings and deployments of the so-called "talking cure," particularly as concerns the concept of "trauma," in the specific sociohistorical setting of the Netherlands, although the implications of trauma research with children indubitably has significantly broader purchase for the contemporary moment. The focus of the paper is polymathic psychiatrist/psychoanalyst and creative author Hans Keilson's pioneering contribution to trauma studies through his painstaking work with Jewish Dutch war orphans, his longitudinal study *Sequential Traumatization in Children: A Clinical and Statistical Follow-Up Study on the State of the Jewish War Orphans in the Netherlands*, published in German in 1979.⁵ I initially provide a biographical sketch of Hans Keilson, followed by a brief contextualization of the historical circumstances particular to Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands—more specifically, that of Jewish child survivors of concentration camps and those emerging from hiding only to find a largely destroyed Jewish community in the Netherlands. Then, I will offer a close reading of one of the descriptive-analytical case studies in his psychoanalytic work to open up its complex semantics of silence, language, and knowledge.⁶ In

analysis in an Age of Catastrophes (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2017), 89–122.

- 4 In her book *Survivors: Children's Lives After the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), historian Rebecca Clifford elaborates on the historical and more recent approaches used in an attempt to encounter (or, more often than not, to recover testimony about their childhood through adult testimony) the experiences of "child survivors" in the aftermath of the Holocaust. This attempt took a variety of forms: in-person interviews (though, as mentioned, less often with children and more commonly with adults), published case histories and oral interviews, or by reading memoirs and diaries. Paradoxically, the nomenclature "child survivor testimony" most often denotes an anachronism; the term itself was of a much later vintage and indicated a sea change in the perspective used to interpret these and other versions of histories, experiences, and available memories of those who had lived through the Holocaust as children.
- 5 Hans Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization in Children: A Clinical and Statistical Follow-Up Study on the State of the Jewish War Orphans in the Netherlands*, with Herman R. Sarphatie, trans. Yvonne Bearne, Hilary Coleman, and Deirdre Winter (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992). The original German-language version of Keilson's book was published in 1979 and bore the title *Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern. Untersuchung zum Schicksal jüdischer Kriegswaisen* (Gießen: Psychosozial Verlag, 2005).
- 6 Anna M. Parkinson, "Untimely Tales: Psychoanalysis as Spectral Modernism in Hans Keilson's Novel *The Death of the Adversary*," in *Tales that Touch: Migration, Translation, and Temporality in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century German Literature*

closing, I shall consider the ongoing significance of Keilson's work for the field of trauma studies today.

Hans Keilson was born into a Jewish family in the German town of Bad Freienwalde an der Oder in 1909. During the twilight years of the Weimar Republic, Keilson moved to Berlin to study medicine and physical education. In 1933, he published his first novel with Fischer-Verlag. With the ever-encroaching Nazi legislation targeting the livelihoods and very existence of Jewish Germans, Keilson's book was almost immediately banned, and on completion of his medical degree, he was prohibited from practicing medicine. Of necessity, he worked as a physical education instructor in Jewish Schools in and around Berlin until 1936, when he went into exile in the Netherlands on the urging of his first wife Gertrud Mainz, whose prescience initiated their emigration from an increasingly antisemitic Berlin and, Keilson believed, also most likely saved their lives.⁷ After the German occupation of the Netherlands in 1940, Keilson went into hiding in the environs of Amsterdam and for a time also in Delft, continuing his work for the Dutch resistance and traveling on forged papers under the name of Jakob van Linden to consult with Jewish children in hiding who exhibited behavior that placed them in danger of exposure. Keilson avoided deportation and survived in hiding in the Netherlands. After the defeat of the Nazi regime and the liberation of the Netherlands, Keilson immediately applied for Dutch citizenship and lived most of the remainder of his long life (he died at the age of 101 in 2011) in Bussum, outside of Amsterdam. After qualifying to practice as a doctor in the Netherlands, Keilson then completed a doctorate in psychiatry, as well as training in psychoanalysis.

Keilson's work as a therapist in the Netherlands had already begun years earlier with his clandestine work for the Dutch underground, and it continued with Dutch Jewish child orphan survivors in the postwar context, becoming part of the fraught and fractious history of the relationship of minority-majority groups in the Netherlands. By compar-

and Culture, ed. Bettina Brandt and Yasemin Yildiz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 53–72.

7 These biographical details are gleaned from various published accounts of Keilson's life. (Auto)biographical details can also be found in almost all of Keilson's publications, including Hans Keilson, *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel*; Hans Keilson, *Da Steht Mein Haus: Erinnerungen*, ed. Heinrich Detering (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 2011); Hans Keilson, *Tagebuch 1944 und 46 Sonetten*, ed. Marita Keilson-Lauritz (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 2014). Although it was published too late for inclusion in this essay, it would be instructive to see the recently published first complete official biography of Keilson that appeared in Dutch in the Netherlands: Jos Versteegen, *Hans Keilson: Telkens een Nieuw Leven* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2023).

ison with other, comparatively larger Western European countries, the Jewish community in the Netherlands had been decimated through Nazi persecution. Before the Second World War, the Dutch Jewish population included one hundred and fourty thousand individuals, of whom a mere twenty-five thousand to twenty-nine thousand (15 percent) survived persecution. Approximately 3,500 Jewish children survived: 1,417 returned to surviving parents, leaving 2,041 Jewish Dutch children orphaned, of whom 1,300 were under thirteen years of age. These children's destinies were inextricably interwoven with those of the postwar foundations and commissions established on their behalf.⁸ This chapter of postwar Jewish-Dutch history (roughly 1945–1950) has been examined critically in recent decades, not least because of sometimes contentious postwar legal rulings on the guardianship of surviving Jewish Dutch orphans.

In retrospect, it is clear how the approach taken by the Dutch government to the so-called "war orphan problem" must have compounded the enormous losses already suffered by the Dutch Jewish community. Drafted by the Dutch government-in-exile, a bill of law provided the postwar legal framework to handle the "war orphan problem," including the creation of the legal category "war foster children" (*oorlogspleegkinderen*), which was to have long-lasting consequences for both those categorized as such and the Dutch Jewish community as a whole. The Order in Council/Royal Decree (K.B.) No. 137 of August 1945 officially established a governmental Commission for War Foster Children (*Commissie voor Oorlogspleegkinderen/OPK*) responsible for ruling on the welfare of and making formal legal recommendations regarding the children's future guardianship. This bill also removed a parent's right of guardianship if they had not returned to retrieve a child they had given away during occupation within one month of the war's end; the child then became a ward of the state.⁹

Similarly, in August 1945, in keeping with the spirit of Dutch tradition that had allowed religious communities to regulate their affairs auto-

8 E. C. Lekkerkerker, "Oorlogspleegkinderen," *Maandblad voor de Geestelijke Volksgezondheid* 1, no. 7 (October 1946): 228. Cited in J. S. Fishman, "Jewish War Orphans in the Netherlands—The Guardianship Issue 1945–1950," *The Wiener Library Bulletin* 27, no. 30/31 (1973/74): 31–36, here 31.

9 Diane Wolf, *Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden Children and Postwar Families in Holland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 12. Here, Wolfe cites a memo from the bill proposal that states: "Parents who do not report within one month will presumably be those who have been transported somewhere else from the Netherlands. They will probably not be capable of taking their parental duties the way that they should. They shall not be permitted to resume their parental authority until they have demonstrated that they are fit to do so."

mously, the Jewish Co-ordination Commission created the foundation Le Esrath Hajeled (“For the Good of the Child”), an organization Keilson was involved with from its inception.¹⁰ Le Esrath Hajeled initially provided social services to children returned to a Jewish environment, including documentation for OPK Commission guardianship cases. The foundation’s intention to eventually replace the OPK Commission did not come to fruition.¹¹ In most cases, the OPK Commission alone would decide the placement of the orphan based on its assessment of the degree of “Jewishness” of the child’s original nuclear family.

Historian Joel S. Fishman’s research into what he accurately termed the “war orphan controversy” reveals a startling level of antisemitic bias on the part of the government ruling that not only led to restricting the options for Dutch Jewish child orphans but also curtailed the agency of surviving parents or relatives in the Jewish community. Intended as a gesture of recognition of the “moral authority” of Resistance groups who had been active in saving Jewish children by placing them in hiding with gentile families during the German occupation of the Netherlands, the Dutch government was, at best, paternalistic, if not overtly biased, in adopting the groups’ attempts to “build a society without divisive denominational differences and racism.” What this meant concretely was prioritizing nationality rather than the religious background of the child’s family when making guardianship decisions. For the most part, the OPK Commission understood “Jewishness” or Jewish identity solely in religious or political terms, as manifested, for example, through synagogue attendance or keeping a kosher household, on the one hand; on the other hand, being Zionist was considered an unambiguous marker of Jewish

10 There are varied and slightly differing versions of the spelling of this organization’s name in the literature on its history. I have chosen this spelling of the organization (Le Esrath Hajeled) for purposes of continuity and since it is the one most frequently used in Hans Keilson’s work.

11 According to Fishman, this substitution did not take place. Instead, to cater to the needs of Jewish orphans remaining in Gentile households along the lines of the work done by Le Esrath Hajeled, the commission established a separate organization of its own called Help to War Foster Children. Unsurprisingly, each organization’s idea of what this “help” for Jewish orphaned children should consist of varied dramatically from that of its counterpart. Fishman, “Jewish War Orphans in the Netherlands,” 32–35. Much later on, members of Le Esrath Hajeled took groups of foster children to live in Israel, and by 1967, 264 war orphans had emigrated from the Netherlands to Israel. According to Fishman, Jewish child orphans who emigrated to Israel tended to be more centered in their identities and have a less fractious relationship with their past. (As we will see from a more detailed psychological perspective in Keilson’s study of the war orphans, these responses varied widely from individual to individual.)

identity. Other, less obvious forms of Jewish cultural identity (with which the majority of the original Jewish Dutch community identified) were not weighted equally as criteria in considering the question of guardianship, being outbid in importance by other, more generalizable factors when measuring the physical and psychological wellbeing of Jewish orphans.¹² In other words, in an effort to avoid racialized particularism, the commission overrode cultural differences that were central to Jewish identity for many in the Dutch Jewish community. In spite of the traditional historical practice of religious tolerance with which the Netherlands is associated, this ruling left the OPK Commission open to accusations of antisemitic prejudice and eroded the autonomy of the surviving members of the Dutch Jewish community. In many cases, this erasure of Jewish identity later generated confusion, disorientation, and suffering as documented in many of the interviews with former Jewish child orphan survivors included in the longitudinal research undertaken by Keilson.

As Fishman argues, the language used to formulate the law also articulated the leading assumptions of OPK members, including that parents would not be returning or that the Jewish orphans' status was equivalent to that of "abandoned or neglected" children rather than that of orphans (their designation as *Oorlogspleegkinderen* [foster children] rather than as *weeskinderen* [orphan children] reveals precisely this logic).¹³ The majority of the OPK Commission consisted of Dutch gentile persons, with invited members of the Dutch Jewish community consistently in the minority. Further, less outspoken members of the Dutch Jewish community were most often recruited rather than those strongly identified with recognizable markers of Jewishness (for example, Zionists or Orthodox Jews).¹⁴ The declaration of the orphans' "best interest" as first and

12 See: Fishman, "Jewish War Orphans in the Netherlands" and Wolfe, *Beyond Anne Frank*.

13 Fishman's important article is unambiguous in this regard; it is titled: "The War Orphan Controversy in the Netherlands: Majority-Minority Relations," in *Dutch Jewish History Proceedings of the Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands, November 28–December 3, 1982* (Jerusalem: Tel Aviv University, 1984), 421–32, here 425–26.

14 Fishman lists the participating Resistance groups as: "Het Kindercomité," the "Van Doorn Group," the "Theo de Bruin Group," and the group called "Oom Piet." Fishman, "The War Orphan Controversy," 424. For a reappraisal of Fishman's research through the lens of human rights discourse (specifically here, in terms of child kidnapping), see also: Diane L. Wolf, "Child Withholding as Child Transfer: Hidden Jewish Children and the State in Postwar Netherlands," *Journal of Human Rights* 12 (2013): 296–308. Wolf also refers the reader to more recent work on this

foremost their Dutch national identity signaled a turn away from the primacy of Jewish identity, and likewise ran counter to the Dutch tradition of cleaving to practices of universal religious tolerance.¹⁵ Significantly, this also broke with traditional Dutch law that held that orphaned children should be reared in the faith of their deceased parents.¹⁶

If it was not so painful, it would perhaps be ironic to note that in their zeal to leave behind exclusionary, racially-driven ideology associated with Nazi thought, the commission often failed to consider Jewish identity (understood by them as a prejudicial form of racialized identity) a vital consideration for the placement of Dutch Jewish orphans. Indeed, in their attempt to altogether avoid using practices of racial categorization they associated with Nazism, members of the commission unwittingly applied an inverted form of antisemitic logic. Thus, surviving relatives of the Dutch Jewish orphans (and, at times, even the surviving parents themselves upon their return to the Netherlands) endeavoring to assume guardianship of Jewish children again faced discrimination as they attempted to argue for the importance of bringing up the war orphans in Jewish households instead of leaving children with gentile foster parents who had taken them in during the Nazi Occupation.

This history provides the backdrop to Hans Keilson's postwar work on sequential traumatization in children. Likewise, it indicates the limited autonomy available to orphans' surviving family members in cases concerning the struggle for guardianship by illustrating aspects of curtailed agency and the psycho-social vulnerability of Jewish orphans and surviving adult members of the shrunken Jewish community in the Netherlands. Although surviving Jewish orphans had experienced explicit antisemitic persecution and the threat of death during the Nazi occupation, lingering antisemitic prejudice continued to cast its shadow over the resolution of the children's postwar destinies.¹⁷

history: Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940–1945* (London: Arnold, 1997).

15 See: Fishman, "The War Orphan Controversy."

16 Fishman, "The Jewish War Orphans," 32.

17 See, for example: Christine Kausch and Katja Happe, "Untertauchzeit: Von prekären Leben in den Niederlanden unter deutscher Besatzung," and Cordula Lissner, "Erzählte Lebensgeschichte und die Frage, wer zuhört: Die Kindertransporte 1938/39," in *Folgen sequenzieller Traumatisierung: Zeitgeschichtliche und Psychotherapeutische Reflexionen zum Werk von Hans Keilson*, ed. Barbara Stambolis and Ulrich Lamparter (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2021), 59–79 and 117–36, respectively.

Survival and Many Unhappy Returns

Our access to the testimonies of child survivors is, of course, mediated by multiple factors, not least the temporal distance from childhood events when narrated by adult survivors or the developmental stage of the child when events occurred, as even under normal circumstances, memory remains inconsistent until five or six years of age.¹⁸ Debórah Dwork's trailblazing work *Children with a Star* points to a divide when she defines children as a "subculture" of society at war, with perspectives that may differ vastly from those of adults.¹⁹ Further, in attempting to gain access to what historian Joana Michlic paradoxically terms the childhood "world of the unarticulate,"²⁰ speakers and listeners navigate the co-mingling of memory and current adult perspectives that may be informed by representations of events in extant scholarship and popular culture, creating what might be called a memory feedback loop. It is important to add to this the ways in which "subcultural" histories of child survivors cannot be disentangled from the rapid growth in post-Second World War societies of the field of child experts—ranging from pedagogues to therapeutic practitioners and those working for governmental social welfare agencies—as is clear in the case of the postwar Netherlands too.²¹

18 Wolf, "Child Withholding," 305.

19 Debórah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

20 Joana Beata Michlic, "What Does a Child Remember? Recollections of the War and the Early Postwar Period among Child Survivors from Poland," in *Jewish Families in Europe: 1939–Present* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 153–54.

21 Recent publications mining this vein of inquiry offer detailed socio-historical and psychoanalytical accounts of the intertwining of practices of psychoanalysis with discourses on mothering, democracy, and pathology in the British postwar context, demonstrating multiple ways in which histories of children during genocidal events and their aftermath are framed by socio-political interests. See: Michal Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Viewing the same psycho-historical terrain but through a different lens, see: Shaul Bar-Haim, *The Maternalists: Psychoanalysts, Motherhood, and the British Welfare State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). These studies include explorations of the theories and normative implications of work by leading child psychoanalysts such as Anna Freud and John Bowlby, who participated in the assessment of child (and mother) mental health in postwar England. Importantly, as historian Rebecca Clifford stresses and which can be borne out in the examples examined in my essay, practitioners' approaches to wartime experiences of children cannot but be informed by their own desires, anxieties, and beliefs. Rebecca Clifford, *Survivors: Children's Lives After the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 17, 43, and 157.

Keilson's work contributes to this larger body of postwar research by child psychologists, psychiatrists, humanist pedagogues, social workers, and other professionals concerned with child welfare and the long-term social consequences of the disruptions, displacements, and unbridled violence unleashed by National Socialist tyranny and the ensuing war.²² Completing for a second time his studies in medicine, this time in the Netherlands, Keilson also commenced psychoanalytical training in 1949 and became a training analyst in 1970. His pioneering study, based on his research on sequential traumatization, was the capstone that earned Keilson his doctorate in psychiatry.²³ Keilson explains how the study emerged from his own personal experience after working with troubled children in hiding during the German occupation of the Netherlands, and particularly his postwar experience as a consultant with Le Esrath Hajeled.

Titled *Sequential Traumatization in Children: A Clinical and Statistical Follow-Up on the Fate of the Jewish War Orphans in the Netherlands*,²⁴ Keilson's German-language monograph on trauma can be considered a *Zeitdokument* (literally a "time document," or document of its time) in at least two senses of the word: first, as a document recording and reflective of the role of the concept of "trauma" at a particular moment, a point to which I will return in my consideration of the broader reception of Keilson's concept; and second, as a palimpsest of closely woven narratives composed of layers of experience that, quite literally, tell the disjointed and extended story of the children's trauma, as becomes particularly clear below in my analysis of one of the valuable histories contained in the descriptive-qualitative studies of Keilson's individual analysands' cases.

Beginning in 1967 with his work as a research associate in the Amsterdam University Hospital of Child Psychiatry, Keilson studied the consequences of what he calls the "sequential traumatization" of his subjects, namely, Jewish war orphans who had survived Nazi persecution in the Netherlands. Almost a decade later, in 1978, he completed his study with

22 See also the collection of essays on the rehabilitation of child survivors in: Sharon Kangisser Cohen and Dalia Ofer, eds., *Starting Anew: The Rehabilitation of Child Survivors of the Holocaust in the Early Postwar Years* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, the International Institute for Holocaust Research, the Diana and Eli Zborowski Center for the study of the aftermath of the Holocaust, 2019).

23 In 1992, an English translation of the study was published by Magnes Press in Jerusalem: Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization in Children* (see footnote 5).

24 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization in Children*. The original German-language version of Keilson's book was published by Psychosozial-Verlag (Gießen) in 1979, with a second edition published by Psychosozial-Verlag in 2005.

the support of research psychologist and psychoanalyst Hermann R. Sarphatie.²⁵

One significant dimension of Keilson's research is its ambitious temporal scope. His study centered on the long-term consequences and aftermath of Nazi state-sponsored policies and practices of racial extermination for surviving Jewish child orphans from the Netherlands, concluding with adult interviews with former child survivors that Keilson conducted in Israel and the Netherlands more than twenty years after the original events. Among other factors, Keilson's remarkable longevity allowed him to publish his longitudinal study on trauma in German in 1979, at the age of seventy, eleven years after he began his research. He attributes the study's long gestation period to his dependence on his sometimes ungainly or unruly sources, including material gathered for unrelated or bureaucratic purposes by the OPK Commission or Le Esrath Hajeled, as well as the personal and political sensitivity of his research, which addressed lived memory and painful recent history.²⁶

In addition, Keilson refers to the neglect of the aspect of psychiatric history he sets out to explore in his study as a further mitigating factor.²⁷ He specifies that his aim was

to present clearly and authentically [. . .] the particular biographical abundance of the material under investigation, with its extensive social and historical ramifications, and thus to render it accessible to critical appraisal.²⁸

With its descriptive-clinical and quantitative-statistical analysis of orphaned Jewish Dutch child survivors, Keilson's study captured and critically appraised layers of history, politics, psychology, and social complexes constitutive of his own personal history as a member of the European Jewish community and a citizen of his adopted country, the Netherlands. In this sense, his study brought into focus his own biography, while providing a critical assessment of "the fate of the Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands" from a psychological (psychiatric/psychoanalytical) perspective, as per the subtitle of his book.

25 For a detailed account of the process of researching and writing the study, see Hans Keilson, "'Sie werden von niemandem erwartet.' Eine Untersuchung über verwaiste jüdische Kinder und deren sequentielle Traumatisierung," *Exilforschung* 3 (1985): 374–95.

26 Keilson, "Sie werden von niemandem erwartet," 375–76.

27 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, "Preface to the original introduction," XIII–IV.

28 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, XIII.

The clinical-descriptive segment of Keilson's book follows the conventions of psychoanalytic case studies, while the statistical-quantitative analysis adheres to psychiatric statistical metrics. Framed through his hypothesis of the lasting effects of the children's cumulative traumatization—namely, their persecution at the hands of the Nazi regime and subsequent triggering effects for trauma in their postwar environment—Keilson defined sequential traumatization as a confrontation with “life-threatening danger and a succession of extremely stressful events.” By definition, trauma is untimely or out of joint, and Keilson offered a nuanced understanding of trauma's temporality as discontinuous yet recursive, also significantly underscoring the intensity of the cumulative nature of a sequence of events that he called the “traumatic situation,” which resulted in “chronic, extreme psychological stress.”²⁹ Further, in its complex and multivalent understanding of the temporalities peculiar to persecution, his study insisted on the centrality of the political and social contexts in which historical events and their psychological after-effects unfolded in the Netherlands both during and—just as importantly—after the Second World War.³⁰ Files from the OPK Commission and Le Esrath Hajeled contributed to Keilson's study by offering recorded biographical details, guardianship decisions, and partial information about the trajectories of the postwar lives of 1,854 Jewish Dutch orphans who had been in hiding or had survived Nazi concentration camps.

Keilson's *Sequential Traumatization* was the first longitudinal study on trauma that took the developmental stage of the child at the time of traumatization into consideration. His study went beyond an examination of the more visible signs of neglect and organic illness such as starvation, inflicted disabilities, residual cerebral impairment, disease, or infection, all of which were especially prevalent in children returning from concentration camps.³¹ The age of separation from the mother was the first organizing principle in his study, very much in keeping with the importance given to the role of mothering at the time (as compared to more gender-neutral concepts of parenting today).³² According to what he called the “genetic aspects of character development in psychoanalytic theory,” he shifted focus from Freudian libido theory to a theory of basic

29 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, 48–50.

30 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, 48–49. Keilson gently broaches this volatile history in his study (32–35). See Fishman, “The War Orphans Controversy in the Netherlands,” 421–32.

31 Keilson, “Sie werden von niemandem erwartet,” 378.

32 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, 85–86.

needs, dividing the age of the children when separated from their mothers into six discrete categories (by comparison, attachment theorist John Bowlby had a quadripartite categorization): I—birth to eighteen months; II—eighteen months to four years; III—four to six years; IV—six to ten years; V—ten to thirteen years; VI—thirteen to eighteen years.³³

Further parameters for Keilson's study included positing three discrete phases of traumatic experience (although there are arguably other phases and the subtle overlap of each of them).³⁴ The first traumatic sequence was defined by the onset of persecution, confinement, enforced isolation, and the destruction of the Jewish family unit, beginning with the invasion and occupation of the Netherlands by German troops. The second traumatic sequence began either with a child's deportation to a concentration camp or being forced into hiding. This phase often included an acute sense of being at the mercy of a hostile environment (characterized variously by hunger, illness, and privation), utter dependency on others, and, it goes without saying, the necessary erasure of Jewish identity when living with foster families. The third and final traumatic sequence occurred with the transition from the status of wartime illegality and statelessness to that of restored legal citizenship in the postwar world. Factoring in the developmental stage of the child when parted from their mother (the norm assumed that the role of caregiving was taken on by mothers), the final traumatic sequence was often characterized by an intensification of ongoing psychological precarity, not least due to the contested and thorny question of guardianship of the orphans.³⁵

33 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, 42–43. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into the specific details pertaining to each of these age categories, which Keilson based on then-current standards for the different functions and stages of maturation, and which included factors such as: the level of dependency of the child on the mother at different stages of life, the development of cerebral functions including cognitive skills and language, an increased attunement to the outside world, emotional maturation, the capacity for remembering, the attainment of critical thinking, and later sexual maturation.

34 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, 52–75.

35 See: Hans Keilson, "In der Fremde zuhause," *Werke in Zwei Bänden. Gedichte und Essays*, ed. Heinrich Detering and Gerhard Kurz (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Verlag, 2005), 218–20. According to Wolf, Dutch journalist Elma Verhey's book *Om het joodse kind* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1991), with its documentation of cases of inappropriate state intervention into processes of Jewish family reunification in the Netherlands, helped to bring this lesser-known postwar history into public discourse: "Verhey's book suddenly transformed a personal, psychological wound into a social and collective experience, forty-five years after the fact." Wolf, *Beyond Anne Frank*, 19–20. For more on this controversy framed as part of the

It is also important to emphasize, as Keilson highlighted in detail in some of his individual case studies, that many of the children were forced to move with high frequency from one hiding place or family to the next during their time in hiding. In practice, this may have meant a series of many other “sequences” with the potential for exposure to hostile elements that are then subsumed under one identified in Keilson’s study. Although we can only hazard estimations, in known cases, the number of different families that a single child stayed with fluctuated between five to fifty different locations, especially if conflict arose within a household or if the child or family in question was put in danger because of their sheltering the Jewish child.³⁶ In fact, Keilson noted that it was difficult to ascertain how often children had to move from one hiding place to the next because keeping records of this nature during the German occupation would have been dangerous.

Importantly, Keilson found that the final stage of the three traumatic sequences—that which occurred once the war was over—was often the most difficult, for this was when child survivors both recognized the end of a life-threatening period of persecution and, at the same time, were confronted unambiguously with the immense and irrevocable losses suffered by their original family. Put another way, child survivors then became subject to the temporality of mourning and had to reckon with the vicissitudes of grief. And it is this vein, I think, that we can also understand Keilson’s declaration in a later interview: “Mourning is actually the substrate of my sense of life.”³⁷

history of the postwar rise of antisemitism in the Netherlands and documented through archival research and eyewitness accounts, see Dienne Hondius, *Return: Holocaust Survivors and Dutch Anti-Semitism*, trans. David Colmer (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

36 Keilson, “Sie werden von niemandem erwartet,” 376–77.

37 “Die Trauer ist eigentlich die Grundlage meines Lebensgefühls.” This is the original German sentence from Keilson, *Da steht mein Haus*, 103.

*"My War Began after the War": Jewish Orphan Survivors in the Netherlands*³⁸

Keilson offers a vivid simile for obstacles to the "talking cure" of analysis, writing:

The many unknown factors which surrounded the files like a massive wall of silence were an inherent part of the persecution situation experienced by the children in hiding. It was, after all, this silence to which they owed their lives.³⁹

This image of an inimitable, defensive enclosure of silence—an obstacle generating a wide gap in the archive of incomplete or cryptic case files latent with meaning—gestures toward paradoxes at the heart of working with child survivors through the method of Freud's so-called "talking cure." This dialectic between language and silence is constitutive of the precarious negotiations of the tension between self-exposure and self-protection that had been practiced by the children as an instilled or unconscious survival tactic during their years of living under conditions of persecution, when hiding became the norm. Defense mechanisms such as silence or the obfuscation of identity that had been key to the child's survival clashed with the postwar desiderata of therapists and other child service workers. As Keilson phrases it: "It was, after all, this silence to which they owed their lives." Ironically and painfully, precisely because of their having lived under perverse circumstances, this protective silence may have represented one of the few ways in which child survivors, wittingly or otherwise, expressed a form of agency: that of sheer survival,

38 This phrase is taken from interviews by Jewish survivors who were still considered to be children (i. e., in most cases, less than sixteen years old) in relation to the postwar period. It refers to the mounting difficulties faced by child survivors after the Second World War was over and they had survived years of antisemitic persecution in hiding or in concentration and death camps. Thus, the concluding chapter of the foundational work on the history of Jewish children in Nazi Europe by Holocaust historian Debórah Dwork is titled "My War Began in 1945," which is in reference to the subsequent long-lasting after-effects of persecution for child survivors after the end of the Nazi regime and the Second World War, which most often continued to color—if not at times completely disrupt—their adult lives. This phrase is telling inasmuch as it is at stark odds with accounts that read survival in a redemptive manner as a form of victory over persecution, where in many cases this is clearly not the "happy ending" for a survivor. Indeed, in some cases there may have been no end in sight.

39 Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, 18.

which would culminate—in many cases after a time lag of an indefinite period—in recurring symptoms of trauma, specifically in the form of psychosomatic complaints. Children's recourse to silence and their own particular, even strange use of language—especially among those who had lived in conditions of extreme deprivation in concentration camps or alone in hiding—were, perversely, both sign and symptom of their extremely limited agency in a reduced and repudiating world.⁴⁰

Acting as an existential prop in the immersive practice of grappling with the past, Keilson's work with child survivors provided him with traces of a broken continuity⁴¹ between his early fascination with Freudian psychoanalysis in Weimar Germany⁴² and his much later psycho-

40 For more recent contributions that likewise draw attention to psychosomatic and other symptoms that continued to reverberate among former European child survivors of the Holocaust in the early postwar years, see in particular the contribution by Irit Felsen and Danny Brom, "Adaptation to Trauma, Silence, and Social Support," in the edited collection *Starting Anew*, 315–50. Also, of particular interest here is the inclusion in the Appendix of *Starting Anew* of the 1946 report by psychologist Dr. Paul Friedman, "Report on a Survey of the Psychological Conditions of the Surviving Children in Europe," 351–88. This report was commissioned by the Health Committee of the Joint Distribution Committee and offers a survey of the psychological conditions of Jewish displaced persons in four European countries (France, Switzerland, Poland, and Germany), with a focus on children, on the basis of which it provides recommendations. For more contributions on this topic, see this journal issue of which my essay forms part. This essay developed from a paper delivered at the international conference *Childhood at War and Genocide: Children's Experiences of Conflict in the 20th Century—Agency, Survival, Memory and Representation*, which took place at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History in Munich on October 17–19, 2022.

41 The phrase "traces of broken continuity" is formulated to stand in contradistinction to Keilson's reference in German to calendrical time as one of "eine einzige, ungebrochene Kontinuität." Keilson, *Da steht mein Haus*, 9.

42 Keilson often retold the tale of how as a young man he bought Sigmund Freud's *Vorlesungen* with prize money he won in an essay contest to which he submitted an essay on Hermann Hesse's *Demian*. The slender leather volume by Freud somehow survived the discontinuities of exile. For example: Keilson, "All das Schöne, nicht den Abgrund. Aus einem Gespräch mit der niederländischen Zeitung *De Pers* (2010, gekürzt)," in Keilson, *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel*, 151. See also: "Es war dieselbe Zeit, in der ich mit meinem Beitrag zu einem Schülerwettbewerb des Börsenvereins des deutschen Buchhandels, über Hermann Hesses *Demian*, den dritten Preis errang. Von dem so gewonnenen Betrag von dreißig Mark kaufte ich mich drei Bücher: ein Novellenbuch von Stephan Zweig, dann von Karl Plättner, einem Kumpan von Max Hoelz, den Band *Eros im Zuchtbaus* (um meine Neugierde zu befriedigen) und schließlich die in Leder gebundenen, im Taschenbuchformat und Dünndruck erschienenen Vorlesungen von Sigmund Freud, eines der Bücher, die mein Exil überdauert und mein Leben bestimmt haben." Keilson, *Da steht mein Haus*, 66.

analytical practice in the Netherlands.⁴³ Although he was in his mid-thirties at the end of the war, Keilson shared key experiences with the younger children and adolescents with whom he worked. As a German Jew, he, too, had experienced antisemitic persecution, survived for the most part in hiding, and he had lost both his parents and his home(land). Writing of the Jewish children's home where he had worked after the Second World War, he recalled:

I saw the children who had lost everything as they emerged from their hiding places and returned from the camps, their parents, siblings, relatives—often sixty to seventy people—lost. I saw the destruction in us and in them during the day, when they were at play, and I heard them in their beds in the evenings crying, crying unrestrainedly. No one needed to feel ashamed, each child knew why another was crying, and we too, the adults in the home, knew it. We were all bound together by the same fate.⁴⁴

Empathetically, through the prism of his own loss, Keilson recognized a common fate that bound him to the suffering of Dutch Jewish child survivors. At the same time, his work also demonstrated the understanding that his and their "fate" diverged significantly in cultural, experiential, and especially in developmental terms. It would take some time for therapists to acknowledge the role of countertransference in child therapy which, in Keilson's view, was unavoidable.⁴⁵ He unambiguously addressed the central role of transference (and the vital awareness of one's own

43 Keilson, "In der Fremde zuhause," 220.

44 German in the original: "Ich sah die Kinder, die alles verloren hatten, als sie aus den Verstecken (sic) und aus den Lagern zurückkamen, verloren ihre Eltern, Geschwister, Angehörige, oft bis zu sechzig, siebzig Personen. Ich sah die Zerstörung in uns und in ihnen, tagsüber, wenn sie spielten, und ich hörte sie abends in ihren Betten weinen, ohne Zurückhaltung weinen. Niemand brauchte sich zu schämen, ein jedes Kind wußte, warum ein anderes weinte, und auch wir, Erwachsene im Heim, wußten es. Das Los verband uns alle." Keilson, "In der Fremde zuhause," 218.

45 Countertransference refers to the unconscious feelings of the analyst vis-à-vis their analysand/patient, especially as pertains to the analysand's own transference of feelings from another relationship onto the relationship with the analyst. It is important to stress here that although Freud coined the term, its full implications were explored by analysts after Freud, particularly those working within the field of object relations therapy, which includes many psychiatrists working with children, such as Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott, and arguably also Keilson himself. See J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 92–93.

countertransference) in the therapeutic setting in a paper presented in 1986, at the first meeting of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) held in Germany since the end of the Second World War:

As an analyst, whoever cannot endure functioning in the role of the SS officer who had murdered the parents of the patient must change their profession. [...] Years ago, when I was starting out in my therapeutic work, I myself was unable to bear it in the case of a twelve-year old boy, and only experienced under a caring psychoanalytical supervision [...] just how wounded I still was.⁴⁶

Keilson underscores the centrality of a neutral space and an accommodating attitude in the therapeutic session in which the child is free to communicate their extreme experiences. At the same time, the therapist must be able to tolerate situations that transfer the impact of the child's destructive and toxic experiences into the holding environment of the therapeutic session in the hope that selfhood or a sense of identity will be restored to the child.

When he began counseling child survivors after the Second World War, Keilson faced a steep learning curve. It took many years for him to attain a perspective from which to intuit the important affective dimensions in the sometimes-dense silences in therapeutic sessions with Jewish child survivors. He learned to listen attentively for the valences of silence so as to decipher their affectively fraught impact on language under the Nazi dictatorship. Initial failed therapeutic sessions with child survivors who manifested symptoms of trauma far more extreme than analysts had yet encountered in psychological treatment in any context helped Keilson recognize the wall of silence surrounding these children as an indication of the radical alterity that had defined their everyday experiences in camps or hiding.⁴⁷

46 Original in German: "Wer es als Analytiker nicht aushält, in der Übertragung als SS-Mann zu fungieren, der die Eltern des Patienten ermordet hat, muss seinen Beruf wechseln. [...] Ich selbst hatte es vor Jahren, zu Beginn meiner therapeutischen Arbeit, mit einem zwölfjährigen Jungen nicht ausgehalten und erlebte erst in einer liebevollen psychoanalytischen Supervision, [...] wie verwundet ich noch immer war.« Hans Keilson, "Ein Anfang, kein Versöhnungsfest: Rückblick auf einen Kongress," *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel*, 59. This essay was written at the request of the editors of the journal *Psyche* and appeared under the title: "Der Hamburgerkongress war ein Anfang, kein Versöhnungsfest," *Psyche* 10 (October 1986): 887–81.

47 Keilson states: "In der kinderpsychiatrischen Praxis hat man Bilder in diesem Ausmaß und in dieser Intensität bisher noch nicht erlebt. Das Neuartige dieser Bilder

Consider his first consultation with a child survivor of a concentration camp. "Esra," the pseudonym used in Keilson's case study of a twelve-year-old boy, was the sole survivor of his large Orthodox Jewish family. What Keilson later judged as his own initial unhelpful—even failed—postwar sessions with Esra, whom he compared to "a sleepwalker coming from another world," later became key to Keilson's understanding of experiences of sequential traumatization.⁴⁸ In his book, he made clear the ways in which extreme traumatic experience, particularly in earlier developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, destroys socio-linguistic norms and instills states of alterity in survivors.⁴⁹ Several decades later, when Keilson returned to the original case file he had compiled from his sessions with Esra between November 1 and 13, 1945, Keilson's observations focused on how Esra's experiences had disrupted the indexical or referential function of language itself. That is, language conventions taken for granted as the foundation for a semantic community before the events of the Second World War had been radically reconfigured through the quotidian conventions of the camps, distorted by the hostile environment under the imperative of survival in the face of persecution and extermination. In his case study, Keilson specifically demonstrates how the conventional understanding of the word "bed" as a designation for the furniture on which one sleeps held different connotations depending on the particular lived context of the utterance. For Esra, who survived internment in Bergen-Belsen, "bed" instead meant something beneath which to hide while sleeping.⁵⁰ In other words, Keilson could not presume that Esra and the Dutch society he re-entered after the war shared even the most basic lexicon, let alone words that conveyed the same affective, symbolic, or semantic charge.

In 1984, Keilson returned once more to Esra's case in a German-language essay written for a psychoanalytic readership entitled "Where Language Falts" / "Where Language Falls Short."⁵¹ The failure of language expressed in the essay's title signals neither a reified realm of

war, dass sie das menschliche Vorstellungsvermögen übertrafen." Keilson, "Die fragmentierte Psychotherapie eines aus Bergen-Belsen zurückgekehrten Jungen," *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel*, 83.

48 In the German original: "ein Schlafwanderer, der aus einer anderen Welt kommt." Hans Keilson, "Die fragmentierte Therapie," 80.

49 This case study forms the basis for Keilson's essay, "Wohin die Sprache nicht reicht," first published in *Psyche* (1984). Keilson, "Wohin die Sprache nicht reicht," in *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel*, 145.

50 Keilson, "Wohin die Sprache nicht reicht," 37–38.

51 In German: "Wohin die Sprache nicht reicht."

“unspeakability” or that which defies representation—a secular theological “beyond” of language—nor, alternatively, a realm in excess of understanding through symbolization, as is characteristic of the “Real” of Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁵² Rather, it points to how massive traumatic experiences fundamentally impacted the referential function of language for many child survivors, alienating them from their former sociolinguistic communities on the most fundamental level.

Thus, the process of mapping experience through language to create shared meaning first needed to be reestablished, and this took many years, including long periods with no contact between Keilson and Esra. It was only in a session with Keilson long after 1945 that Esra was able to articulate his disturbing experiences in Bergen-Belsen, including having woken up next to his mother’s corpse in the camp barracks one morning. Today we are much more familiar with the so-called “concentrationary universe” of the camps, with this quality of otherworldliness ascribed to what passed for “everyday life” in the extraordinary world of the camps, but in the decades immediately after the war’s end, this aspect of survivors’ behavior and the context in which it took place was not widely understood, and the extreme experiences testified to by camp inmates were initially often met with confusion or disbelief.⁵³

Like other postwar professional care workers specializing in psychiatry or psychoanalysis, Keilson’s commitment to his work was complexly intertwined with his personal experience, particularly his ongoing dedication to commemorating the irreparable loss of his own murdered parents. In fact, the dedication to *Sequential Traumatization* reads as follows: “en lieu of the Kaddish.” The Kaddish is a ritual Jewish prayer of mourning, understood here as a commemoration of his parents by way of the labor through which he sought to understand the aftereffects of the destruction that had claimed their lives: it was only after the war

52 Keilson, “Die fragmentierte Psychotherapie,” 94.

53 Two well-known examples are David Rousset’s term “the concentrationary universe” (“l’univers concentrationnaire”), which is also the title of his account of the Neuen-gamme and Buchenwald concentration camps: David Rousset, *L’univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Éditions du Pavois, 1946). Yehiel De-Nur was known internationally for his Stalag novels, which he wrote under the penname Ka-Tsetnik, but in particular because of his dramatic testimony at the Eichmann trial (Jerusalem, 1961), during which he collapsed (Session No. 68). He opened his testimony as follows: “this is the history of planet Auschwitz. [...] the time there is not a concept as it is here, on our planet.” Citations are transcribed from the original English subtitles accompanying the Hebrew testimony from a live recording of the trial. Session No. 68, 69, accessed March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3-tXyYhd5U>.

when Keilson learned that six months after his parents' initial internment in the Dutch transit camp Westerbork in April 1943 they had been deported to Birkenau, where they were murdered on arrival. In this sense, too, like the children with whom he worked, Keilson's understanding of his past losses also occupied a zone of belatedness and uncertainty.⁵⁴

In his final autobiographical account published just before his death in 2011, Keilson introduces the metaphor of the calendar, with its reassuring cyclical rhythms and predictability, over and against which we might grasp the untimely temporality particular to persecution:

Whoever has lived and survived on the run in the middle of Europe as a Jew and a persecuted person is offered, in retrospect, only one single, unbroken continuity as the background of his existence: that of the calendar with its monotonous, recurring numbers of weeks and months, weekdays, Sundays, and holidays, printed in red ink and valid all over the world.⁵⁵

Working with trauma means encountering a concept of temporality that does not run according to calendrical time or the twenty-four-hour schedule by which we calculate our days. Psychoanalytical work on trauma explicitly thematizes the temporal registers of belatedness and retroactivity and asks in which ways past suffering interrupts the surviving subject's present. Psychoanalysis itself is a practice of maintaining affective proximity to a difficult past, a form of engaging with lived dimensions of intimate histories of German persecution. In his desire to comprehend the suffering of Jewish Dutch orphans, Keilson also gained an intimate understanding of the history of destruction experienced by the Jewish community of the Netherlands, his chosen home.

54 This is emphasized in the brief preface to his German publication, where Keilson writes: "Despite the purely clinical design of the study, my double training as a physician and teacher in Germany and my sphere of work there until 1936, as well as my years of experience as adviser to the Jewish war orphans organization in the Netherlands after the end of the Second World War, meant that the concept of a follow-up study of children took on a personal significance which went beyond the thematic unity of psychiatric, social-psychological and pedagogical problems." Keilson, *Sequential Traumatization*, XIII.

55 German original: "Wer als Jude und Verfolgter auf der Flucht mitten in Europa gelebt und überlebt hat, dem bietet sich im Rückblick, als Hintergrund seines Daseins nur eine einzige, ungebrochene Kontinuität an: die des Kalenders mit seinen eintönig wiederkehrenden Zahlen der Wochen und Monate, Wochen- und Sonn- und Festtagen, mit roter Farbe gedruckt und gültig in aller Welt." Keilson, *Da steht mein Haus*, 9.

Conclusion: Outspoken and Unspoken Destinies of Trauma

A remarkably versatile German-language writer, Keilson's work, including his poems, fiction, and essays, gave form to myriad experiences, exhibiting a spectrum of emotions and performing a memorial function of sorts. His ambivalent relationship to his mother tongue, German, is demonstrated by his choice to write his major scientific work on trauma in German even though almost all of his therapy sessions and interviews with child survivors were conducted in Dutch. Referring to this, Keilson states: "in addition to the psychological results, [I wanted to] describe the historical facts that had led to their being orphaned in the language of the perpetrators, which also was and still remains mine."⁵⁶ In other words, we can be grateful for Keilson's work, which represents an ongoing struggle to articulate through the German language the ways in which his own personal losses were compounded. Indeed, glimpses of experiences offered through his extraordinary acts of linguistic and disciplinary boundary-crossing in his poetry, novels, and descriptive-analytical renderings of his case study subjects make legible the complex human costs of violence and its constitutive ambivalence that continue to resonate with us today.⁵⁷

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Freudian-based psychoanalytic concept of "trauma" has changed, with its accent falling variously on an individual or collective's psycho-organic state of being, which acts as an indicator of the disruptive violence of extreme socio-historical events. In an essay charting the development of the term "trauma" in psychiatric discourse, Keilson traced the historical arc from Charcot's and

56 Keilson writes: "[ich wollte] außer den psychologischen Ergebnissen die historischen Tatsachen, die zu der Verwaisung geführt hatten, in der Sprache der Täter beschreiben, die auch meine war und immer noch ist. In dieser gebrochenen Formulierung liegt auch mein Verhältnis zur deutschen Sprache, ein vielleicht gebrochenes Verhältnis, das gewiß nicht nur als ein Verlust betrachtet werden muß." Keilson, "Wohin die Sprache nicht reicht," 246.

57 For an analysis of this kind of illuminating boundary-crossing between psychoanalysis and literature and the insights into structures of ambivalence this affords us, see my essay: "'Death of the Adversary': Enduring Ambivalence in Hans Keilson's Postwar Psychoanalytic Literature," in *Die vergangene Zeit bleibt die erlittene Zeit. Untersuchungen zum Werk von Hans Keilson*, ed. Simone Schröder, Ulrike Weymann, and Andreas Martin Widmann (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 91–103. On the topic of Hans Keilson's use of silence in different forms of writing, see: Jens Birkmeyer, "Die vielen Stimmen im Schweigen. Diagnosen der Ungesagten in Hans Keilsons Essays," and Simone Schröder, "Die verschachtelte Wahrheit: Erzählstrukturen in Hans Keilsons psychoanalytischer Essayistik," in *Die vergangene Zeit bleibt die erlittene Zeit*, 189–202 and 203–20, respectively.

Freud's early work in psychoanalysis on traumatic neuroses to the term's later emphasis on socio-historical factors (what Keilson refers to as "man-made disasters")⁵⁸—from "shell shock" exhibited by soldiers returning from trench warfare during the First World War, to survivors of genocidal warfare.⁵⁹ Addressing the lingering history of suspicion of faking one's symptoms ("malingering") that has accompanied the term trauma from its inception, he discussed how this topic gained urgency in the postwar period, when forensic-psychological claims were being filed by (predominantly Jewish) survivors.⁶⁰ Although the postwar West German reparations law for survivors of the Holocaust finally was passed in 1956 after lengthy negotiations between the West German government, Jewish organizations, and the Western Allies, the legal recognition of the diagnosis of trauma as a legitimate medical basis for reparation claims was only gradually accepted.⁶¹ Still operating in the long shadow of antisemitism,

58 Hans Keilson, "Die Entwicklung des Traumakonzeppts in der Psychiatrie: Psychiatrie und manmade disaster," *Mittelweg 36: Zeitschrift des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung* 6, no. 2 (April/May 1997): 73–82, here 75–76. See: Werner Bohleber, "Hans Keilson und die Entwicklung der Traumatheorie in der Psychoanalyse," in *Folgen*, 43–58. Bohleber clearly identifies the historical discourses on trauma from Jean-Martin Charcot's work in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century France onward that Keilson draws on and in which he participates.

59 For a selection of historical essays on the cultural reassignment of female-associated symptoms of hysteria to account for male trauma after World War One, see: Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner, eds., *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

60 For a brief summary of the history of struggle in the negotiation of a legitimate definition of trauma, particularly in psychiatry, that takes both the debates in the postwar West German context of reparations and the discussion of the US-American Vietnam veterans into account, see: Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 92–103.

61 Herzog, "Post-Holocaust Antisemitism and the Ascent of PTSD," in *Cold War Freud*, 89–122. Herzog's chapter captures the history of the battle on the part of sympathetic psychiatric medical experts for recognition from German institutions responsible for war reparations of the ways in which traumatic experiences could cause victims permanent, incapacitating damage. In the postwar period, the significance and legitimacy of "trauma" as a psychiatric diagnosis with impact on reparations cases was far from uncontested in legal, scientific, and medical terms, a matter that had, at times, devastating ramifications for those victims seeking reparations for injuries and losses suffered due to Nazi racial policies and their genocidal consequences (what is referred to today as the "Holocaust"). On this history, see particularly: Robert Krell and Marc I. Sherman, *Medical and Psychological Effects of Concentration Camps on Holocaust Survivors* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1997); Christian Pross, *Paying for the Past: The Struggle over Reparations for Surviving Victims of the Nazi Terror* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), and Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), among others.

German courts originally contested the findings of research on trauma by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in Norway, the Netherlands, France, and Poland.⁶² Keilson's research on the long-term damage inflicted on children through the traumatic experience of manmade disasters contributed to the evolving scientific literature that argued for the long-term effects of trauma for adults and children alike in a range of pedagogical and humanitarian contexts.⁶³ His articulation of trauma as a psychological process (rather than a singular event) with deep causal links to external social factors was ahead of its time.

Trauma's most recent manifestation takes the form of the psychiatric diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a term officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 in the field's standardized reference work *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III*.⁶⁴ The diagnosis of PTSD increased in part as a response to antiwar activists seeking a way to explain disturbed or uncharacteristic behavior such as blocked affect and intrusive memories of violence as experienced by many US veterans initially after the war in Vietnam, and then later in the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶⁵ That PTSD emerged as a diagnosable condition specifically from the fraught

62 For the timeline of changes in legal and broader societal attitudes toward survivors and the need for reparations from the late-1950s onward, see: Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 103–13. Munich-based psychiatrist Kurt Kolle, Mainz-based psychiatrist Ernst Kluge, New York-based William G. Niederland, and émigré psychoanalyst Kurt Eissler (who later became the Director of the Freud Archives) were among those who contributed significantly to shifting the climate of opinion in medicine, thereby giving ballast to the legitimacy of “trauma” as a diagnostic category for psychiatric assessment in adjudicating reparations cases for victims of the Holocaust. Herzog also argues for the discursive influence of the “Americanization” of the debate on the Holocaust under the influence of William Niederland and Henry Krystal, among others, in the US-American context from the late 1960s onward. Here, 109–10.

63 Keilson was, of course, not alone in his attempts to understand the effects of wartime trauma on children. For example, Anna Freud, living in England after having fled Austria, founded the Hampstead War Nurseries for foster children with single parents in 1940. See: Anna Freud and Sophie Dann, “Experiment in Group Up-bringing,” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 6 (1951): 127–68. For details about the Hampstead War Nurseries, see: Clifford, *Survivors*, 154–64; and Shapira, *War Inside*, 66–86.

64 The American Psychiatric Association, “DSM History,” accessed on October 15, 2023, https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm/about-dsm/history-of-the-dsm#section_0.

65 The most recent version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), in which PTSD remains a diagnostic category, was published in 2013.

social context of returning Vietnam veterans who had been affected negatively by their participation in the war in Southeast Asia and required reintegration into society illustrates the socio-historical and cultural specificity of the diagnosis.

In addition to Keilson's nuanced temporal concept of sequential traumatization as processual rather than originating in a single incidence of unexpected violence, his emphasis on understanding trauma's embeddedness in a specific socio-cultural environment is pertinent for understanding trauma in a transnational framework. For example, the "Americanization" of trauma under the apparently universal rubric of the term "PTSD" erases the cultural specificity of acts of violence (and, relatedly, important political and historical context).⁶⁶ Far from representing a universal measure for trauma, the diagnosis of PTSD is the product of a particular political and historical-sociological moment and not a medical or scientific diagnosis divorced from its cultural context of specific wars abroad in which the United States was and is an active participant.⁶⁷ When this cultural specificity goes unacknowledged, it blunts the use of trauma as a diagnostic tool in other geo-political and cultural settings because, perhaps contrary to appearances, violence's cultural ubiquity cannot be measured in universal terms but only in relation to its distinct socio-historical setting. This becomes particularly urgent today as we continue to contend with the afterlife of excessive and everyday acts of violence that characterized European colonial rule and the history of slavery in the US-American context.⁶⁸

In the wake of its publication, Keilson's study on sequential traumatization was not frequently referenced outside of European psychoanalytic circles nor was it readily visible or easily locatable on the map of contemporary mainstream or even specialized psychological discourses on trauma.⁶⁹

66 For an account of the "Americanization" of trauma in psychiatry, see: Herzog, *Cold War Freud*.

67 For a convincing critique of the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder, the collusion of science, medicine and politics in its diagnostic history, and the US-militarism it supports: Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma: Imaginaries of War and Citizenship in Post-9/11 America* (London: Verso, 2022).

68 For a critique of psychiatric scientific "objectivity" in the context of the history of US-American slavery, see: Deidre Cooper Owens, "Examining Antebellum Medicine Through Haptic Studies," in *Medicine and Healing in the Age of Slavery*, ed. Sean Morey Smith and Christopher D. E. Willoughby (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021). Many thanks to Wesley Hogan for sharing this reference with me.

69 For a recent reception history and assessment of the ongoing value of Keilson's work on trauma in the present, see Barbara Stambolis, "Öffentliche und wissen-

David Becker, a German psychoanalyst and long-time resident of Chile (1982–1999), has been instrumental in drawing attention to the ongoing relevance of Keilson's work.⁷⁰ A nuanced and perceptive reader of Keilson's research, Becker argues for the importance of his emphasis on traumatic sequences' unpredictable temporality, as well as the significance of understanding the social context giving rise to traumatic experiences as the precondition for undertaking any kind of therapeutic intervention.⁷¹

Underscoring the historical significance of the concept of "trauma" in an increasingly transnational context, Becker's elaboration of the significance and relevance of "sequential traumatization" has pushed Keilson's work beyond its original European framework to address transnational contexts in productive ways. While Keilson's particular socio-political context is that of the surviving Jewish minority in the Netherlands after the Second World War, Becker rightly points out that Keilson's model is capacious enough to help us understand histories of extreme violence or genocide in quite different contexts ranging from Chile to Bosnia,

schaftliche Wahrnehmung von Hans Keilsons Arbeit mit traumatisierten jüdischen Kriegswaisen," in *Folgen*, 23–41. See also: Bohleber in *Folgen*, 43–58. For his work's reception history: *Geschichte als Trauma. Festschrift für Hans Keilson zu seinem 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Dierk Juelich (Frankfurt a. M.: Nexus Verlag, 1991); "*Gedenk und vergiß—Im Abschaum der Geschichte*". *Trauma und Erinnern. Hans Keilson zu Ehren*, ed. Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber and Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarsik (Tübingen: edition diskord, 2001). References to Keilson's work on trauma can be found in more recent publications on sequential traumatization in transnational contexts. See: Dieter Nelles, Armin Nolzen, and Heinz Sunker, "Sequential Traumatization: The Living Conditions of Children of those Politically Persecuted under the Nazi Regime," *Taboo* (Fall–Winter 2005): 59–70; and David Becker and Margarita Díaz, "The Social Process and the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma in Chile," in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Yael Danieli (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 435–45. See also: Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 114–22; and Kausch and Happe, "Untertauchzeit."

70 David Becker, "Zwischen Trauma und Traumadiskurs. Nachdenken über psychosoziale Arbeit im Gazastreifen," *Werkblatt* 27, no. 65 (2010): 50–86; see also: D. Becker, *Die Erfindung des Traumas. Verflochtene Geschichten* (Freiburg: Edition Freitag, 2006).

71 Here (and elsewhere), he engages with the work on trauma by psychiatrist and anthropologist Richard Rechtman and anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin. For a sophisticated sociological-philosophical genealogy of the term "trauma" in the context of psychiatric/psychological epistemologies of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as an analysis of the changing moral attitudes toward suffering and the attendant moral politics, see: Fassin and Rechtman, *Empire of Trauma: The Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Rwanda, and Gaza.⁷² Becker's critique of a universalizing humanitarian "one-size-fits-all" use of trauma as a diagnostic tool regardless of the historical and cultural context in which the sequence of events takes place finds resonance in psychiatrist Derek Summerfield's view that the diagnosis of "trauma" in many humanitarian settings can be patronizing, culturally reductive, and misguided, not to mention inadequate to the task of socio-economic repair, which should, in reality, act as the precondition for therapeutic treatment.⁷³ After extensive work in the Gaza region, Summerfield argued forcefully for decolonial practices when treating mental illness in humanitarian situations, including a de-universalizing approach to the diagnosis and treatment of suffering that takes into account the context in which the traumatic events took place, and one that is invested in long-term, local solutions rather than short-term, imported interventions.⁷⁴

Significantly, Summerfield's contentions and Becker's own work in non-European settings are buttressed by two central aspects of Keilson's project on "sequential traumatization": his focus on the socio-cultural specificity of the event, and the importance of the longer historical *durée* beyond (and before) the period of enacted violence. In other words, Keilson argues for the contextualized situatedness of therapeutic intervention and an understanding of trauma not only as a punctual event but quite possibly as a multi-leveled and differentiated set of sequences of individual and broader societal suffering. Trauma in Keilson's work is understood in both collective and cultural (as opposed to solely individual and organic) terms. In other words, it matters greatly who produces knowledge, in what context, and to what end, and which other perspectives are elided, obscured, or erased in the process, as has been shown in critiques of the production of colonial and racialized medical epistemes.⁷⁵ The

72 See: Becker, "Zwischen Trauma und Traumadiskurs"; and Becker and Diaz, "The Social Process."

73 Derek Summerfield offers this rather scathing critique in damning terms (ostensibly to provoke discussion) in "The Invention of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and the Social Usefulness of a Psychiatric Category," *BMJ* 322 (January 13, 2001): 95–98; Summerfield, "A Critique of Seven Assumptions Behind Psychological Trauma Programmes in War-Affected Areas," *Social Science and Medicine* 48 (1999): 1449–62.

74 See also: Kate Andersen and Mohammad Salaymeh, "Traumatic Construction and Traumatic Events," *Keppel Health Review* (Autumn 2021), <https://www.keppelhealthreview.com/autumn2021/decolonisingtrauma-part1>.

75 Recent scholarship historicizes the colonial and neo-colonial production of medical knowledge and critiques claims of epistemic neutrality and scientific objectivity. For an analysis of the imbrication of fascism and psychiatry in postwar France and

distressing truth is that Keilson's approach to trauma as a chronicling of violent events affecting children and adults alike remains a project that is far from complete. In Keilson's work, the careful attention paid to the imbrication of historical experience and individual biographies makes it possible to cautiously imagine the future, better understand the past, and inhabit the present, for better or for worse.

its colonies, see: Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021); for a global contextualization of psychoanalytic concepts in the postwar, Cold War era, see: Herzog, *Cold War Freud*; for a critique of the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder, the collusion of science, medicine, and politics in its diagnostic history, and the US-militarism it supports: Abu-El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*.

SOURCE COMMENTARIES

A Drawing Book, Its Materiality, and Afterlife: Approaching Children's Lives in Hamburg through Children's Drawings from the Talmud Torah School

In 1934, seven-year-old Boas Popper mapped the area around his parents' house on HansasträÙe in Hamburg in his school drawing book (Figure 1). As noted in faint writing on the cover, Popper was attending class 2b of the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* (Talmud Torah School) at Grindelhof 30 at the time. The school was located about one kilometer from his home in a building right next to the magnificent Bornplatz Synagogue. The building was specially built for the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* by the Jewish community of Hamburg and inaugurated in 1911. On another page of the drawing book (Figure 2), Popper draws the school building with the heading "Hamburg." It can be identified by its characteristic entrance with three doors and the clock on the roof above the entrance. A cactus is shown in one of the windows, with the class number inscribed above it. Popper occasionally confuses the letters "d" and "b", which is typical of novice writers. It is therefore possible that he is marking his own class 2b here.

Popper's drawing book is at the center of this article; in its eighteen pages, we find a material document of Jewish childhood in Hamburg in approximately 1934, authored by a child. The drawing book represents an artifact of the antisemitic exclusion and annihilation of Jewish life in Hamburg during National Socialism. Popper and his family left Germany for Palestine in 1936 due to the increasing threat to the family's lives. Two more drawing books from second grade, a copybook from first grade, and a geography notebook from third grade authored by Popper have been preserved.¹ They were all created between 1933 and 1935 at the

1 Archive of the *Israelitische Töchter Schule* Memorial and Educational Center Hamburg: o8:H22 (Zeichenheft von Boas P[...], Klasse 2b); o8:H12 (Zeichenheft von

Talmud-Tora-Schule in Hamburg. Today, they are part of the collection of the *Israelitische Töchtereschule* (Jewish Girls' School) Memorial and Educational Center. This includes further writing and drawing books, as well as letters from former pupils of Jewish schools in Hamburg and photographs of school life, mainly from the 1930s and 1940s.²

In this contribution, I argue that the drawing books from the Hamburg Jewish schools are a valuable and neglected archival collection which hold enormous potential for researching Jewish children's lives in the 1930s in Hamburg and beyond. As mentioned, to illustrate my argument, I present a source commentary of Popper's drawing book from 1934. Particularly, I focus on methodological challenges associated with children's drawings as a historical source. I proceed in three steps. First, I consider children's drawings as sources within the history of children and childhood and its specifics. I then outline my methodological approach to the drawings of Popper in the context of analytical approaches to material culture. In the third part of the contribution, I present my analysis, unfolding multiple layers of meaning mediated by the artifact. I conclude with some thoughts on the value of children's drawings as a historical source.³

Approaching Children's Lives within the History of Children and Childhood with Drawings

Children's drawings as sources for historical research have received relatively little attention as well as criticism, but they have also been associated with the hope of including marginalized voices in the historiography of children and childhood. Although numerous publications have appeared since the 1970s and the history of children and childhood has become a "vibrant, dynamic field," it still needs to assert its importance

Boas P[...], Klasse 2b); o8:H49 (Heimatkunde Boas P[...] 3b), o8:H50 (Zeichenheft für BOAS P[...] 1.); o8:H51 (Zeichenheft für BOAS P[...]TALMOTOR KISSE 2d), page numbers of the scan are given in brackets after the reference.

- 2 Archive of the *Israelitische Töchtereschule* Memorial and Educational Center Hamburg, Dokumentensammlung, o8, accessed on April 15, 2023. See also: <https://jewish-history-online.net/exhibition/childrens-worlds#home>, accessed September 14, 2023.
- 3 I wish to thank Dr. Anna von Villiez, head of the *Israelitische Töchtereschule* Memorial and Educational Center Hamburg, for her support. Many thanks also to Tova Harety for helping me with the Hebrew writing. I would especially like to thank Dr. Edel Sheridan-Quantz for the careful editing and her support in researching the biography.

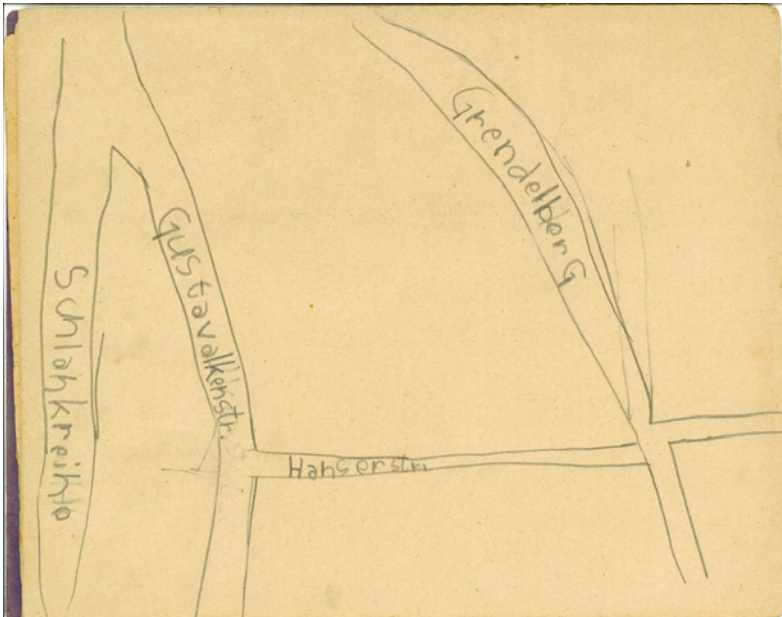


Figure 1 and 2: Source: Archive of the *Israelitische Töcherschule*, 08:H22 (scans 6 and 7).

for general history writing.⁴ The complexity of this debate became evident in an exchange in the *American Historical Review* in 2020 prompted by Sarah Maza. In her article, Maza questioned the possibility of researching children's agency and the entanglement of children's history with broader historical themes.⁵ Among the numerous convincing critical responses was that of Steven Mintz, who, under the title "Children's History Matters," advocated strongly for the possibility of children's history and pointed to a multitude of studies that already discussed Maza's "polemical" considerations in greater detail.⁶ These studies on the history of children and childhood examine the construction of childhood embedded in its specific historical, cultural, and social constellations and thus provide an analytical approach to historical events and the development of society in general.⁷ Several researchers especially emphasize the need to make children visible as social and historical agents in these constellations in order to obtain a multi-perspective picture of the past.⁸ They also call for recognition of the complexity of children's lives, their agency embedded in power relations, and constellations of vulnerability.⁹ This is all the more important when it comes to children's lives under

4 Steven Mintz, "Children's History Matters," *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1286–92, 1286. See for example: Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Knopf, 1962); Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2001); Meike Sophia Baader, Florian Eßer and Wolfgang Schröer (ed.), *Kindheiten in der Moderne. Eine Geschichte der Sorge* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2014); Martina Winkler, *Kindheitsgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2017).

5 See: the articles of Sarah Maza, Steven Mintz, Nara Milanich, Robin P. Chapdelaine, Ishita Pande, Bengt Sandin, in *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1260–322.

6 Mintz, "Children's History Matters," 1291.

7 See: Paula Fass (ed.), *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 9; Meike Sophia Baader, "Kindheit," in *Historische Bildungsforschung. Konzepte – Methoden – Forschungsfelder*, ed. Gerhard Kluchert et al. (Bad Heilbrunn: utb, 2021), 149–60.

8 See: Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*. 2nd edition (Cambridge: Medford, 2018), 1–11; Mona Gleason, "Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education," *History of Education* 45, no. 4 (2016): 446–59.

9 See: Nara Milanich, "Comment on Sarah Maza's 'The Kids Aren't All Right,'" *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1293–95; Meike Sophia Baader, "Vulnerable Kinder in der Moderne in erziehungs- und emotionsgeschichtlicher Perspektive," in *Vulnerable Kinder. Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen*, ed. Sabine Andresen et al. (Wiesbaden: VS, 2015), 79–101; Florian Esser, Meike S. Baader, Tanja Betz and Beatrice Hungerland (ed.), *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

persecution and during war and genocide because these extreme conditions affect sociality and humanity, as well as concepts about normative childhood, protection, and the care of children.¹⁰

Although the source problem can divert from other theoretical issues of the history of children and childhood, the difficulty remains that sources authored by children are limited, rather unconventional, and methods of interpretation are still underdeveloped.¹¹ Scholars already recapture children's lives and perspectives through a variety of materials authored by adults by "reading sources 'against the grain,'" a proven method in feminist analysis.¹² However, I am interested in documents authored by children themselves and their potential for researching historical children's lives. Young, marginalized children left few sources behind due to a lack of time, material, or skill. In situations like forced displacement and war, it is even more difficult for the youngest to create sources and leave them behind because their agency is particularly determined by violence.

One of these key sources authored by children is the drawings. Children's drawings were increasingly produced from 1800 onwards.¹³ In research, they served as "historico-philosophical figure[s]" to form "a uniformly structured universal history" from prehistory to the modern day, or children's drawings were embedded in logics of pedagogical and psychological control of child development.¹⁴ Less recognized so far is the significance of children's drawings as cultural products which shed light on broader

10 See, for example: Wiebke Hiemesch, "Witnessing Children's Lives in Nazi Concentration Camps: Oral Testimonies and Children's Drawings," in *Children and Youth at Risk In Times of Transition*, ed. Baard Herman Borge, Elke Kleinau, and Ingvill Constanze Ødegaard (Berlin and Boston: DeGruyter Oldenbourg, 2024), 67–89; Wiebke Hiemesch, *(Über-)Lebenserinnerungen. Kinder im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2017); Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra (eds.), *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Mischa Honeck and James Marten, *War and Childhood in the Era of the Two World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

11 Sarah Maza, "Getting Personal with Our Sources: A Response," *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1317–22; Nell Musgrove, Carla Pascoe Leahy, and Kristine Moruzi (eds.), *Children's Voices from the Past: New Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

12 Gleason, "Avoiding the Agency Trap," 452.

13 Barbara Wittmann, *Bedeutungsvolle Kritzeleien. Eine Kultur- und Wissensgeschichte der Kinderzeichnung, 1500–1950* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2018).

14 Barbara Wittmann and Christopher Barber, "A Neolithic Childhood: Children's Drawings as Prehistoric Sources," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 63/64 (Spring/Autumn 2013): 125–42, 128 and 141.

questions of society and history.¹⁵ This also includes the fact that there are just a few systematized collections of children's drawings; they are far more frequently preserved unsystematically or even preserved through private initiative.¹⁶ As Boas Popper's drawing book shows us, the fact that children's drawings are rarely found in public archives does not mean that they do not exist—undiscovered in boxes or private collections. This reminds us once again to be aware of hegemonic processes of archiving and normative judgments about what is considered to be a historical source.¹⁷

This brings us to some considerations about the researcher's interpretation. Children's drawings hold a special value for researching children's perspectives because as visual and aesthetic products, they do not rely on verbal expression; thus, they do not presuppose the skill of writing and language.¹⁸ At the same time, as with other visual materials, drawings are elusive in a specific way. Images inspire varying interpretations and feature ambiguity and simultaneity. Moreover, the visual language of children differs from that of fine art, paintings, and photography. Visual Studies and Visual History methods have strengthened the understanding of images as sources and developed methodologies to analyze visual culture in the broadest sense; nonetheless, this has been centered on adults.¹⁹ As a consequence, such research is limited when analyzing children's drawings. Both scholars in the field of visual studies and scholars in the field of contemporary children's drawings emphasize the need to analyze visual sources in their historical and cultural context because of the ambiguity of visual material.²⁰

15 Wittmann and Barber, *Bedeutungsvolle Kritzeleien*, 187.

16 See for an exception: the collection of 70,000 children's and youth's drawings at Stiftung Pestalozzianum (Zurich, Switzerland), accessed on April 12, 2023, <https://sammlungen.pestalozzianum.ch/index.php/informationobject/browse?view=table&sort=lastUpdated&repos=477&onlyMedia=1&topLod=0>. See also: Wittmann, *Bedeutungsvolle Kritzeleien*, 187 FN 1.

17 Rodney G. S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria: The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists* 61 (2006): 215–33; Harry Hendrick, "The Child as Social Actor in Historical Sources: Problems of Identification and Interpretation," in *Research With Children: Perspectives and Practices*, 2nd edition, ed. Pia Christensen and Allison James (New York: Routledge, 2010), 36–61.

18 See, for example: Sara Eldén, "Inviting the Messy: Drawing Methods and 'Children's Voices,'" *Childhood* 20, no. 1 (2012): 66–81.

19 See: Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Gerhard Paul (ed.), *Visual History. Ein Studienbuch* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

20 For approaches on children's drawings in qualitative research, see: Mirja Kekeritz and Melanie Kubandt (ed.), *Kinderzeichnungen in der qualitativen Forschung. Herangehensweisen, Potenziale, Grenzen* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2022).

With regard to the contextualization of children's drawings, I will highlight three key aspects: The *first aspect* is to shed light on the production context and the child as a drawing actor (for example, the stimulus to draw, the material provided, or any interaction while drawing, as well as art education and the social-cultural environment).²¹ The *second aspect* is researchers posing questions about the artist's biography and their own interpretation of their drawings.²² The *third aspect*, as some studies have emphasized, is that the drawings' presentation, reception, and preservation are of significance in their own right. This includes the drawings' involvement "as social objects" in intertextual entanglements, political discourse, and their contribution to the production of meaning.²³

These three aspects are especially relevant to the study of historical drawings because we cannot control or observe the process of historical production. We can no longer ask the children. Often, even the identity of the author and the provenance of the drawings remain unclear. Researchers must therefore deal with gaps in the information available. As Margaret R. Higonnet stresses, "children's visual testimonies have been privileged as authentic and reliable. Icons of Innocence, children have been thought to be truth tellers..."²⁴ But, the reproduction of supposedly "authentic" children's voices is an illusion.²⁵ In conclusion, children's drawings are created and preserved in social and cultural environments, which is why they need contextualization and interpretation within source criticism.²⁶

21 See: Bettina Uhlig, "Nele und das Krokodil. Die hermeneutische Bildanalyse als Methode zur Erforschung kindlichen Zeichens," in *Kinderzeichnungen in der qualitativen Forschung. Herangehensweisen, Potenziale, Grenzen*, ed. Mirja Kekeritz and Melanie Kubandt (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2022), 59–102.

22 See: Derek Bland, "Analysing Children's Drawings: Applied Imagination," *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 35, no. 3 (2012): 235–42; Ioana Literat, "A Pencil for Your Thoughts': Participatory Drawing as a Visual Research Method with Children and Youth," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 12, no. 1 (2013): 84–98.

23 Claudia Aradau and Andrew Hill, "The Politics of Drawing: Children, Evidence, and the Darfur Conflict," *International Politics Sociology* 7 (2013): 368–87, 368.

24 Higonnet, "Child Witnesses: The Case of World War I and Dafur," *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1565–76, 1574.

25 Spyros Spyrou, "The Limits of Children's Voices: From Authenticity to Critical, Reflexive Representation," *Childhood* 18, no. 2 (2011): 151–65; Sirkka Komulainen, "The Ambiguity of the Child's 'Voice' in Social Research," *Childhood* 14, no. 1 (2007): 11–28.

26 Jack Hodgson, "Accessing Children's Historical Experiences through Their Art: Four Drawings of Aerial Warfare from the Spanish Civil War," *Rethinking History* 25, no. 2 (2021): 145–65, 148.

Despite these challenges, there has been a growing body of studies on children's drawing collections from different constellations of oppression, war, and genocide from the twentieth century. Nicolas Stargardt's early work on the drawings from Theresienstadt Ghetto identifies what can be gained from engagement with children as "historical subjects."²⁷ Sarah Kass explores the Theresienstadt drawings' meaning for commemorative culture.²⁸ Another well-known collection of drawings made by school children from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) has been the subject of different historical publications.²⁹ Drawings made by children who survived the Darfur Conflict were accepted as contextual evidence in 2007 at the International Criminal Court. They form the subject of Claudia Aradeau and Andrew Hill's article focusing on "how children's drawings are both differentially produced, and productive of difference and ambivalence, in the 'truthfulness' of conflict."³⁰ Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière considers the use of children's drawings in propaganda and as testimonies of wars and conflicts, referring to the reporting of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962). He points out once again that the drawings not only depict history but are "themselves historical traces."³¹

27 Nicholas Stargardt, "Children's Art of the Holocaust," *Past and Present* no. 161 (November 1998): 191–235, 228. Some 4,387 drawings and paintings created in art classes held by the artist and teacher Friedel Dicker-Brandeis in the children's homes of Theresienstadt Ghetto were recovered after liberation, accessed on September 8, 2023, <https://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/collection-research/collections-funds/visual-arts/children-s-drawings-from-the-terezin-ghetto/>.

28 Sarah Kass, *Kinderzeichnungen aus dem Ghetto Theresienstadt (1941–1945): Ein Beitrag zur Erinnerungs- und Vermächtniskultur* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2015).

29 Anthony L. Geist and Peter N. Carroll, *They Still Draw Pictures: Children's Art In Wartime From The Spanish Civil War to Kosovo* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Christian Roith, "Trotz allem zeichnen sie: Der Spanische Bürgerkrieg mit Kinderaugen gesehen," *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 1–2 (2009): 191–214; Hodgson, "Accessing Children's Historical Experiences."

30 Aradau and Hill, *The Politics of Drawing*, 368.

31 Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière, "The Voice of the Innocent: Propaganda and Childhood Testimonies of War," *History of Education* 43, no. 1 (2014): 105–123, 122.

Methodology Notes

In the next section, I discuss Boas Popper's drawing book as a historical trace within an "object-driven" case study.³² The interdisciplinary field of material culture provides me with a methodological reference.³³ Thus, I address the drawing book as a child's cultural artifact, as material remains of a past aesthetic practice of a child's engagement with the world.³⁴ The drawings reveal insights into the everyday life of the child, Boas Popper, and the way in which he related to the changing world of the 1930s through his drawings. My analysis is guided by the book's materiality and its eighteen colorful pages.

The analysis proceeds in several steps. I begin by describing the drawings' materiality, signs, and representations. In doing so, I elaborate on assumptions about specific practices of their production and use, the conditions of origin as well as the books "biography," which are elaborated through further studies and documents.³⁵ Following the presentation of Boas Popper's *biographical fragments*, I illustrate three dimensions of historical contextualization using selected drawings created by the boy, as well as further material. I discuss the drawings focusing on the aspects of the *Living Space of an Urban Child*, *School Life between Tradition and Reform*, and *Testimonial Object*. I aim to unfold different layers of meaning through which children's drawings can be addressed. In doing so, I make no claim to completeness but rather understand this source commentary as a tentative movement in which more questions arise than can be answered.³⁶

32 Karen Harvey, "Introduction: Historians, Material Culture and Materiality," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. Karen Harvey (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–26, 2–3.

33 See: Chris Tilley et al (eds.), *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: Sage, 2013).

34 Bettina Uhlig and Lis Kunst, "Kinder zeichnen: Einführung," in *IMAGO. Zeitschrift Für Kunstpädagogik* 7 (2018), 3–11; Wiebke Hiemesch, "Kinderkulturen und ihre Materialitäten Überlegungen zu Artefakten als Gegenstand von Forschung und historischem Lernen," in *Historisches Lernen und Materielle Kultur. Von Dingen und Objekten in der Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Sebastian Barsch and Jörg van Norden (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), 91–110.

35 With these steps I refer to: Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 169–78; Manfred Lueger and Ulrike Froschauer, *Artefaktanalyse. Grundlagen und Verfahren* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018); Thomas Meier, Michael R. Ott, and Rebecca Saue (eds.), *Materiale Textkulturen. Konzepte – Materialien – Praktiken* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015).

36 This analysis follows an article examining two drawings of an eleven-year-old girl who attended the art classes of Julio Levin at the Private Jewish Primary School in

Layers of Meaning Bound within the Book

Materiality

Holding the drawing book in my hands in March 2023, I immediately noticed its yellowed and faded cover. The spine was broken. Decades of storage had left their mark on the material. The book, produced by the Peka company, reminded me of my own copybooks carried in my schoolbag when I was young. The front cover reads “*Zeichenheft. Heft 2 mit Seiden für ... Klasse ...*” (Drawing book: Number 2 with interleaves for ... Class ...). Boas Popper probably did not fill in his name and class himself, the writing seems practiced and more likely to have been done by an adult hand: “Boas Popper”, “2b”, “1934.”

Within the covers (18.5 x 22 centimeters) are three double pages of unbleached paper with thread binding. A double page is also loosely inserted in the middle of the book. All of the pages are filled with drawings. Boas Popper drew contours in lead pencil, some of which he colored in. The use or absence of color directs my attention to the details. He obviously attached great importance to individual elements and used them to tell stories in his drawings. Objects and persons are represented with individualized details, and small scenes are illustrated. Boas Popper sometimes placed Hebrew or Latin script alongside the drawings to caption them or to mark objects. This writing seems less practiced and shadows of erased letters can occasionally be seen, indicating mistakes or incorrect placement. The motifs from Boas Popper’s drawings can be classified under the following themes: Urbanity and traffic, buildings and housing, Jewish culture and religion, children’s literature and fairy tales, biology and fauna, and everyday scenes and personal objects. Some of the drawings are reminiscent of cataloging, like those of fruits and ships which he labels in German and Hebrew. Other drawings depict buildings (school), spatial relationships from Boas Popper’s immediate surroundings (street maps), or scenes from urban life, Talmudic stories, or literature for children.

The material characteristics of Boas Popper’s drawing book indicate its institutional school context. It can be assumed that the choice of subject followed the teacher’s input. Some of the drawings seem to be guided in form or modeled on an example (for example, a chart of fruit or the street

Düsseldorf in 1937. Her fate was unknown, so I read the drawings as “traces” and followed them in the context of the deportation and murder of Jewish children in Düsseldorf and postwar remembrance: Wiebke Hiemesch, “Tracing the Absence of Children’s Voices – Artefacts of Children’s Persecution under the National Socialist Regime,” *Paedagogica Historica* 58, no. 3 (2022): 329–48.

map); others could have been created freely. This raises questions about the context and drawing practice of Boas Popper. Who was the boy? What inspired him to draw, and which choices did he make? Addressing his drawing book as a cultural artifact, what do we learn about his historical experience as a Jewish child in Hamburg in 1934? What is the drawings' history up to today? How did their uses and meanings change?

Biographical Fragments

Boas Popper was born in 1927 as the third child of a middle-class Jewish family.³⁷ The family lived on Hansastrasse, which Boas mapped in one of his drawings.³⁸ His mother Charlotte Popper (born Lewinsky) was born in Preußisch-Stargard in 1898. She grew up in a religious parental home. Her father was a textile merchant. She studied mathematics in Königsberg and became involved in a Zionist youth association. In Hamburg, she worked as a mathematics teacher.³⁹ Here, Charlotte Lewinsky met Dr. Erich Benjamin Popper, who was born in Elmshorn in 1898. He was a dentist and took part in the First World War.⁴⁰ Charlotte and Erich married in 1923, one and two years later, Popper's two older sisters were born.⁴¹ At least one of the sisters attended the *Israelitische Töchterchule* in Hamburg.⁴² The family's life in Hamburg seems to have been influenced by Orthodox Judaism. Looking back, the father criticized himself for searching for emotional support in religion and requiring the same from his wife.⁴³ When Boas Popper created the drawings, his father had already made plans to leave Hamburg for Palestine, to escape the increasing antisemitic persecution in Germany. He emigrated at the latest in 1935, and Popper, his mother, and sisters followed in 1936.⁴⁴ Popper's

37 Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 213-13 Landgericht Hamburg-Wiedergutmachung, Nr. 37766.

38 Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 522-1 Jüdische Gemeinden, Nr. 992 b.

39 "Charlotte Popper geborene Lewinsky," in *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland. Selbstzeugnisse zur Sozialgeschichte im Kaiserreich*, ed. Monika Richarz (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1979), 427–34.

40 Anne Betten, *Sprachbewahrung nach der Emigration – Das Deutsch der 20er Jahre in Israel. Teil I: Transkripte und Tondokumente* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1995), 123.

41 Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 351-11 Amt für Wiedergutmachung, Nr. 20574.

42 Anne Betten, *Sprachbewahrung nach der Emigration – Das Deutsch der 20er Jahre in Israel. Teil II: Analysen und Dokumente* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000), 69.

43 Anne Betten and Miryam Du-nour (eds.), *Wir sind die letzten fragt uns aus. Gespräch mit den Emigranten der dreißiger Jahre in Israel* (Gerlingen: Bleicher Verlag, 1995), 237–38.

44 Betten, *Sprachbewahrung nach der Emigration*, 123–34. Erich Popper was officially deregistered from his residence in Hamburg in April 1936, the rest of the family in May 1936, Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 522-1 Jüdische Gemeinden, Nr. 992 b.

mother, father, and one of his sisters gave an interview in 1990 for a research project on the German language of emigrants of the 1930s in Israel.⁴⁵ Around 1955, his mother wrote a report about Jewish life in her hometown, Preußisch-Stargard.⁴⁶

Popper's everyday life in Hamburg was evidently characterized by Orthodox communal Jewish life, as well as by middle-class life in the Hanseatic city. One of his drawings from 1934 is titled "*Wie bei meinem Vater [...] Kinderarzt*" (As in my father's [...] paediatric practice), showing a dentist attending to a patient in the dentist's chair.⁴⁷ He captioned another drawing "*Meine Ren Uhr*" (My Ren Clock) and depicted the clock's front and mechanism in all its detail.⁴⁸ This was a potential foreshadowing of Popper's later educational career—he became a successful engineer and registered numerous patents.⁴⁹ As I elaborate in the following paragraphs, motifs of Hanseatic urban life, middle-class childhood, and Jewish religion coexist in his drawings.

The Life Space of an Urban Child

In his 1934 drawing book, Popper draws scenes of urban Hanseatic children's worlds that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. In particular, he seems to focus on industrialization, technification, the density of space, as well as increased mobility due to the expansion of transport routes and vehicles. This can be illustrated by Popper's drawing of the Hamburg electric tram (Figure 3). The first Hamburg tramline opened at the end of the nineteenth century, and the system was expanded in the early twentieth century. A map from 1910 shows that an over-ground line was also planned near the Poppers' home on HansasträÙe.⁵⁰ It can therefore be assumed that the tram was part of the boy's everyday life. He draws it with a variety of details, both as a technical object (for example, the overhead power line, the coupling) and as a scene of public life. Two uniformed conductors are standing on the boarding platform.

45 Betten, *Sprachbewahrung nach der Emigration*.

46 "Charlotte Popper geborene Lewinsky," in *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland*, 427–32.

47 Archive of the *Israelitische Töchterchule*, 08:H12 (5).

48 Archive of the *Israelitische Töchterchule*, 08:H12 (10).

49 Betten, *Sprachbewahrung nach der Emigration*, 76–77.

50 Railway and tramway map of Hamburg and Altona, about 1910, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, accessed on April 5, 2023, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/baedeker_n_germany_1910/hamburg_rail_1910.jpg.

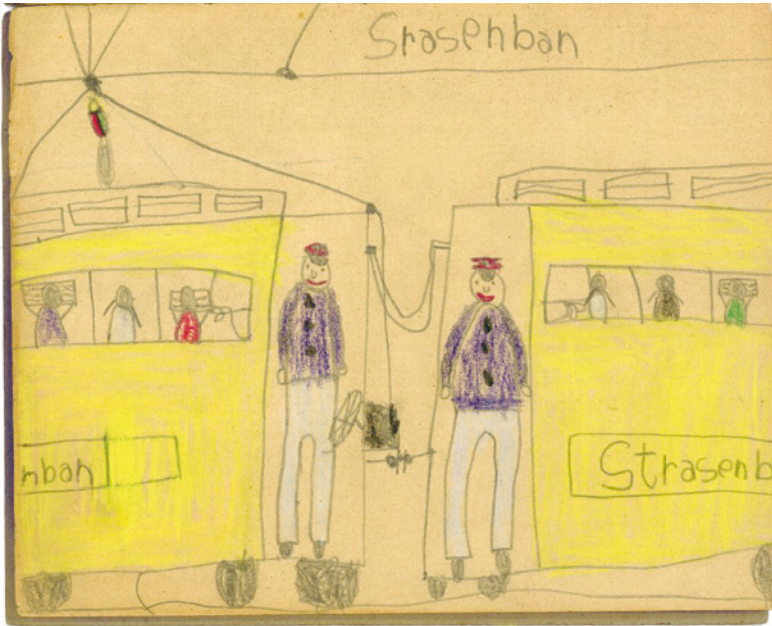


Figure 3: Archive of the *Israelitische Töcherschule*, 08:H22 (3)

Inside the tram, people are seated, probably on their way to work, reading newspapers. The tram also appears in other drawings and written sources by children from the collection of the *Israelitische Töcherschule*. Esther Wigderowitsch, a student at the girls' school in 1930, writes about her experience of the dense "crowds" on the tram and the busy conductors.⁵¹ She was particularly impressed by the advertisements on it, an expression of the expanding consumer culture. Metropolitan traffic and the urban infrastructure evidently held a high attraction for Popper; there are further drawings in his drawing book of various vehicles, boats, and street maps. A comparative analysis with other boys' and girls' drawings from the collection could give indications of general or more gender-specific motifs. Referring to school documents, it could be questioned whether these motifs were inspired by a specific curriculum covering the subject of technology in both the girls' and boys' schools.

Another possible connection could be that the motifs arose in a pedagogical setting inspired by the so-called "*Großstadtpädagogik*" (metropolis

51 "Niederschriften Esther Wigderowitsch 7a," H48, Archive of the *Israelitische Töcherschule*.

pedagogy), as similar motifs also appear in other drawing books in the collection.⁵² Contrary to the pessimistic view of big cities as specifically threatening and harmful for children, at the beginning of the twentieth century, educators in Germany and Austria integrated the urban environment into their pedagogical thinking and emphasized the value of the city as a learning environment. Teachers took up themes like technical progress, consumption, and traffic and aimed at autonomous and thus democratic participation in the city as a public space. It is thus possible that the drawings were created with reference to learning materials or after excursions. Such excursions to urban sites had taken place at the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* during the Weimar Republic and in the years immediately after 1933.⁵³ Likewise, excursions to the nearby rural area of the Luneburger Heath were carried out. Popper could have taken part in such excursions, thereby gaining inspiration for his drawings of typical northern German rural housing, in addition to the portrayals of his urban surroundings.⁵⁴ These drawings could thus give indications of both a pedagogical program at the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* which valued nature and urban life in the city as a pedagogical environment. The former might also be seen in the context of a reform of pedagogical ideas at the beginning of the twentieth century, where the retreat from urbanity into nature was advocated.⁵⁵ It would be worthwhile to differentiate initial assumptions made here about (gender-specific) teaching concepts by drawing on further sources from children's and school documents in the future in order to place them in the context of a history of pedagogical concepts and Jewish education in Germany in the 1930s.⁵⁶

52 For this paragraph, see: Håkan Forsell, "Die großstädtische Kindheit," in *Kindheiten in der Moderne. Eine Geschichte der Sorge*, ed. Meike S. Baader, Florian Eßer and Wolfgang Schröer (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 2014), 190–225. Among them is a copybook book with a short text and a drawing of the Hamburg tramway by Popper's sister, Briefheft an Lili Traumann, Archive of the *Israelitische Töchterschule*, 02:Ho1.

53 Randt, *Talmud-Tora-Schule*, 131–34.

54 Archive of the *Israelitische Töchterschule*, 08:H12 (12/14).

55 Forsell, *Großstädtische Kindheit*, 194–5; Meike Sophia Baader, *Erziehung als Erlösung. Transformation des Religiösen in der Reformpädagogik* (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2004).

56 See: Ingrid Lohmann, *Erziehung und Bildung*, in *Hamburger Schlüsseldokumente zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte*, (September 22, 2016), accessed June 12, 2023, <https://dx.doi.org/10.23691/jgo:article-215.de.vi>; Andreas Hoffmann, *Schule und Akkulturation. Geschlechtsdifferente Erziehung von Knaben und Mädchen der Hamburger jüdisch liberalen Oberschicht, 1848–1939* (Münster: Waxmann, 2001); Elke Kleinau, *Bildung und Geschlecht. Eine Sozialgeschichte des höheren Mädchenschulwesens in Deutschland vom Vormärz bis zum Dritten Reich* (Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag, 1997).



Figure 4: Archive of the *Israelitische Töchterschule*, 08:H22 (8)

On another page (Figure 4), Popper draws a street scene. We see the fronts of multi-story houses. Doorsigns indicate that several families live here. Another sign points to the entrance of the toy shop, whose display can be seen through the open door. In another open window, a person is airing textiles. People are walking on the street, perhaps they are in a rush to catch the train waiting between the houses. Here, Popper draws a condensed panorama of urban life which we also know from the study *Der Lebensraum des Großstadtkindes* (The Life Space of the Urban Child) by Martha Muchow.⁵⁷ Muchow's pioneering work from the 1930s describes the everyday life of working-class children in the Barmbek district of Hamburg.⁵⁸ She gives a dense picture of how children moved in urban

57 Martha Muchow was a Hamburg psychologist and educator. She obtained her doctorate at Hamburg University and worked with William Stern. After Stern's exclusion from the University in April 1933, Muchow was also expelled. She committed suicide in September 1933. The study was published posthumously in 1935 by her brother. Martha Muchow and Hans Heinrich Muchow, *Der Lebensraum des Großstadtkindes*, new edition (Weinheim: Juventa, 2012).

58 Further studies followed: Imbke Behnken, *Urbane Spiel- und Straßenswelten. Zeitzeugen und Dokumente über Kindheit am Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wein-

space and adopted it through play. Some places are quite similar to those of Popper's motifs: the harbor, traffic, and the shopping mall (*Warenhaus*). Again, these first vague and sketchy connections with broader historical changes, which I can only roughly outline here, should be elaborated further in future research. Building on Muchow's work, Popper's drawings could be read as an artifact of middle-class childhood. The street appears in his work less as the place of the playing child and more as sketched from an observer's perspective. A comparative analysis of various drawings could be carried out to question whether the drawings illustrate the shift of middle-class children's places to private and pedagogical places at the beginning of the twentieth century, as described by Jürgen Zinnecker.⁵⁹

The urban space must have changed fundamentally for Popper as a Jewish child when the National Socialist regime began in 1933. However, at first glance, it can hardly be seen explicitly in his drawings that the seven-year-old was threatened by antisemitic persecution. In his 1935 "*Heimatkunde*" (local studies) copybook, there is a (remarkably accurate) drawing of Hamburg's town hall.⁶⁰ On the second page, Popper adds a sketch of the square in front of the town hall, which he labels "Adolf Hitler Platz." Indeed the City Hall square was renamed as early as 1933 by the city administration to honor Hitler. Such infringements on public space were part of the National Socialists' penetration of public life which aimed at the "*Führerkult*" (cult of personality of the Führer). The boy's mapping can be read as a document of the exclusion of Hamburg's Jews from the public sphere which affected Popper's everyday life in his hometown. The streets and public buildings, even schools, became increasingly dangerous for Jewish children, so they avoided them for their own safety. In addition to the antisemitic order to wear a yellow star from September 1941, in February 1942 Jews were banned from public transport—one of Popper's frequent motifs.

heim: Juventa, 2006); Helge Zeiher and Hartmut Zeiher, *Orte und Zeiten der Kinder. Soziales Leben im Alltag von Großstadtkindern* (Weinheim: Juventa, 1994); Imbke Behnken, Manuela du Bois Raymond and Jürgen Zinnecker, *Stadtgeschichte als Kindheitsgeschichte. Lebensräume von Großstadtkindern in Deutschland und Holland um 1900* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 1989).

59 Jürgen Zinnecker, "Vom Straßenkind zum verhäuslichten Kind," in *Kindheitsgeschichte im Prozeß der Zivilisation. Konfigurationen städtischer Lebensweise zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Imbke Behnken (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1990), 142–62.

60 Archive of the Israelitische Töcherschule o8:H49.

School Life between Tradition and Reform

The history of the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* exemplifies the dissolution of the Jewish school system in Hamburg and Germany by the National Socialist regime. The school was founded in 1805 by members of the Orthodox Jewish community as a welfare institution for poor children in Elbstraße.⁶¹ In the following hundred years, the school underwent various reforms, the number of pupils grew, affluent pupils began to attend, and the range of school subjects became broader. The school was approved as a *Höhere Bürgerschule* in 1870.⁶² In 1911, the school moved to its new building at Grindelhof 30, next to the Bornplatz Synagogue (inaugurated in 1906). Popper probably entered the school via its characteristic portal with three doors and a clock on the roof above, which he also drew. In another map, he sketched the surroundings “*Rund um die Schule*” (around the school) including the school and the synagogue.⁶³ In 1932, shortly before Popper started school there, the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* was approved to prepare pupils for university entrance (*Oberrealschule*). Among the graduates in 1934 were also five females.⁶⁴ At the same time, the beginning of the National Socialist regime in 1933 was accompanied by profound changes, including the cancellation of funding. More than one hundred students had already left Germany, and just as many left state schools to escape isolation and discrimination.⁶⁵

As its director, Rabbi Joseph Carlebach had begun the modernization of the school in 1921. In particular, the hierarchies between pupils and teachers were reduced.⁶⁶ The staff was rejuvenated, and art, music, and sport took on more importance in the life of the school.⁶⁷ Albert Spier, who became director in 1926, described the educational task of the school as the:

Development of all the dormant powers in the child and youth for the education of self-aware Jewish individuals, whose worldview is firmly rooted in Jewish tradition and Jewish culture, but who, at the same

61 Ursula Randt, “Die Talmud-Tora-Schule in Hamburg. Bildungseinrichtung und Stätte sozialer Fürsorge,” in *Verloren und Un-Vergessen. Jüdische Heilpädagogik in Deutschland*, ed. Sieglind Ellger-Rüttgardt (Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1996), 139–57, 140.

62 Randt, *Stätte sozialer Fürsorge*, 151.

63 Archive of the Israelitische Töchterchule 08:H22 (loose side).

64 Ursula Randt, *Die Talmud Tora Schule in Hamburg 1805 bis 1942* (Munich: Dölling und Garlitz, 2005), 145.

65 Randt, *Talmud Tora Schule*, 146.

66 Randt, *Talmud Tora Schule*, 124, 137.

67 Randt, *Talmud Tora Schule*, 129, 131.

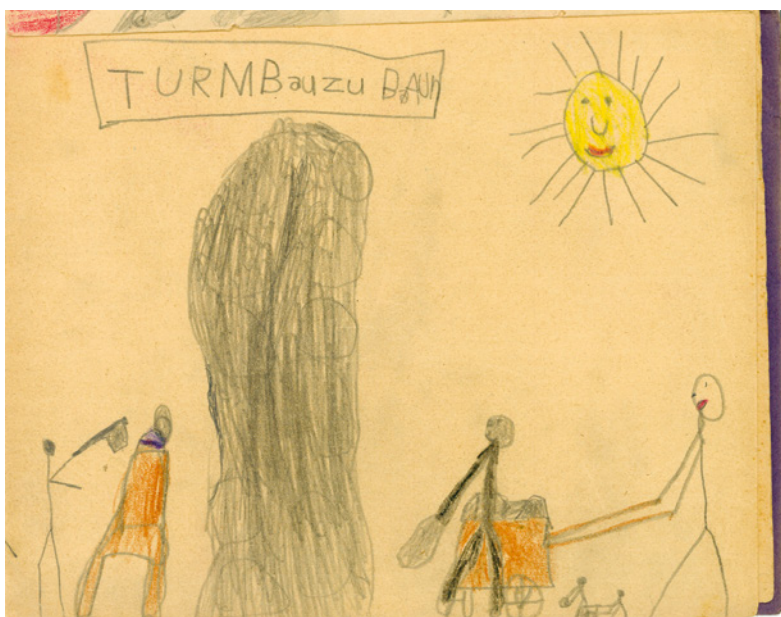


Figure 5: Probably "Tower of Babel" ("TURMBau zu BAUN"). Source: Archive of the *Israelitische Töcherschule*, 08:H22 (6).

time, strives for harmony of their whole personality through empathy and a grasp of all the values of German culture and its relations to the European and general educational heritage.⁶⁸

Popper's drawings can be read in light of this pedagogical program, where art also became an important part of the curriculum. He, for example, draws Talmudic stories (Tower of Babel, Paradise) and Jewish rituals (*Shabbat* and *Sukkot*) right next to the Hamburg cityscape.⁶⁹ The school's corridors were decorated with pictures from Jewish history and culture, including one of the Western Wall.⁷⁰ These surroundings could have

68 Albert Spier, 1932/34, quoted in Ursula Randt, *Stätte sozialer Fürsorge*, 154. Author's translation of the German original: "Entfaltung aller im Kind und Jugendlichen schlummernden Kräfte zur Heranbildung des bewußten jüdischen Menschen, dessen Weltanschauung fest verwurzelt ist in der jüdischen Tradition und den jüdischen Kulturgütern, der aber zugleich durch Einfühlung und Erfassen aller Werte deutscher Kultur und ihrer Beziehungen zu dem europäischen und allgemeinen Bildungsgut die Harmonie der Gesamtpersönlichkeit erstrebt."

69 Here I refer to all four of Boas Popper's booklets.

70 Randt, *Talmud Tora Schule*, 128–29.

inspired Popper's drawings, like the one of the Western Wall in Jerusalem.⁷¹ Hugo Mandelbaum, who had been teaching the junior classes since 1925, decorated the classroom with pictures of the Hamburg port and biblical stories of Joseph, designed by art teacher Kallmann Rothschild II. The two teachers also published an illustrated Hebrew primer together.⁷² Popper uses Hebrew script in his drawings too.⁷³ A list of former teachers indicates that Mandelbaum and Rothschild may still have been at the school in 1936, but it is uncertain whether Popper was taught by them.⁷⁴ The boy seems to have been free in his choice of materials, colours, and motifs, though most of his motifs seem to be directly related to his immediate surroundings. Using supplementary children's drawings, school documents, and teachers' biographies, it would be worthwhile to examine whether the art education at the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* was related to the *Kunsterziehungsbewegung* (art education movement) of that time in Hamburg, which was also part of the reform pedagogical movement.⁷⁵

By 1937, the number of students at the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* had continued to grow, and the school had gained a reputation as an exceptional Jewish educational institution throughout Germany. It also became a place of refuge and preparation for emigration.⁷⁶ During the night of November 9–10, 1938, the entire teaching staff and older pupils were arrested. In 1939, the school was forcibly merged with the Jewish girls' school on Karolinenstraße and renamed "*Volks- und Oberschule für Juden*" (Primary and Secondary School for Jews). Jewish children were already banned from attending state schools in November 1938 and, consequently, Karolinenstraße became the last Jewish place of refuge. On

71 Archive of the Israelitische Töcherschule, 08:H12 (9).

72 Randt, *Talmud Tora Schule*, 135–36.

73 Archive of the Israelitische Töcherschule, 08:H22.

74 H. Mandelbaum and K. Rothschild are not listed as teachers at the *Talmud-Tora-Schule* in 1940. In another list, possibly from 1942, their names appear as former teachers. It is unclear, however, to which period the list refers. An address list without a date indicates that H. Mandelbaum emigrated to England. Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 362-6/10 Talmud-Tora-Schule, Nr. 49.

75 See: Wolfgang Lefler, *Geschichte des Zeichen- und Kunstunterrichts von der Renaissance bis zum Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Oberhausen: Athena, 2013), 161–90; Rolf Laven, *Franz Cizek und die Wiener Jugendkunst* (Vienna: Schöningh, 2006). On the context of drawing, education, reform pedagogy, and emigration in the 1930s, see: Meike Sophia Baader, "Die Schule am Mittelmeer," *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* XVI/2 (2022): 31–1; Hiemesch, "Tracing the Absence of Children's Voices."

76 Randt, *Talmud-Tora-Schule*, 150–56.

June 30, 1942, the school was closed. Around 300 pupils were unable to escape and were murdered in the Shoah.⁷⁷

The Drawing Book as a Testimonial Object

Popper emigrated to Palestine in 1936 and did not experience the last phase of the existence of *Talmud-Tora-Schule*. His father later recalled that he had begun to prepare for his family's emigration just after the boycott of Jewish businesses and practices on April 1, 1933, which threatened his existence as a dentist. Popper's father emigrated to Palestine in 1935 at the latest; his mother followed in 1936 together with her children.⁷⁸ The drawing book, along with the other three copybooks authored by Popper, could have been brought by him to Palestine. However, the story of their further preservation is mostly unclear. They may have come back to Hamburg in the context of the work of Ursula Randt, who studied the history of the *Israelitische Töchterschule* and other Jewish schools in Hamburg from the 1970s onwards. She was in contact with survivors' families and a former teacher of the girls' school, Lili Traumann, and collected materials from them.⁷⁹ Later she donated her private archive to the memorial center for the *Israelitische Töchterschule* (founded in 1989), where the copybooks remained undiscovered and unsystematically stored in boxes for years.

Through this archiving story, Popper's drawing books and copybooks found their way into the context of the culture of remembrance. Today, they are part of the collection of an institution that simultaneously commemorates the history of Jewish life in Hamburg, as well as remembers its destruction due to persecution, displacement, and the murder of Hamburg's Jews with a special focus on the school's pupils and teachers. Thus, Popper's drawing books can be framed as "testimonial objects" which in their present material existence "carry memory traces from the

77 "Children's Worlds: New Perspectives on the History of Jewish School Life in Hamburg," *Key Documents of German-Jewish History: A Digital Source Edition*, accessed on April 16, 2023, <https://jewish-history-online.net/exhibition/childrens-worlds>.

78 Anne Betten, *Sprachbewahrung nach der Emigration*, 123–24.

79 Author's mail correspondence with Dr. Anna von Villiez, Head of the *Israelitische Töchterschule* Memorial and Educational Center, (14 December 2022); Ursula Randt, *Carolinenstrasse 35. Geschichte der Mädchenschule der Deutsch-Israelitischen Gemeinde in Hamburg 1884–1942* (Hamburg: Verein für Hamburgische Geschichte, 1984).

past [...] but they [also] *embody* the very process of its transmission.”⁸⁰ Read as “traces” of Jewish children’s past worlds and Jewish school life in Hamburg, and their destruction, their multiple layers of meaning need to be unfolded.⁸¹ This process of reading and interpreting Popper’s drawings presented here is colored by my research position as a historian of childhood and education, as well as the research field of children during war and genocide.

Tentative Conclusion

In this article, I explored the different layers of meaning bound together in Popper’s drawing book. As a material product of a children’s cultural practice created in a school setting, the drawing book provides insights into the everyday life of a Jewish boy and the way he related to the rapidly changing world around him in 1930s Hamburg through his drawings. These show us that Popper’s everyday life was affected by the urban architecture and geography of Hamburg, as well as by scenes and practices of the Jewish upper middle class. They point to a Jewish school between reform and tradition which cultivated the teachings of the Talmud and Jewish rituals, as well as pedagogical work referring to reform concepts. These first preliminary lines of contextualization need to be elaborated by further research referring to wider materials. So far, however, we can state that the small drawing book is linked to broader historical themes like urbanity, mobility, and mechanization but also changing educational methods and vibrant Jewish life in early twentieth-century Hamburg. At the same time, Popper’s drawings are colored paper traces of children’s worlds and school lives destroyed by antisemitic persecution. Popper’s drawings do not explicitly show scenes of oppression, and the family left Germany before the violence came to a head. However, it is for this very reason that the drawing book stands in its material existence, kept in the Education and Memorial Centre as a “testimonial object” of a threatened Jewish childhood in Hamburg immediately before and during displacement, destruction, and the Shoah.

80 Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission,” in *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 353–83, 355, emphasis in original. See also: Laura Levitt, *The Objects That Remain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).

81 See: Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 174. For a study of children’s drawings as traces, see: Hiemesch, “Tracing the Absence of Children’s Voices.”

In my article, I argued for considering children's drawings as a historical source and critically questioning hegemonic processes of their use and archiving, which tend to pay little attention to children's drawings. I have shown that it is valuable to take children's drawings as a starting point to explore history through the artifacts of children. My approach highlights a small selection of drawings at the center of its case study to tackle the practices of the drawing child. Nevertheless, the drawings can not be considered as individual expressions of a child but as artifacts embedded in complex cultural and historical contexts. Moreover, in terms of material culture, I consider it necessary to include both the creation and the afterlife of the drawings in the analysis, thus shedding light on the changing interpretive contexts over time. As my approach demonstrates here, it is also important that interpretation always contains gaps in knowledge and may well enter the field of speculation. These gaps may not all be filled, but interpretation must be validated as much as possible by contextual information. In doing so, children's drawings can provide insight into history from the child's social position and contribute to a multi-perspective historiography.

“Dear Daddy, you ask me how I spend the whole day, from morning to evening I think about you ...”: Children's Letters and the Emotions Hidden Within Them¹

Letters as a Source

The role of ego documents in contemporary Holocaust research is steadily growing. As Joanna Michlic rightly points out, “There are multiple and interlinked developments responsible for this shift, the ‘rediscovery’ and reevaluation of personal testimonies for historical writings.”² Over the past few years, more and more researchers are turning to various types of documentation: diaries, letters, and even court testimonies. These are supplemented by postwar sources: video testimonies, memoirs, and testimonies before various kinds of committees. Historians recognize personal testimonies as essential for the historical reconstruction of the past. The picture created with their help expands our knowledge of the war years, adding a unique individual perspective. They allow us to take a fresh look at the survival strategies of Jews destined to be murdered, differentiating the behavior of women, men, and children.

1 Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak, ed., ... *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba... Korespondencja wojenna rodziny Finkelszteinów (1939–1941)* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2012), 105.

2 Joanna Michlic points to factors that contributed to this, such as access to archival collections in Eastern Europe, many memoirs’ publications and oral testimonies and increasing interest in “previously understudied topics” – among others, the history of children during the second world war. See: Joanna Beata Michlic, “The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources: Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. Sara R. Horowitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 145–46.

At the same time, this approach faces strong criticism from researchers skeptical of unitary sources. Using ego documents requires a critical approach which allows for extracting interesting information and, primarily, the separation of facts from views and opinions. In historical research, correspondence has been used for many years.³ Consequently, it is hard to imagine Holocaust Studies without letters and postcards sent and received by the victims. During the Second World War, this correspondence played a unique role. As Jacek Leociak describes:

A letter is a particular concentration of words. They are intimate words because they are intended for the one and only person to whom one writes. They are fleeting words because this peculiar intimate conversation between the sender and the addressee is written down on a piece of paper and carried—quite literally—from one place to another. These words are fleeting also because they are immersed in the transience of the moment in which they were written. They refer to situations and circumstances often known only to the addressee and the sender. Thus, only in this context are they understandable, only in this context are they relevant.⁴

However, children's correspondence remains an underused source in research on the Holocaust. Although hard to analyze, such correspondence is valuable material and, therefore, I will highlight some key points in this source commentary regarding such analysis by focusing on children's letters.⁵ Firstly, I will present ways to critically investigate the sources—letters and postcards written by children during the war. What impact do linguistic, financial, and gender constraints have on how and why a child decides to write a message? Secondly, based on the selected sources, I will analyze how the correspondence of the youngest victims of the war allows us to understand their emotions, not only those that accompanied the writing of the letter, but perhaps, above all, those that accompanied them

3 Their significance for historical research is particularly highlighted by Dalia Ofer; see: "Personal Letters in Research and Education on the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 3 (1989): 341–55.

4 Jacek Leociak, *Tekst wobec Zagłady (O relacjach z getta warszawskiego)* (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997), 145.

5 On Jewish children and childhood in the Holocaust, see: Debóra Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991); Nicholas Stargardt, *Witness of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Joanna Beata Michlic (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017).

in their everyday lives. Did they try to hide feelings? Additionally, I will examine which, often unconscious, strategies were used to deal with pain, fear, and suffering. How did they influence the relations with family? Looking closer at how victims of the Nazi persecution reacted could add a new viewpoint to the history of the Holocaust.

One of the crucial source collections is the correspondence held at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, as well as other collections in the Ringelblum Archive. The first volume of the edition of documents from the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto is devoted to the letters. These documents were edited by Ruta Sakowska, who wrote in the introduction that: "Letters about the Holocaust are probably the most dramatic documents of the ARG [Ringelblum Archive]."⁶ Another noteworthy correspondence is the collection of postcards from the Łódź (Litzmannstadt) ghetto, kept in the State Archive in Łódź. However, the letters are often scattered among various archival collections in Poland, Israel, the USA, and other countries, including not only those from urban centers but also from smaller towns and villages, such as Będzin, Kałuszyn, or Zamość. There are also many editions of wartime correspondence between people remaining in close relationships (family, friends, love), and also correspondence anthologies.⁷ One must not forget about the letters remaining in the private collections of the survivors; perhaps, some of these are still waiting to be discovered.

6 *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. I *Listy o Zagładzie*, ed. Ruta Sakowska (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1997), xxiv. See also: Tadeusz Epsztein, Justyna Majewska, and Aleksandra Bańkowska, eds., *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 15 *Wrzesień 1939. Listy kaliskie. Listy płockie* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2014).

7 See: Wanda Lubelska, *Listy z getta* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2000); Barbara Engelking-Boni, "Sześć listów z warszawskiego getta. 9 VII 1941–25 VI 1942," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, no. 198 (2001): 229–40; Ann Kirschner, ed., *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Barbara Engelking, "Miłość i cierpienie w Tomaszowie Mazowieckim," in *Zagłada Żydów. Pamięć narodowa a pisanie historii w Polsce i we Francji*, eds. Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, and Anna Ziębińska-Witek (Lublin: UMCS Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie 2006); Hanka Goldszajd, *Listy z getta/Letters from the Ghetto* (Kielce: Charaktery, 2007); Jan Gelbart, *Adresat nieznamy*, ed. Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlik (Warsaw: Baobab, 2009); Charlotte Goldberst, *Correspondance du ghetto. Varsovie – Liège, 1940-1942* (Brussels: Édition du Centre d'Études et de Documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz ASBL, 2016). In addition to the volume of Ringelblum Archive already mentioned, see: Reuven Dafni and Yehudit Kleiman, eds., *Final Letters from Victims of the Holocaust* (London: Weidenfeld, and Nicolson, 1991); Zvi Bacharach, ed., *Last Letters from the Shoah* (Jerusalem: Devora Publishing 2004).

Analysis Limitations

Undoubtedly, like any other source, the letters are not free from limitations. Fear of repression meant that authors, who were also children, often tried to conceal the truth in their writing. Awareness of the existence of censorship in correspondence, that they were aware a third party could read their words, caused authors to encrypt some information. This often happened in the case of family correspondence when authors used crypto-information (for example, when they called mass murder “a disease” or “holding a wedding party”).⁸ Although the letters were censored and written without the intention of publication, to never be shown to anyone except the addressee, they were frank. Significantly, they were treated as a means to express suppressed emotions. As Dalia Ofer notes: “The perspective of those writing at the time is influenced both by immediate, local events and the overwhelming emotions of fear, pain, anger and impending loss.”⁹ Moreover, letters captured the inner world of thinking and feeling, similar to diaries, which, conversely, were rarely written by young children. Their intimate emotions found their best expression in correspondence.

Frequently, the form of correspondence was dictated by the writing material. Not every person had paper or the time and strength to write. And yet, the need to convey a few sentences to share feelings with another person was strong; people often reached for postcards on which they only had to write a few words. A serious limitation in analyzing correspondence is its fragmentation. It is hard to find fully preserved correspondence along with the lists of senders and addressees. This is even more complicated in the case of children’s letters. As a result, scholars are dealing with messages that are often incomprehensible because their context remains unknown to us. The authors of the letters provide information that is not clear to the present-day reader or a wider audience as it was aimed at a specific individual. It is often impossible to establish even the personal details of the letter authors.

However, sometimes the situation differs and scholars have a significant collection of relatives’ correspondence from the Holocaust, which is unusual and remarkable at the same time. This allows historians to write the history of a separated family based on letters written to each other.

8 See: Marcin Urynowicz, “Listy o Zagładzie. Kryptoinformacja,” *Pamięć i Sprawy iedliwość* 1 (2002): 121–31.

9 Dalia Ofer, “Cohesion and Rupture: The Jewish Family in the East European Ghettos during the Holocaust,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* XIV (1998): 146.

For this source commentary, I have chosen two of these families who were separated during the war and maintained correspondence for a significant amount of time. The authors came from similar backgrounds—intelligentsia circles—and, in both cases, the fathers were social and political activists, although the Zygielbojms were Bundists and Finkel-sztejn's Zionists.¹⁰ They lived in two major cities—Warsaw and Łódź—and their economic situation was quite good. They were part of the middle class and had contacts with the surrounding non-Jewish milieu. When the war broke out, the children, alongside their mothers, were in Warsaw, and then moved to the ghetto, while their fathers left Poland in 1939. However, their experience of German occupation and the moments when they began to write differ.¹¹

Collective Writing

Many letters are collective endeavors; many children write together with other family members. They add short notes to the longer messages from their parents or elder siblings. This was also the case for Artur Zygiel-bojnm (born in 1929), son of Szmul Zygielbojnm, a Bundist politician. In January 1940, because of fear of arrest, Szmul left Poland while his second wife Maria and their son stayed in Poland. For as long as they could, Maria and Artur tried to write to Szmul. Artur often added a few lines to his mother's letters. The family corresponded for almost two years, from January 1940 to November 1941. The preserved documents are held in the YIVO Archives in New York and include twelve letters

10 For a more comprehensive description of the Jewish population in interwar Poland, see: Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 11–83. For more information about Warsaw Jews, see: Glenn Dynner and François Guesset, eds., *Warsaw: The Jewish Metropolis. Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

11 Despite numerous restrictions introduced by the occupant, the post office in the ghettos functioned until the liquidation operations began. The correspondence was in Polish or German. For more on the functioning of the post office in the Warsaw Ghetto, see: Ruta Sakowska, “Łączność pocztowa warszawskiego getta,” *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 1–2 (1963): 94–109; Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak, “List należy do życia ... Listy prywatne jako źródło badań nad Zagładą,” *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 2 (2014): 325–33. For information on the post office in the Łódź Ghetto, where the situation was different, see: Adriana Bryk, “Najlepsze dziecko Prezesa’ – poczta w getcie łódzkim (1939–1944),” *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 16 (2020): 523–53.

and twenty-eight postcards. Unfortunately, Szmul's messages sent to Poland are missing.¹²

Rywka Zygielbojm, Szmul's daughter from his first marriage with a woman named Gołda Sperling, also corresponded with him. In the Warsaw ghetto, she worked at the Jewish Social Self-Aid (*Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna*, ŻSS). In her letters, Rywka described the family situation, the fate of friends and family (including her older brother), living conditions in the ghetto, and the contents of food packages received from her father. Her financial situation was very difficult, and it continually worsened. Along with her mother, who did not work, Rywka was selling off their belongings. On July 24, 1941, she desperately asked for help:

Mom doesn't work yet. I work only three days a week. We have lost a lot of weight, and you probably understand what we feel in our souls. Dear Daddy! Save whatever you can. At least let your conscience be clear that you have done everything you could.¹³

The girl clearly missed her father very much; however, such open appeals were rare. Children frequently tried not to worry their loved ones with the details of their situation.

For at least several months, the Zygielbojm family took steps to allow Maria and Artur to join Szmul—unsuccessfully. They both died during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in early May 1943. Rywka Zygielbojm probably died in the Treblinka death camp in the summer of 1942.¹⁴

A similar situation occurred in the case of the second family. In August 1939, Chaim Finkelsztein, a journalist and the director of the press publishing house "Haynt," left for the twenty-first World Jewish Congress in Geneva (August 16–26, 1939) and did not return to Poland.¹⁵ His wife Rywka and his two daughters—Eстера, known as Tusia (born in 1925), and Awiwa (born in 1930 or 1931)—stayed in Warsaw. They corresponded with Chaim for two years, from December 1939 to November 1941. Approximately one hundred and forty letters and cards, now kept

12 Michał Trębacz, "‘Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje.’ Listy rodziny do Szmula Zygielbojma, 1940–1941," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 4 (2018): 790–91.

13 Trębacz, "‘Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,’” 808.

14 Vladka Meed, *On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1993), 110.

15 See his monograph about this daily newspaper published in Yiddish in Warsaw: Chaim Finkelstein, "Hajnt": *A Jewish Newspaper 1908–1939* (Tel Aviv: The World Federation of Polish Jews, 1978).

at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, have survived. However, the collection is not complete as copies of letters from New York from the first eight months of correspondence are missing.¹⁶

Like Szmul Zygielbojm, Chaim Finkelsztein applied for visas for his wife and children, first from Paris and then from New York. Initially, he tried to get entry visas to Palestine and later attempted to bring his family to the United States. He managed to have their names included on a list of people who could enter America. Unfortunately, this came too late. Rywka and her older daughter Estera were murdered in April 1943 in unknown circumstances. Only the younger daughter Awiwa survived the war. She came to New York, via Stockholm, where in 1945 she met her father, who had located her with the help of his friend Adolf Berman. Awiwa decided to stay in the United States.¹⁷

Moment of Writing

A crucial question when examining letters is why people wrote during the Holocaust. Was it a natural form of continuation of the lost contact? Or was it a specific event that made them begin writing? If so, which event was it—the closing of the ghetto, encountering death, rumors about the actual purpose of the deportations, or the deportations themselves?¹⁸

16 See more: Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba . . .*, 27–28.

17 She lived with her father, but their relationship was not close. The process of finding each other was not easy; it took a long time and was emotionally exhausting. It was also associated with high costs and time-consuming procedures. During the meeting, it turned out that both the parents and the children, after years of separation, had become estranged from each other, and it was difficult for them to communicate. This was often disappointing for those reunited. For more on this, see: Joanna Beata Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady. Wojenna i powojenna historia oraz pamięć żydowskich dzieci ocalałych w Polsce* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2020).

18 Like in the case of the almost anonymous Fela, whose letter was preserved in the Ringelblum Archive and who decided to send a short message after April 1942, or with the Gips sisters (and their two letters), for whom impending extermination could be the decisive moment. They wanted to inform their loved ones and obtain information about them. It is unknown if there were more. In the Ringelblum Archive, many such individual letters and postcards have been preserved. Their senders are often almost anonymous; we know their names and surnames, but often that is all we have been able to determine. Perhaps the upcoming deportations were a single impulse to reach for the pen, but it could also be that only a fragment of the correspondence has survived. *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 1 *Listy o Zagładzie*, ed. Ruta Sakowska, 17–18, 65–70.

From the potential reasons, it is possible to determine which one was most likely. For the Finkelsztejn family, writing letters seemed to be a natural form of contact. The girls were skilled at it, and they felt confident. One can assume that the family corresponded with each other during earlier periods of separation. For the Zygielbojm family, their letters and postcards were usually connected with parcels sent to the ghetto. Szmul Zygielbojm's wife and children often requested something and thanked him for the items they received. Undoubtedly, this was not the only reason for writing. The family members who remained in the Warsaw ghetto wanted to know more about Szmul's life; yet, they still formulated specific requests for him. Sometimes, they were serious ones, such as obtaining passports for them, but they also concerned smaller things, like stamps. Writing seemed to be a new experience for them, especially for Artur. He was definitely not used to it and wrote short sentences, more or less repetitive and using the same words. His notes were characterized by schematic content. He did not hide his feelings, but he also did not dwell on them, like the daughters of Chaim Finkelsztejn.

Longing

Longing is present in a particular way in personal correspondence; similarly, it is the primary emotion that shines through the children's letters. Usually, they wrote about it directly: "Dear Daddy! How are you? I am healthy and I miss you very much. I'd like us to meet soon," wrote Artur Zygielbojm on June 24, 1941.¹⁹ A month earlier, on May 15, 1941, the boy asked: "Dear Daddy! I miss you so much... How are you feeling? What do you do? I am healthy and I feel well. I'd like to see you right now. Do you still have your mustache? Kisses. Be well."²⁰

A few months later, on September 8, 1941, his half-sister Rywka wrote to the same addressee: "I would love to get your photo. Can I send you photos? I really miss you! Write to me precisely about everything, mostly about your life! [...] Kisses! Your daughter."²¹

Finkelsztejn's daughters were much more effusive in their letters. "Dear Daddy!!! I miss you so much. Every day I [dream] that a letter came, I am terribly sad when I remember that you are not with me. I

19 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje." 806.

20 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje." 805.

21 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje." 810.

wish we were all together. I kiss you strongly,” wrote Awiwa on February 15, 1940.²² On March 9, 1940, she confessed: “My dearest daddy!!! I am so terribly sad when there is no letter from you. How are you, how are you feeling? We have everything okay, just one thing not right that you are not with us [sic]. Your loving Bibek Sribek.”²³

A few months later, on September 16, 1940, she wrote touchingly: “Dear Daddy, you ask me how I spend the whole day, from morning to evening, I think about you if I forget for a moment, all the words are addressed to you.”²⁴ The exchange of correspondence eased the longing and provided a substitute for a meeting or at least a conversation.

Although Finkelsztein's daughters wrote little about their situation and were rather restrained, emotions often come to the fore in their letters. The girls did not hide their feelings and wrote simply and honestly: “Dear!!! How are you doing? We are healthy and we miss you. I kiss You, Tusia; Dear Daddy. I miss you very much, Awiwa.”²⁵ The lines show a huge longing for their father, whom they had not seen for a long time and whom they missed very much. They tried to calm their desperate father, simultaneously reassuring him of the strength of the bond that bound all the family members. On October 11, 1940, Awiwa tried to calm down her father:

My dear papa. How can you write that we have forgotten you? Papa, my heart, I miss you and expect this moment to be together. I cry out of longing for you, and you write, papa, that I forgot about you. Papa, do everything you can to get us together as soon as possible. So you don't need to think like that. We are all healthy, [and] we look good. I have a new coat and shoes.²⁶

During the Holocaust, a certain reversal of roles can be observed as children took on the roles of the parents, not only providing means of subsistence or food for the family but also protecting them and becoming their emotional support. When the adults were unable to perform these roles, the children felt responsible for the family and became prematurely mature without having the opportunity or time to prepare for this

22 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* ..., 54.

23 It was one of Awiwa's terms of endearment, used in the family before the war.

Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* ..., 55.

24 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* ..., 105.

25 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* ..., 100.

26 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* ..., 130.

change.²⁷ Such a change is noticeable in the example of Chaim Finkelsztejn's daughters, who wanted to protect their father from hearing sad news. The extreme stress that Chaim was subjected to, primarily related to caring for his loved ones, reduced his parenting skills. His fears, anxiety, and guilt, which he also showed in letters, were felt by Awiwa and Estera, who started to feel responsible for his emotions despite being in very difficult living conditions themselves. It seems that their father was not aware of this. The elder daughter Estera, together with her mother, especially tried to calm him down, comfort him, and lift his spirits.

Anxiety—Lack of Information

Not every letter reached the addressee. As a result, the lack of information intensified the longing and loneliness of the imprisoned. Those confined in the ghetto interpreted the silence as bad news. Contact with people from outside the walls gave hope—it showed that there was a safe place somewhere, free from hunger, violence, and death. At the same time, it was a substitute for the social contacts lost with the outbreak of the war that allowed them to “break out” outside the world of the ghetto. This contact was therapeutic.

Artur Zygielbojm wrote on January 19, 1940:²⁸

Dear Daddy, it's been so long since you left, and yet we've had so little news from you. Why did we receive so few letters? What's going on with you? Where are you? I miss you so much and do not even know your address. [...] How are you feeling? And when will you send us the arrival papers? Stay healthy and hold on tight. I kiss you by the sea,

On February 15, 1940, Tusia Finkelsztejn asked similar questions to her father:

27 See: Dan Bar On and Julia Chaitin, “Parenthood and the Holocaust,” *Search and Research Papers* 1 (2001): 1–65; Lenore J. Weitzman, “Resistance in Everyday Life: Family Strategies Role Reversals, and Role Sharing in the Holocaust,” in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present. History, Representation, and Memory*, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 46–66; Maria Ferenc Piotrowska, “‘Ma ono na twarzy grymas dojrzałego i gorycz pokrzywdzonego [...] – nie ma dzieciństwa’. Przemiany ról dzieci w rodzinie w getcie warszawskim,” *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, no. 11 (2015): 347–76.

28 Trębacz, “‘Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,’” 795–96.

My dearest!!! We are all surprised by such a long break in your correspondence. What happened? Don't you realize that your letters are our only consolation? Daddy, are you working? How are you doing? Write back quickly.²⁹

A few months later, on November 18, 1940, she wrote: "My dear, we have not received a letter from you for three weeks now, and for this reason, we are very worried, with us everything is the same as before, your Sweet Lady."³⁰

The children greatly desired contact with their relatives remaining outside the ghetto walls. The omnipresent fear reinforced the need for contact and every break in correspondence caused additional anxiety which accompanied the writers throughout their stay in the ghetto. Complaints about letters not arriving, the lack of responses, and reproaches about too infrequent contact constitute the leitmotif of correspondence from the closed ghetto. This often led to conjecture about the reasons for the lack of communication.³¹

Hope

As Jacek Leociak has emphasized:

The letter is based on the foundation of hope. Those who know their letter has no chance of reaching the addressee do not write. The hope for communication is, therefore, a prerequisite for an empty page to be filled with writing. And although many letters have never been read by the addressee, without such hope, no letter could ever be written.³²

It was no different for the Zygielbojm and Finkelsztejn families. Both of them not only hoped for a continuation of correspondence but also for a reunion. They believed that they would receive a reply to their letter.

On September 8, 1941, Rywka promised her father: "When we meet someday (I wish as soon as possible), I will tell you exactly about everything."³³ In turn, on June 9, 1941, Awiwa advised Chaim Finkelsztejn:

29 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 53.

30 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 158.

31 Maria Ferenc, "Każdy pyta, co z nami będzie". *Mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2021), 266–67, 272–75.

32 Leociak, *Tekst wobec Zagłady*, 146.

33 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 810.

“Don’t worry, maybe we will see each other again soon, so don’t lose hope, just as we don’t lose it.”³⁴ A year earlier, on August 14, 1940, both daughters, wishing him well, wrote: “Daddy!!! We wish you a good year and an imminent reunion on your birthday.”³⁵ Such phrases do not often appear in correspondence. It is probable that both parties realized, at least at a certain moment, that a joint meeting would be neither easy nor quick. Consequently, letter-written conversations were crucial to maintaining family and emotional ties.

The Joy of Contact

For most, if not all, of those imprisoned in the ghetto, contact with the outside world was a consolation and shelter from the horrors of war. Both children and adults closed in the ghetto were waiting for letters and postcards, for any message from their loved ones—a sign of life. As I have already mentioned, it is probable that they did not receive all of them, as in the preserved correspondence, one can find frequent complaints about the lack of some information and responses. However, even a short message made them happy—for a while, at least.

On September 18, 1940, Rywka Zygielbojm wrote to her father Szmul: “Dear Dad, if something has caused me joy and pleasure lately, it’s probably just your card. You can’t imagine how delighted I was to read that you are already in Lisbon and will soon be at Emanuel’s place” [in the United States].³⁶

For the imprisoned children, the messages from the parents from whom they were separated were very important.

Daddy!!! How are you? What are you doing? I imagine you are not well either. We are fine. We remember you all the time. Daddy, if possible, send us your photo. Write frequently and extensively. Remember that your letters are one of our most important foods.³⁷

34 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 315.

35 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 91.

36 Rywka is referring to Emanuel Nowogródzki, the secretary general of the Bund in interwar Poland, a member of the Central Committee of the Bund and the Warsaw City Council, who left for the USA in February 1939 and then was an activist for the American Representation of Bund in Poland. Trębacz, “Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,” 796.

37 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 59.

Estera Finkelsztein asked on April 2, 1940. Almost a year later, on January 8, 1941, she wrote:

My beloved dearest father! Thank you very much for your loving notes. You don't know how much spirit they give me. As Mom has already written to you, I am eagerly awaiting your letters, which have been coming less regularly lately. [...] Daddy, are you still working? How are you doing? Write about everything: where do you go, what are you doing, you're not at home all day, are you? Write a lot because your letters act like injections for a sick person. Be healthy, take care of your health, and take care of yourself.³⁸

Rywka Zygielbojm used a similar "medical" metaphor. On July 24, 1941, she wrote:

I have received your letter [...]. It came very quickly. I am glad at least we can communicate by letter. You ask me to write to you often. I have the same request for you. Your letters are our medicine. We miss a word from our loved ones so much that it is beyond human comprehension. [...] Dear Dad, you write very little about yourself. I would like to know exactly how you are doing. I miss you and all loved ones. Now, as I write, I have tears in my eyes, and I feel like crying, but we are tough and not only made of iron but iron-concrete as well. We must persevere. Maybe we'll see each other again. Write right away!³⁹

Care

Although the sentences may seem trivial sometimes, describing the daily routine, the maturity of the child authors can often be detected. Children often cared for their parents and sympathized with them, even when they felt lost and helpless. They asked about their absent parents' state of health, their well-being, and work.

"Dear Daddy! How are you? Are you healthy? I am healthy, and I feel well. Write to me about what you do. I'm kissing you," Artur Zygielbojm wrote to his father on March 8, 1941.⁴⁰ A few months later, on November 1,

38 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 196.

39 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 808.

40 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 801.

1941, he asked: “Are you healthy? Write to me about what colleagues you have at work. Do you receive letters from your brother? Write to me about what’s up with him?”⁴¹

Apart from longing, children’s letters show special care for their parents, resulting from a strong emotional bond. In the letters of Finkelsztejn’s daughters, their maturity draws the reader’s attention. The girls cared for their parents, and they especially sympathized with their distant father, realizing that even though he was in a much better situation, it must have been very difficult for him. On March 30, 1941, Awiwa wrote:

Dear Daddy, what are you doing? You ask me so many questions in your last letter of February 23 that I cannot answer them, and I will only answer some of them for you. So we are healthy, we have enough to eat and clothes, in a word, we have everything. A thousand kisses.⁴²

Estera told her father many times during her two-year correspondence to take care of himself, to “hold on.” The instructions to take care of his well-being and the “pieces of advice” given by the girl in such a difficult situation are moving. At the beginning of August 1941, she wrote:

I am very glad that you take care of yourself, dress appropriately, please, dear, if you stop receiving letters from us, do not lose heart. Know that mummy looks after us and herself and that we will surely meet 100% healthy and strong.⁴³

A few months later, on October 15, 1941, she reassured her father again:

My sweetheart, how you dare to doubt that we love you, be sure that our separation not only did not weaken our love but quite the opposite. You can’t even imagine how much longing is hidden under the cover of these words. As a task, you must be healthy and remember that somewhere in the distance your wise wife and children who love you, superhuman miss you, now we must hold on, and when we connect, we will definitely make up the time of separation. Be healthy because this is the most important thing. Your truly loving, Tusia.⁴⁴

41 Trębacz, “Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,” 812.

42 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 251–52.

43 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 352.

44 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 400.

Artur Zygielbojm's letter from October 11, 1941, is similar in tone. He writes more childishly because of his age; however, concern for his father and fear for his workaholicism is clearly visible here: "Dear Daddy! I received your letter, which made me very happy. [...] How are you? Are you healthy? I am asking you not to work 28 h[ours] a day, as you did here, but 8, 10 h[ours], humanly."⁴⁵

As Dalia Ofer notices, "In an atmosphere of dread, the family could be either a support or a burden."⁴⁶ In the case of the Zygielbojms and the Finkelsztejns, one can definitely speak of the first. Letters were a form of support for the separated family, providing encouragement and consolation in difficult moments. Certainly, it would have been much more difficult for them without the exchange of the correspondence.

Self-censorship

It is impossible to escape the question of how truthful the children were to their fathers about the conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto. Their letters brought up only a tiny fraction of the knowledge about the realities of the time, which we know well from other sources, including personal documents. Indeed, both the daughters of Chaim Finkelsztein and the children of Szmul Zygielbojm wrote about their everyday lives, and it does not seem that they hid sad events from them. "I'm doing well. I am in Miedzeszyn, in the Sanatorium. It's almost like before the war here. Only with firewood and food worse. I am as healthy as a horse," wrote Artur on January 19, 1940.⁴⁷ In turn, on May 15, 1941, Rywka reported: "As for how we manage, we sell from the apartment, different things. Dear Daddy, there is no other advice, but let's hope."⁴⁸ However, it is obvious they did not write about everything. Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak, who was in contact with the younger daughter of Finkelsztein, wrote: "Regardless of everything, as Awiwa recalled years later, she constantly felt hungry. However, in her letters, the question of hunger does not appear."⁴⁹

One can wonder why there was a certain reticence in the letters. An awareness of correspondence censorship may have had some influence. Hence, the authors did not write about everything directly and used specific phrases or terms. For example, Zygielbojm's daughter, who,

45 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 812.

46 Ofer, "Cohesion and Rupture," 151.

47 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 795–796.

48 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 805.

49 Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Łęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* ..., 19.

unable to mention the high mortality rate in the ghetto, used the name of a well-known funeral home owner: "Also, our only dream is to be with you. You can imagine the extent of this dream. Here Mr. Pinkiert has a lot of work to do."⁵⁰ It seems, however, that it was much more important to spare their loved ones' pain and suffering. In a situation where loving family members experienced such different circumstances, the exception is letters in which they write directly about their tragic situation. Rather, they try to avoid such descriptions, thereby avoiding the worries of loved ones.

Obviously, the children were unable to convey the horror of the ghetto reality. They were also undoubtedly protected by their mothers and other adults. The requests for food parcels, especially for their specific content, reflected their situation. On the other hand, probably even very detailed information would not bring the nightmare of the occupation nor the ghetto conditions closer to people who had not experienced them and would not be able to fully visualize what was happening there, or even believe it. Perhaps the children, especially the older ones, were aware of this. On May 12, 1940, Estera confessed:

Dear Daddy!!! I would kiss you to death for joy that you send letters so often. Maybe someday you will understand what your letters mean to us, although I doubt it. Papciu, nothing new with us, don't be nervous about anything, nothing will happen to us. You gotta hold on! We understand that you are doing what you can, don't blame yourself for leaving because you are sinning, you don't know what you are talking about, and you couldn't help us anyway.⁵¹

At the same time, the children write about glimpses of "normal" life, moments that make them temporarily happy. Artur Zygielbojm bragged about his school successes and activities. On October 11, 1941, he wrote:

We are all fine. We are preparing for sports, geographical and literary competitions, between the 3rd and 4th groups. [...] Recently, we had a Nature Day with a performance that we managed quite well. It was a day dedicated to nature. A newspaper was then hung on the wall. Praise to Nature and "Baba" made of crops from our field. The day passed in a festive mood.⁵²

50 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 805.

51 Koźmińska-Frejlik, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* ..., 74.

52 Trębacz, "Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje," 812.

They especially treasure those situations that remind them of the happy moments spent with their loved ones. But even these moments are marked by longing. “Dear papa!”—Estera wrote to her father in May 1940—

I arranged the birthday in such a way that now it is possible to celebrate a birthday nicely. Kitty! You can understand that even for a moment I have not forgotten you, even more so today. I saw you dancing awkwardly, joking with girls, and I felt your protective gaze on me.⁵³

Conclusion

The preserved Holocaust children's correspondence is noteworthy for many reasons. Its content, apart from the factual layer, reveals human experiences in an extreme, abnormal situation. It was impossible to write about everything in a short letter. However, despite the condensed form of correspondence, the emotions find an outlet and resonate. I presume these young authors did not think strangers would read what they wrote. Therefore, they openly wrote about their feelings. They mention the good old days. The letters are mostly focused on the authors' emotions. They rarely discuss daily routines, as diaries do.⁵⁴

The realities of the war changed relations with loved ones, sometimes causing mutual distance. Conflicts arose among relatives living in the same place. Although they are a very small sample, the analyzed letters, however, show that the outbreak of war did not always detrimentally change family relations. In the Finkelsztein family, one can observe through their correspondence how close the relationship bonds were between the mother and daughters during the entire period. Mutual love and tenderness for each other are reflected in the paper. Their attitude towards their father, who was far away, does not change either. Their correspondence is filled with feelings, openly expressed longing and love, shared memories, and tender expressions. Their situation is similar to the Zygielbojm family. The letters are filled with great concern for their father and sincere interest in his fate. Both Artur and Rywka miss him very much, but neither of them reproaches him for his departure or the undoubtedly difficult decision.

53 Koźmińska-Frejlik, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba ...*, 80.

54 For example, see: Susan Lee Shneiderman, ed., *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing up in the Warsaw Ghetto* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); Renia Knoll, *Dziennik* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2012); Rywka Lipszyc, *Dziennik z getta łódzkiego*, ed. Ewa Wiatr (Crakow and Budapest: Austeria, 2017).

The children's testimonies are a significant source showing how they coped with everyday life during war and mass murder. It seems that, unlike diaries, they are devoid of artistic elements. Children write without special care for linguistic correctness or literary style. They do not attach importance to these factors. Simple short sentences, sometimes just a few words, and the same questions, which display the tragedy of their situation even more. This does not mean that they show the fullness of their emotional state. The censorship (external and internal) already mentioned forced restrictions. Nevertheless, the correspondence shows many details of their life not available in other sources, such as terms of endearment. It documents the strength of family bonds and captures the inner world of thinking and feeling. How much poorer history would be without these, even short letters, without the messages and emotions contained in them?

Of course, children's letters reveal only part of their wartime experience, and their correspondence should not be expected to provide the same kind of information as official documents. They cannot be regarded as sufficient evidence, but juxtaposed with other sources, they let us see another dimension of the stories told. Sometimes children's letters are a source that is hard to analyze because they are often written in a language understandable only to their authors. However, they provide an exceptional insight into the everyday life of the young. Their greatest advantage is the ability to capture the child's world of being, thinking, and feeling. Letters, like other ego documents, allow the researcher to focus on emotions and the dynamics of their change. They do not pretend to show the whole scope of events happening in their surroundings but rather a very intimate, individual view of one's life in an abnormal situation. They also contain observations about the wartime social world, the adult world in which the children grew up prematurely. As Michlic rightly points out: "For a historian who wants to understand and reconstruct Jewish society on the level of the family unit as it emerged from extreme persecution, child survivors' testimonies are indispensable. Moreover, they are important data in the analysis of how individual self-perception and perceptions of the war and genocide change over age, time, and maturation."⁵⁵ It is crucial to consider the subjectivity of children's view of reality and to recognize children's agency.⁵⁶ Their letters are essential for the history of childhood but also the everyday history of the Second World War. Therefore, the children's correspondence from the Holocaust is a valuable and irreplaceable source in historical investigations.

⁵⁵ Michlic, *The Aftermath and After*, 148.

⁵⁶ Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady*, 35.

“We feel we must add our appeal”: Humanitarian Decision-Making in Three Appeals to the Government in Post-Second World War Britain¹

During the Second World War, as the Nazis occupied the countries of Europe, the children of these lands began to occupy the imaginations of contemporaries. As Tara Zahra argues, reports of the impact of this war on children “spawned dystopian fears of European civilization in disarray.”² This devastation of children became infused with ideas of the destruction of the future, and the youth came to represent people’s hopes and fears for what lay ahead.³ If the impacts of this war on children were extensive, so too were the efforts to rescue, rehabilitate, and recuperate them. One form of aid, which was also undertaken after the First World War, was recuperative holidays. These involved sending children abroad for short periods of time to restore their physical and psychological well-being. Though it varied depending on the scheme, children often spent time in reception centers before being placed with local foster families in the host country. Such schemes were organized, mostly independently of each other, by individuals, organizations, and governments throughout Europe. My research approaches an integrated, transnational,

- 1 Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945, The National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 371/55521. Acknowledgment: I am very grateful to the editors of this volume for inviting me to participate in the conference “Children at War and Genocide,” and also for their constructive feedback on this piece. This research was funded by Trinity College Dublin and the Irish Research Council.
- 2 Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 4.
- 3 See: Zahra, *Lost Children*, 88–117; Rebecca Clifford, *Survivors: Children’s Lives after the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 38–58.

and comparative history of this phenomenon and the experiences of those who organized, facilitated, and participated in the schemes.⁴ While there has been a welcome move towards examining children's own voices and agency, which my broader research embraces and incorporates, it also seeks to provide a history of this phenomenon that situates it within postwar Europe and underscores the connections between the experiences of children and those of the adults around them.⁵ Recuperative holidays were not just the work of governments and professional bodies; they relied on the realization of the "admirable impulses," as one contemporary put it, of many amateurs and determined civilians.⁶ A key question that preoccupies my work is why people chose to undertake these kinds of initiatives and, in a time when need was abundant, how individuals determined to whom to devote their energy and attention.

In this period, there were schemes afoot throughout Europe to help children from all over the continent. Britain's most extensive recuperative holiday initiative, which had begun during the war and continued into the postwar years, involved the hosting of approximately 9,300 Dutch children.⁷ In examining how individuals and governments made humanitarian decisions, an interesting case study is Children of Europe Air Rescue, a voluntary organization established by Air Vice-Marshal H. V.

- 4 This is a short case study from my PhD project, "Little Guests': Transnational Humanitarian Hospitality for Europe's Children in the Aftermath of the Second World War," which is based on research in Britain, Ireland, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Other work on this phenomenon includes: Bernd Haunfelder, *Kinderzüge in die Schweiz: Die Deutschlandhilfe des Schweizerischen Roten Kreuzes 1946–56* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2007); Cathy Molohan, *Germany and Ireland, 1945–1955: Two Nation's Friendship* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999); Anton Partl and Walter Pohl (eds.) *Verschickt in die Schweiz: Kriegskinder entdecken eine bessere Welt* (Wien: Böhlau, 2005); Isabella Matauschek, *Lokales Leid – Globale Herausforderung: die Verschickung österreichischer Kinder nach Dänemark und in die Niederlande im Anschluss an den Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2018); Jan Sintemaartensdijk, *De Bleekneusjes van 1945: De Uitzending van Nederlandse Kinderen naar het Buitenland* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2002).
- 5 On the state of the research field, see, for example: Sarah Maza, "The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood," *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1261–85; Laura Tisdall, "State of the Field: The Modern History of Childhood," *History* 107, no. 378 (2022): 949–64.
- 6 H. E. Brooks to F. H. Cleobury, November 14, 1945, TNA Home Office (HO) 213/783.
- 7 Netherlands Government "Children Committee," General Report for November 1944–October 1946 7, TNA Ministry of Health (MH) 102/1467. On the evacuation of Dutch children towards the end of the war, see: Ingrid de Zwart, "Coordinating Hunger: The Evacuation of Children During the Dutch Food Crisis, 1945," *War & Society* 35, no. 2 (2016): 132–49.

Champion de Crespigny, an Australian senior Royal Air Force (RAF) officer who had commanded the British Air Headquarters in Iraq during the Second World War. He unsuccessfully stood for election as the Labour representative for Newark in 1945 and served as a regional commissioner for the Control Commission for Germany in Schleswig-Holstein in 1946 and 1947.⁸ De Crespigny shared his proposal at a meeting in the Albert Hall on November 26, 1945.⁹ This called for the “rescue of 10,000 children under seven from Central Europe irrespective of race, whose lives we can save by bringing them here for about six months, until conditions have sufficiently improved for their return,” though it quickly became apparent that the main targets were German children and the phrasing was a tactical attempt to avoid the likely objections to a scheme for German children.¹⁰ In his proposal, de Crespigny argued that the scheme “would be a spectacular and dramatic instance of international brotherhood, and the movement should grow into something really big in giving a lead to the world.”¹¹ He also suggested the public would welcome the scheme because the “constructive humanitarian work” would “come as a great moral relief to individuals who have been employed for so long on war time occupations.”¹² In particular, he argued that it would have a positive effect on members of the RAF, whom it was proposed would provide transport for the children and would welcome it as a “healing memory.”¹³ Although this scheme was rejected by the government and never came to pass, it still warrants examination and can provide insights into postwar humanitarian decision-making at different levels, from the individual to the international. This commentary will

8 Air Vice-Marshal H. V. Champion de Crespigny, *Air of Authority: A History of RAF Organisation*, last modified December 16, 2019, www.rafweb.org/Biographies/Champion.htm; *Montrose Standard*, May 22, 1946, 1.

9 De Crespigny to Chuter Ede (Home Secretary), December 5, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521. De Crespigny also sent an identical letter to the Prime Minister and others on the same date (TNA Prime Minister’s Office [PREM] 8/221). In an earlier letter to the Prime Minister, he noted that it was Victor Gollancz who had invited him to speak at the Albert Hall meeting (De Crespigny to Prime Minister, letter, December 1, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221). Furthermore, in his address at the Albert Hall, a transcript of which can also be found in PREM 8/221, de Crespigny noted that he had developed this scheme with Dr. Karl König, and it had the early support of many groups, including the “Save the Children Association.”

10 De Crespigny to Prime Minister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221; File minutes, January 8, 1946 (the original note is dated 1945, though this must be a typing error), TNA FO 371/55521.

11 De Crespigny to Ede, December 5, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

12 De Crespigny to Prime Minister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

13 De Crespigny to Prime Minister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

introduce the scheme and some responses to it before moving on to a more in-depth examination of three letters that petitioned the government to support bringing German children to Britain.

The success of schemes like de Crespigny's depended on government approval and, in order to gain this and be successfully implemented thereafter, they would also need support from the general public.¹⁴ There were a number of possible motivations behind the specific desire to help Germany in this period, the explanations and implications of which extend beyond the example of recuperative holidays. Reflecting on de Crespigny's scheme, one Foreign Office official observed that it was "all part of the strange attraction which Germany continues to exercise on a section of the British public."¹⁵ While perceptions of the former enemy were hostile in the immediate aftermath of the war, by the autumn of 1945 this was beginning to change and public sympathy was increasingly expressed for the Germans due to overwhelming press reports of suffering (especially among the children) and, in particular, the sensationalist publications of Victor Gollancz which drew attention to civilian hunger and hardship in the British Zone.¹⁶ However, the official government response to this scheme was somewhat self-defensive, with assertions that Britain could not be accused of not "playing our full part in the relief of distress in Europe" on the basis that Dutch children and some Jewish children from German concentration camps had been welcomed in the country, plans were in place to accommodate groups of French children, and a system was being developed to bring over distressed relatives of those already in Britain. Furthermore, the Foreign Office indicated that due to "communal feeding arrangements," children in the British zone were "as well fed as children in many other countries in Europe."¹⁷ It was also noted that the practical obstacles were "formidable."¹⁸ Indeed, there is a sense that, to a certain extent, the fate of the German case was deter-

14 File minutes, January 8, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

15 File minutes, Troutbeck, January 11, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

16 Paul Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilising Europe after the Second World War* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 112–24.

17 Letter from Chuter Ede to Air Vice-Marshal de Crespigny, March, 1, 1946; Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, PREM 8/221. On the introduction of meals for school children in the British Zone in February 1946, see: Johannes-Dieter Steinert, "British Humanitarian Assistance: Wartime Planning and Postwar Realities," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 3 (2008), 431.

18 Letter from Chuter Ede to Air Vice-Marshal de Crespigny, March 1, 1946; Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, PREM 8/221.

mined by its consideration alongside a number of other schemes for the relief of children in Europe.¹⁹ While practical considerations were certainly significant in determining the outcome, it is evident that political and moral issues also influenced the final Cabinet decision. It was felt that the proposal to have the RAF transport German children would have meant giving them priority over Allied children who, in other initiatives, were responsible for finding their own transport. This would, a memorandum by the Home Secretary concluded, create a “very bad impression” in every Allied country.²⁰ During their deliberations over the scheme, the Foreign Office was concerned enough about this issue that one official suggested it might be “wise to stipulate that only a certain percentage of the children should be Germans and Austrians.”²¹ This was not an unrealistic concern, as evident in the vitriol received from Czechoslovakia when reports of this proposal reached the press there.²²

Furthermore, the practical necessity of having adults of the same nationality accompany the children to overcome language barriers and generally look after them, was perceived as a much more significant problem in the case of German children than those of other nationalities. As the Home Secretary’s memorandum emphasized, the experience with the Dutch children had indicated that there would need to be a ratio of approximately five to one between children and adults, thus necessitating the transfer of approximately two thousand German adults with the children. In addition to concerns about the practicality of ensuring that no “political undesirables” made their way to Britain, officials were “doubtful” about “whether public opinion, which on the whole might welcome the reception of German children, would tolerate the reception of adults.”²³ Moreover, the Women’s Voluntary Service, “who had cooperated most willingly to help the Dutch children,” were not willing to assist in the provision of clothing or finding billets for German children.²⁴ However, some in government took a more favorable view. The German

19 Letter from Geoffrey de Freitas to McAllister, December 13, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

20 Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, 2, TNA PREM 8/221. See also: TNA Cabinet (CAB) 129/7/1.

21 File minutes, December 17, 1945, TNA FO 371/51260.

22 File: Czechoslovak press attacks against alleged invitation of German children to England, dated December 31, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

23 Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, 1–2, TNA PREM 8/221. See also: TNA CAB 129/7/1.

24 P. T. Hayman (HO) to R. W. Selby (FO), March 8, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

Department, for example, felt “there could be no more effective method of educating German children than bringing them up in British homes” and that “schemes of this kind are a concrete proof that we practice and really believe in what we preach.”²⁵

Often reflecting arguments made in the government’s considerations, the response of the British public to this scheme was divided along many lines, in particular between those who saw the German children as innocent victims and those who feared the consequences of their Nazi upbringing. The *Gloucester Citizen* published a letter from one man who responded to de Crespigny’s scheme with “reflective apprehension” and, suggesting that there would likely be significant “criticism and bias from many people,” stated that he himself, though a “lover of children and staunch defender of those ‘who of themselves cannot help themselves’” believed that charity such as this should begin at home.²⁶ A similar sentiment was expressed by an observer who suggested that while “on humanitarian grounds one would not wish to penalise children of any nationality,” more Dutch children and the youth of other Allied countries should be given a “chance” before German children.²⁷ One person, arguing that the children of former-occupied countries should come first, wrote that “whilst starvation amongst the young is a terrible thing, it should be German children who should have the dry crusts, and the Dutch and Belgians who should have butter and jam on their bread.”²⁸ Alternatively, some took the view that it would do “great succour” in light of the need to foster democratic organizations in Germany or emphasized that German children could not “in any circumstances be held responsible for what has happened in their country.”²⁹ Of course, these discussions extended beyond the specific case of de Crespigny’s scheme. One letter to the editor in 1946 asked if those who disapproved of helping German children wanted to bring them up to “believe the same doctrine of hatred as their fathers did before 1939?”³⁰

On the other hand, there were those who argued that there was “nothing to be gained by a sickening display of sentimentality and misplaced generosity” and reminded those who pitied the children “that the

25 File minutes, January 8, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521. One minister objected to this position in a handwritten note.

26 *Gloucester Citizen*, December 5, 1945, 4.

27 *Liverpool Daily Post*, December 4, 1945, 2.

28 *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 14, 1945, 8.

29 *Nottingham Journal*, December 12, 1945, 4; *Nottingham Journal*, December 4, 1945, 2.

30 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, December 3, 1946, 6.

German children of 1914 were the Nazi thugs of 1939.”³¹ Another common argument was that there were many children in Britain who would benefit from the goodwill of those who sought to help German children.³² For many who opposed de Crespigny’s scheme, a particular lesson was to be learned from the experience of the Scandinavian countries. They reminded people that in 1918, Norway had taken in starving German children who then returned as part of the invading army in 1940.³³ Lord Mountevans argued this point in the House of Lords in December 1945:

I happened to be in Norway during the invasion and I saw a sight I shall never forget. One realized that the Germans had local knowledge and I saw mountain homes and valley homes set on fire. I saw fathers, grandfathers and great grandfathers bringing out little Norwegian children, babes in arms, who stared wide-eyed with terror and amazement at these Germans whom they [had] been told about and who had been brought up in that sun-kissed land. That is the way they repaid the kindness of a country which had not been at war for at least a hundred years. These youngsters forgot the hardships and humiliation of post-war Germany after 1918; when they returned surely it should not have been as murderers.³⁴

Stories about this betrayal had been widely circulated at the time of the invasion and emerged again during debates about postwar humanitarian decision-making.³⁵ One letter to the editor asserted that if those asking for homes for German children asked “people to take in as guests the destitute and starving Poles, Czechs, Jugoslavs, and Austrians or Hungarians, most folks (myself included) would be most willing to help in such humane work, but to take in and nourish vipers into our homes as the

31 *Western Morning News*, December 17, 1946, 4. See also: *Eastbourne Gazette*, October 10, 1945, 15.

32 *Western Morning News*, December 17, 1946, 4; *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 14, 1945, 8.

33 See for example: *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 21, 1945, 8; *Nottingham Journal*, December 21, 1945, 2; *Linlithgoushire Gazette*, August 5, 1949, 4. See also: Steinert, “British Humanitarian Assistance,” 432–33.

34 Lord Mountevans speaking on the Situation in Central Europe, House of Lords (HL) Deb 05 Dec. 1945, Vol. 138 cc 341–98.

35 See for example: *The Scotsman*, April 30, 1940, 4; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, April 27, 1940, 1; *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, April 27, 1940, 4; *Western Morning News*, April 30, 1940, 5.

Norwegians did, NO.”³⁶ Nonetheless, many were willing and eager to help alleviate the suffering of German children.

An Analysis of Three Individual Letters to the Government

Before it was denied government approval, de Crespigny’s scheme was considered at an interdepartmental meeting, which was convened “owing to public pressure” on January 11, 1946.³⁷ Despite its ultimate failure to secure government support, de Crespigny’s scheme provides insights into postwar humanitarian decision-making and the emotional mood in certain sections of society. While contemporaries noted that there were approximately five hundred offers of hospitality for German children in response to the scheme, this research has not yet discovered a consolidated collection of letters or offers of hospitality, and it is not entirely clear whether these were sent to the organizers of the scheme, to the government, or to both.³⁸ Those appeals from the general public that do turn up are usually embedded in files created by government ministries. While these sources are not voluminous and are often only discovered through the serendipity of the research process, they can be invaluable in answering and inspiring research questions. This commentary will examine the three appeals that appear in one Foreign Office file regarding offers of hospitality to German children, the rest of which concerns the consideration of the de Crespigny scheme and various documents relating to this theme.³⁹ The people who wrote these letters do not appear again in this research project. While it may be possible to trace them and their family trees, particularly given the availability of resources such as Findmypast and Ancestry.com, their personal histories are not the subject of this history. This source commentary cannot claim to be representative of anything other than the written word of these three people in postwar Britain but also endeavors not to see them simply as anecdotes

36 *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 14, 1945, 8.

37 See: Telegram from Foreign Office to Prague, January 7, 1946; Draft meeting report on “German Children”; and other files in TNA FO 371/55521. This scheme and its consideration is examined in more depth in my PhD thesis.

38 Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, 1, TNA CAB 129/7/1. It was noted in the Home Secretary’s memorandum that approximately five hundred offers of hospitality had been received. Furthermore, the Home Secretary received enough letters from M.P.s enclosing letters in which constituents asked to participate in this scheme that they devised a standard reply (File minutes, February 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/58103).

39 See: TNA FO 371/55521.

or soundbites in constructing an argument.⁴⁰ It will analyze the three letters in depth by examining how each approaches the task. At the same time, it will search for insights into the rationalizations they provide for their desire to help German children, many of which reflect (and may have been inspired by) the lines of debate and discussion examined in the previous section.

The first and most succinct letter came from Mr. C. D. M., who wrote to his local Member of Parliament, Arthur Moyle. The others, from Mrs. Winifred L. and Mr. and Mrs. Eric and Stella S., were addressed to the Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin.⁴¹ Both men were part of Clement Attlee's postwar Labour government.⁴² Although Winifred's letter was dated March 4, 1946, after the de Crespigny scheme had already been scrapped, the others date from around the time it was announced in the winter of 1945. Where C. D.'s letter is quite short and to the point, the others are more emphatic and detailed. It is difficult to ascertain much about C. D. short of his address, though Eric and Stella state that they are "ordinary working class people, and are Socialists, because we are Christians." On the other hand, Winifred's letter comes from a manor in Somerset, and she opens by declaring that she is a "staunch Conservative." While C. D. explicitly stated that he (and his wife) had offered to take in a German boy, Eric and Stella simply stressed their hope that Bevin would give "all the pleas for help," with particular reference to a scheme for bringing over German children, his "most sympathetic attention." Winifred, on the other hand, offered to take in up to thirty children herself.⁴³

Each of the writers sent their letters with a clear purpose and this is evident in the format of their petitions.⁴⁴ C. D. used negative feedback to spur his local M. P.:

40 On this idea, see: Julia Laite, "The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age," *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 4 (2020): 963–89.

41 C. D. M. to Arthur Moyle M. P., letter, December 15, 1945; Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945; Letter from Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521. The letter writers' surnames have been omitted from this work to maintain their privacy. The file also contains a letter from a member of the public enquiring about the possibility of taking in the child of an acquaintance in Germany, though this has not been included here because the intended recipient of aid was known to the offeror.

42 For an overview of postwar Britain, see relevant chapters in: Dan Todman, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942–1947* (London: Penguin, 2020).

43 C. D. M. to Arthur Moyle M. P., letter, December 15, 1945; Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945; Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, letter, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

44 This research cannot yet confirm if the organizers of this scheme explicitly encouraged the public to reach out to politicians or supplied them with any guidelines for

I am rather perturbed with the attitude of the government to the German children. It seems to run counter to the oft expressed concern for the brotherhood of man and international fellowship. The matter so concerns me that I have offered to have a little German boy in my home for a period if transport can be found to bring him over.⁴⁵

Eric and Stella, for their part, heaped praise on Bevin and also called the scheme “an opportunity to exercise charity in its true sense, and to sow seeds of international understanding which is so necessary for international peace.” Interestingly, they also compelled him at various points to consider his own and the British nation’s “responsibility”:

You have shown since you became Foreign Secretary a deep understanding of the problems facing the world, and a courage and outspokenness one does not normally expect in the “diplomatic” world. It is because of this that we feel you will understand that Christian charity demands that we cannot stand aside when there is so much misery needing help. Surely the British nation bears some responsibility for the chaos because of the mass bombing carried out in our name. This has dislocated transport and made housing a far greater problem than it is in Britain, and that is bad enough.⁴⁶

Such *allusions* to British responsibility, which were strongly denied by the government, were also evident in de Crespigny’s proposal, in which he argued:

During the war this Service has been employed in disrupting central Europe with the object of destroying resistance. If we have to look back upon the tragic loss of life which we have not done everything in our power to mitigate, the crews who staffed our bombers will undoubtedly feel responsibility. To be employed now on humanitarian

doing so. However, there is an indication that they may have in a report about a Save Europe Now meeting in December 1945 which “urged the people to take German children into their homes for part of the winter.” During this meeting, Wing-Commander E. R. Millington commented on the “question of sending food to Europe” noting that “the Minister for Food was probably frightened that the people would not support the Government if it sent food to Europe” and that “the people must tell the Government that it under-estimated the people’s political good sense and moral goodwill.” (*The Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 7, 1945, 5).

45 C. D. M. to Arthur Moyle M. P., letter, December 15, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

46 Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

and constructive work would be welcomed by the whole Service and would be a healing memory.⁴⁷

This is an interesting notion, though a representative from the Air Ministry emphasized that “the RAF did not feel that any ‘conscience salving’ was needed for those very necessary operations of war!”⁴⁸ Another example of this comes from a December 1945 meeting organized by Victor Gollancz’s Save Europe Now to encourage people to welcome German children into their homes. Here Wing-Commander E. R. Millington, M. P., remarked that he was “determined to do all he possibly could to assist the German people to throw off the bitterness of a defeated nation, and to enable German children to grow up in a free, clean, and democratic atmosphere.” He said: “For every life I have taken in bombing raids I feel a moral obligation to save ten or more lives.”⁴⁹ Moreover, there is evidence of the language of Allied moral responsibility emerging during the war. For example, in his appeal to the British people to lobby for food and navicerts for children during the blockade of occupied Europe, Howard Kershner asserted: “Until we make the effort, however, we are not blameless, and must bear a considerable part of the responsibility for the loss of a generation of children.”⁵⁰ There was also public opposition—spearheaded by the likes of Gollancz—to the bombing of Germany at the end of the war, which may have fed into the expressions of moral responsibility and the need to make up for wartime actions that recur in humanitarian rationalizations in this period.⁵¹ Further to this, as Paul Betts argues, “British views of the Germans” were distinct because they turned postwar “criticism on themselves as occupiers, to the extent that they saw the proper treatment of Germans in the British Zone as an instance and test of British

47 J. M. Troutbeck to Eric and Stella S., letter, January 9, 1946; Draft report of meeting on “German Children,” TNA FO 371/55521; De Crespigny to McAllister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221. It is not possible to know in which format or how much detail Eric and Stella read or heard about de Crespigny’s proposal and therefore to make a confident link between their points and his language. See also: De Crespigny to McAllister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

48 Draft report of meeting on “German Children” at Parliamentary Under Secretary of State’s room at the Home Office on January 11, 1946, TNA Board of Trade (BT) 64/1501.

49 *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 7, 1945, 5.

50 Howard Kershner, *One Humanity: A Plea for Our Friends and Allies in Europe* (New York: Putnam, 1943), 27.

51 See: Francis Graham-Dixon, *The Allied Occupation of Germany: The Refugee Crisis, Denazification and the Path to Reconstruction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 7–10.

civilisation.”⁵² However, while he argues that “even if this moral crusade was often motivated by Christian principles, it was the care of the bodies (not souls) that spurred calls for action,” this was not always true of recuperative holiday initiatives.⁵³

In their letter, Eric and Stella underscored the limits of their potential impact, writing: “There is so little that, we, as individuals, can do in the matter but you are in a powerful position, and with your opportunity goes grave responsibility for the future.” Like Eric and Stella, Winifred introduced herself and piled praise on the Minister in her petition to Bevin, whom she encouraged to “go on being Brave” because England is “looking to you,” signing off as “your sincere and respectful admirer”:

As a staunch Conservative I would in the future vote Labour, if I knew you were going to hold a post in, or lead the Government. This feeling is held about you pretty generally by all parties through the country, I believe. Yet it was not held about Churchill although he brought us through 1940, 41 and 42. So you see it is rather terrific. We look to you to bring us through the next struggle, for whether Britain wills it or not, she must either get off the map or [...]⁵⁴

She was writing in March 1946, when de Crespigny’s scheme had already been rejected. However, while she echoed Eric and Stella in underscoring the limits of her capacity to influence, she determined to do what she could, regardless of the feasibility of her plan:

That is why I am going to beg to be allowed to take German children into my home, temporarily, from our Zone until this threat of starvation is over. I believe many people would do this if an appeal were made through the country, say through the Quakers or some other Relief Society operating in Germany. For instance, I might be able to take thirty children, helped with a few mugs and camp beds, providing the Government were prepared to allow ration cards for the children, even if these were restricted to certain foods. I think this gesture could be made to the starving Germans without offending the Dutch or any of our allies. I know only too well that taking German children is not even touching the fringe of the food problem BUT WE MUST DO

52 Betts, *Ruin and Renewal*, 123.

53 Betts, *Ruin and Renewal*, 123.

54 Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, letter, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

SOMETHING NOT TO LET THESE PEOPLE STARVE. We owe it to our humanity, prestige and self-interest.⁵⁵

It should also be noted that the writers are all steeped in the reality of postwar Britain and acknowledge this, assuring the recipients of their awareness of the other factors at play in such decisions.⁵⁶ Where C. D. noted that he and his wife would try to make do on their own ration cards, Eric and Stella stressed that if such a scheme were approved, the German children “could be fed and clothed entirely by the [host] families concerned from their own rations, and so would be no liability on the rest of the community.” Though Winifred did not offer to feed the children from her rations, she showed sensitivity to both the limitations of government resources and the controversy associated with humanitarian aid for Germany when the children of former Allied and liberated countries were also in considerable need. She also stressed that if an “open brave talk were [sic] given over the wireless and the position explained, people here would accept bread rationing” to prevent starvation in Germany. This underscores her sense of urgency.

One difficulty with interpreting letters such as these is that it is impossible to truly know where the genuine belief of the writer lies and where it is substituted for by their expectations of what the recipient needs to hear. Though this research has not yet encountered any specific instructions from de Crespigny or others to petition the government about this matter, there are a number of common themes and strategies evident in these letters. In each case, there is a sense of urgency and conscious rationalization. Whereas C. D.’s letter, which is quite short, explains that he is willing to take in a German child “in the name of humanity” and international fellowship, there is a lot more to unpack in the others. Eric and Stella’s letter is rooted in various interpretations of moral, national, and Christian responsibility. In addition to a sense of having, as British citizens, responsibility for the situation in Germany, they also go into detail on their interpretation of their Christian duty:

We are ordinary working class people, and are Socialists, because we are Christians. Believing, like yourself, in the universal brotherhood of the human race, we appeal to you to use your utmost influence in the support of essential Christian principles. We have, of course, no love

55 Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, letter, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

56 See: Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

of Fascism, but we know from very many reports, that even in Germany, there was much opposition to the Nazi regime and ideals, especially among the Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike. It is these brave people—who have suffered much for their Faith—who must be helped in every way to rebuild their country on Christian principles. You know as well, if not better than, we do, what the alternative is if Christianity is not the main force in a country.⁵⁷

Their need to rationalize their desire to help Germans and underscore that they were no supporters of fascism is a reminder of the divided opinions surrounding initiatives on behalf of Germany in this period. A final point, which is evident in the letters from Eric and Stella and Winifred, is the impact of emerging Cold War tensions on humanitarian decision-making at the individual level. This is quite explicitly indicated by the latter, who references the “next struggle” and states that “with a strongly Sovietised Germany and an increasingly communistic Holland, it will take all that a Bevin can do to keep England sitting pretty.” She also references a “good letter in *The Times*” on March 2, 1946. It is very likely that she is referring to a letter from A. G. Dickens at Keble College, Oxford, in which he argues that feeding the British Zone in Germany depends on more than “mere humanitarian considerations” and asks: “Is it not our obvious interest to create bastions of western democracy in Continental Europe? But whereas Fascism and Communism both thrive on hunger, democracy by its very nature cannot do so.”⁵⁸ The influence of this letter on her thinking is clearly reflected in Winifred’s letter to Bevin, where she talks of a “gesture” to Germany, writing in capital letters: “WE MUST DO SOMETHING NOT TO LET THESE PEOPLE STARVE. We owe it to our humanity, prestige and self-interest.” At the end of her letter, she asked Bevin to “tell one of your over-worked Secretaries to let me know to whom to apply for permission to take children.”

Eric and Stella’s reference to the Cold War is more subtle and open to interpretation, with allusions to Bevin’s undoubted knowledge of the “alternative” “if Christianity is not the main force in a country” and his “grave responsibility for the future.” These references, especially when considered alongside other sources, underscore the extent to which emerging Cold War anxieties were a factor in humanitarian decision-making in

57 Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

58 A. G. Dickens, letter to the editor, *The Times*, March 2, 1946 (letter dated February 28), 5.

this period. Such fears continued to be apparent both in responses to recuperative holidays and to other forms of humanitarianism, particularly in the case of a divided Germany where people feared the political repercussions of widespread hunger and epidemics for the potential spread of communism.⁵⁹ However, even beyond the de Crespigny scheme and the specific case of German children, there were those who believed in the potential of showing children the benefits of democracy by taking them into their homes. For example, a report regarding the stay of Austrian children in Cheltenham in 1948 noted that:

Their three months' stay with the people of this great country will do more than merely mend mind and body. It will help strengthen a vital bond of friendship between the nations and instil into the minds of our little guests a lasting antidote to the slow poison of Communism being cunningly injected into children in almost every country in the world.⁶⁰

The broader research project that this source commentary stems from explores these issues in more detail, examining the entangled nature of the various recuperative holiday schemes in Britain and a number of other European countries, while also undertaking a more detailed comparative analysis.

It is interesting to note that though each of these letters petitions the government to support schemes for bringing German children to Britain, none of them mention the needs of children specifically. As was evident in the government deliberations over this scheme, initiatives on behalf of children were less controversial than those that might involve German adults. In this sense, aiding the children could serve as a less contentious way to show goodwill to Germany, alleviate one's moral qualms about Allied bombing, fulfill one's Christian duty, or play a part in securing democracy and peace in an uncertain future. While there were other schemes for bringing children from liberated or Allied countries to Britain, in addition to other means by which one could do their part to alleviate postwar suffering in Europe, those who sought to help Germany often had clear reasons for wanting to do so and had to go to greater lengths to explain this desire. Furthermore, offers to take in children (and humanitarianism in general) could entail a level of conditionality. In his

59 *Manchester Guardian*, May 16, 1946, 6; *Sevenoaks Chronicle & Kentish Advertiser*, April 4, 1947, 6.

60 *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic*, October 23, 1948, 4.

letter, C. D. notes that he and his wife “have offered to have a little German boy” in their home. It is unclear from the letter whether they would be willing to take in a girl, an older child, or a child of another nationality. On the other hand, there were some people who expressed a willingness to take in children from anywhere but Germany. While it can be explained in part by the abundance of need in postwar Europe and the necessity of making decisions, this pattern of conditional humanitarianism aligns with a broader trend of selectivity in such contexts. For example, Zahra notes that couples offering to adopt displaced children in this period “were disappointed upon discovering that blonde three-year-old girls were in short supply.”⁶¹

In seeking to write an integrated history of recuperative holidays from multiple perspectives, my PhD research has devised various questions that relate to the different groups and stages involved in the schemes. A key argument is that the so-called humanitarian impulse is actually a series of decisions based on practicalities, (pre)dispositions, prejudices, and past experiences. It is evident from these letters (and other sources) that humanitarian decision-making often had as much to do with the needs of the individuals providing aid as those receiving it. This can also provide insights into issues regarding other schemes that were occurring simultaneously and competing for attention and support at various levels of state and society. If factors such as the anticipation of potential negative futures or the need to ease one’s postwar conscience formed part of the desire to aid German children, rather than an explicitly pro-German sentiment, it follows that a lack of attention given to children (or even adults) of other nationalities and backgrounds may not always have been the result of prejudices against those groups. A lack of priority assigned to them might also be the result of a hierarchy determined as much by the givers’ own needs as those of the recipients of aid. Moreover, there were many who opposed schemes for German children not necessarily due to anti-German sentiment but from a desire to prioritize children from Allied or liberated countries. The possibility that individuals were simply responding to the initiatives and news they were aware of should not be discounted either. In each of these letters, there is a sense that the writers were responding to specific schemes or news stories they had read (or heard) about, and it is not possible to determine for certain what, if anything, they knew about other initiatives (such as the one for Dutch children) or the needs of other groups (such as child survivors of concentration camps).

61 Zahra, *Lost Children*, 9.

Finally, it is clear that sources such as these cannot speak for the population as a whole. Indeed, even where they display shared objectives and use similar discursive strategies, there are distinct differences between them. What we know of these writers is what they put in a letter to compel someone in a position of power to act. We cannot claim to know them from these letters, let alone say with certainty that they maintained the positions they set out here for more than the moments they took to write and send them, or how closely they held their expressed beliefs. What we can infer is that they believed in the importance of offering hospitality to German children strongly enough at the time of writing to follow through the steps of rationalizing their opinions and sending their letters. Julia Laite argues that “when a phenomenon can only be fully explained by examining the small stories that defined it, or were defined by it, then those stories become significant, in and of themselves.”⁶² This is certainly true in the case of individuals, such as the authors of the three letters examined here, actively participating in civil society and advocating for what they, for their own reasons—at least some of which we can identify—believe is right.

62 Laite, “The Emmet’s Inch,” 974–75.

PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Surviving Starvation in Soviet Ukraine: Children and Soviet Healthcare in the Early 1930s

An anonymous pediatrician and Soviet postwar refugee, interviewed in the United States by Harvard scholars in 1951, recalled her experience during the famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine: “Most of the mothers told us, ‘Why do you give us injections [vaccinations]? All that we need is bread.’ They really and truly needed bread first of all, and the rest could come later. Also, if we did prescribe food, they would say, ‘What food can we get?’”¹ The artificial, state-induced famine in Soviet Ukraine, known as the Holodomor, was the consequence of mass food requisitions and the “war on peasants.” The forced mass starvation became the instrument of collectivization. The Holodomor was part of a Soviet Union-wide famine; other areas affected by the mass starvation included, for example, Kazakhstan, the Lower Volga Region, and the Northern Caucasus. Kazakhstan experienced the highest number of victims in proportion to its population (approximately a quarter of the Kazakh people perished in 1930–1933). The catastrophic famine also heavily hit the Kuban region (a part of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic), populated by ethnic Ukrainians and Volga German communities.² At the same time,

- 1 Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule B, Vol. 2, Case 1700. Widener Library, Harvard University, 9. The identity of the pediatrician is unknown because, due to security reasons, all participants of the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System testified anonymously and their real names were not recorded on any documentation related to the project.
- 2 Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 274–82; Brian J. Boeck, “Complicating the National Interpretation of the Famine: Reexamining the Case of Kuban,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 30, no. 1–4 (2008): 31–48; Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 2018.

the famine in Ukraine had distinct features. Besides the famine, the Soviet government conducted repressive policies against the Ukrainian intelligentsia and the republic was one of the territories affected the most.³

Famines are associated with public health crises, and they put a substantial strain on healthcare systems. One of the features of catastrophic famines is the collapse of public healthcare systems due to the spread of communicable diseases caused by malnutrition and migration.⁴ As a result, diseases could often be one of the main causes of excess mortality. As the Soviet government attempted to cover up the famine, it is impossible to establish the primary cause of death of Holodomor victims. However, following the common pattern, the intensification of the famine caused the spread of infectious diseases, especially epidemic typhus.⁵ Traditionally, children are the most vulnerable population group during famines. According to demographic research, children below the age of fourteen constituted approximately 43.5 percent (1.7 million) of the Holodomor victims.⁶ My study examines the medical relief campaigns that aimed to provide medical assistance to children during the state-induced famine between 1932 and 1933 in Ukraine and analyzes how total state violence shaped the nature of these relief campaigns. My main focus will be on exploring the experience of young patients by studying survivors' testimonies.

In the early 1920s, the Soviet leadership planned to implement their vision of public healthcare and provide free medical services to the Soviet working class. Despite a gradual improvement, the lack of trained medical personnel and funds hindered the development of the Soviet healthcare

3 Norman M. Naimark, "How Holodomor Can Be Integrated into Our Understanding of Genocide," in *Contextualizing the Holodomor: The Impact of Thirty Years of Ukrainian Famine Studies*, ed. Andrij Makuch and Frank S. Sysyn (Edmonton and Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2015), 112–24.

4 Alex de Waal, *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2018) 6, 9, 48–9, 92–3.

5 The military authorities stated there were more than 135,000 cases of epidemic typhus in Ukraine during nine months of 1933 compared to less than 18,000 in 1932, 11,600 in 1931, and 5,400 in 1930. See: Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'ednan' Ukrainy (TsDAHO), f.1, op. 20, spr. 6232, 72-76 zv. The spread of malaria was, among others, a consequence of mass starvation, and the party leadership informed Moscow that in September 1933 alone there were roughly 200,000 cases of malaria in Ukraine. According to the official statistics, there were about 60,000 cases of malaria in May, 65,613 in June, 70,500 in July, and 150,000 in August. See: TsDAHO, f.1, op. 20, spr. 6232, 69.

6 Natalia Kuzova, "Childhood during the Holodomor 1932–1933 in Ukraine (in the South of Ukraine)," *Journal of Family History* 47, no. 1 (2022): 59.

system.⁷ Simultaneously, Soviet officials proclaimed that children were the healthcare system's main priority, and the government established a network of children's hospitals and clinics, including the Research Institute of Protection of Motherhood and Childhood in Kyiv in 1928.⁸ Although official statistics showed an increasing number of specialized institutions, the Soviet government failed to fulfill the plan. Additionally, the existing hospitals and clinics often did not provide adequate services because of staff and financial shortages. Even official Soviet sources emphasized the lack of modern medical services was especially visible in the countryside. According to statistics, in 1929, one doctor provided care for approximately 5,560 rural patients, and only 22.1 percent of rural women had access to medical assistance during childbirth.⁹ The shortage of trained personnel posed the most serious problem for the public health authorities. Although the government encouraged medical personnel to work in the countryside and provided some additional benefits, the majority of doctors tried to find employment in the cities. To solve the issue, some public health officials suggested mandatory service in rural areas for all medical graduates.¹⁰

Soviet medical experts embraced social hygiene as the main approach to public healthcare in the 1920s. Nutrition became one of the main areas of research, and the authorities founded the State Nutrition Institute in Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Odesa in 1930.¹¹ Experts declared that the main task of

- 7 For a short overview of approaches to Public Healthcare in the Soviet Union, see: Tricia Starks, "Propagandizing the Healthy, Bolshevik Life in the Early USSR," *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 11 (2017): 1718–24.
- 8 L. Babiuk, "Medytsyna u povsiakdennomu zhytti zhynotstva riadians'koi Ukrainy v roky NEPu (1921-1927)," *Naukovi zapysky istorychnoho fakul'tetu Zaporiz'koho natsional'noho universytetu* 49 (2017): 66–70; Olha Artiushenko, "Okhorona dytynstva i materynstva v USRR u 1928-1933," *Problemy istorii Ukrainy: fakty, sudzbeny nia, poshuky* 19, no. 2 (2010): 142–68.
- 9 Khorosh I. D., *Rozvytok okhorony zdorov'ia na seli v Ukrain'skii RSR* (Kyiv: Zdoriv'ia, 1968), 168–69.
- 10 Artiushenko, "Okhorona dytynstva," 152–65; P. Pozumentirov, "Neskol'ko polozheh nii ob organizatsii zdavookhraneniia na sele," *Vrachebnoe delo*, no. 14–15 (1930): 1038–47; Khorosh, *Rozvytok okhorony zdorov'ia*, 157–58.
- 11 Hordina B. L., "Problema pitaniia v rekonstruktivnoi period i zadachi zdaviv ochraneniia," *Vrachebnoe delo*, 12-13 (1930), 947–54; O. F. Slin'ko, "Nauka na fronti borot'by za rekonstruktsiu hromads'koho kharchuvannia," *Problemy kharchuvannia*, 6 (1932), 3. Medical officials promoted communal feeding as both a healthy alternative that increased productivity and a means of emancipation for Soviet women. For instance, some experts argued that individually feeding children not only took up the women's time but also could lead to overfeeding and serious mental trauma. See: A. Kisel', "Konsul'tativnaia praktika," *Vrachebnoe delo*, no. 18 (1930): 1340.

public healthcare was not to cure but prevent disease, and improvement in nutrition was one of the key factors of this approach. In 1932, Iakiv Lifshits, an ideologist of the Soviet medical system and a future director of the Ukrainian Institute of Experimental Medicine, wrote that special attention had to be paid to child mortality as medical professionals would be able to achieve significant improvement due to the development of healthcare.¹² However, the realities of the state-induced famine sharply contradicted official proclamations, and the Soviet state was responsible for millions of deaths from hunger and famine-related diseases.

Historiography and Primary Sources

Most scholars focus on the top-down examination of the Soviet leadership's role in the mechanism of the Holodomor.¹³ At the same time, recent scholarship indicated the turn to social history that resulted in the attention to the experience of ordinary survivors and perpetrators.¹⁴ As official Soviet documents were unsuitable for studying the personal experience of Holodomor victims, researchers started to incorporate previously neglected testimonies. Among other topics, scholars have explored children's experiences during the famine, but usually children are depicted as passive victims without a sense of agency. The main focus of the research was on demographic losses, institutions, and the experience of children through studying the experience of their parents and adult

12 Ia. Lifshits, "Pro druhu p'iatylytku medychnoi nauky v USRR," *Zhurnal medychnoho tsykladu* 2, no. 3 (1932): 547.

13 See for example: works of Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); R. W. Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Andrea Graziosi, *Stalinism, Collectivization and the Great Famine* (Cambridge, MA: Ukrainian Studies Fund, 2009); Stanislav Kulchytsky, *The Famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine: An Anatomy of the Holodomor* (Edmonton and Toronto: CIUS Press, 2018).

14 Oksana Kis, "Women's Experience of the Holodomor: Challenges and Ambiguities of Motherhood," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 4 (2021): 527–46; Daria Mattingly, "Idle, Drunk, and Good for Nothing: Cultural Memory of the Rank-and-File Perpetrators of the 1932–33 Famine in Ukraine," in *The Burden of the Past: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine*, ed. by Anna Wylegala and Malgorzata Glowacka-Grajper (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 19–49; Victoria Khiterer, "The Holodomor and Jews in Kyiv and Ukraine: An Introduction and Observations on a Neglected Topic," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 3 (2020): 460–75.

relatives.¹⁵ Iryna Skubii's short article about children's material world and its relation to their survival strategies is the only work that regards children not as objects but as subjects and thus recognizes their agency.¹⁶

My research is situated in the broader fields of medical history and famine studies. Despite the repeated attempts to re-center medical history from the perspective of medical professionals to the perspective of patients (those who were suffering or ill), the main focus remains on professional medical discourse.¹⁷ This study aims to bridge these two approaches and examine the medical relief campaign conducted by Soviet authorities and the personal experiences of medical treatment of young famine victims. In the context of famine studies, it contributes to the examination of victims' agency during catastrophic famines. To analyze the Soviet public health policy during the Holodomor, I use sources produced by Soviet institutions deposited at the regional and central archives in Ukraine (among them the files of the People's Commissariat for Public Health in Ukraine, the regional branches of the Public Health Departments and reports of the Joint State Political Directorate [ODPU]). Additionally, the survivors' stories are vital for the project as they allow me to explore the agency of children and my work will heavily rely on testimony collections.

The first systematic projects to collect testimonies of Holodomor eye-witnesses started in the late 1980s, and most witnesses were child survivors. As the Soviet government denied that the famine of 1932–1933

- 15 Although Conquest's monograph, the first book-length study of the famine, included a chapter about children, scholars focused on the in-depth examination of children's experiences two decades later. For example, I. Shul'hanova and R. Moldavs'kyi, "Dytiacha smertnist' v syrotyntsiakh Ukrainy v roky Holodomoru," *Ukrains'kyi selianyn* 26 (2021): 44–7; Artem Kharchenko, "'Potribni bil'sh kvalifikovani robitnyky': kolektyvnyi portret personal syrotyntsi v naperedodni Holodomoru 1932-1933," *Ukraina Moderna*, <https://uamoderna.com/md/kharchenko-orphans>, accessed September 15, 2023; Oksana Kis, "Women's Experience of the Holodomor: Challenges and Ambiguities of Motherhood," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 4 (2021): 527–46; Kuzova, "Childhood during the Holodomor," 59–77.
- 16 Iryna Skubii, "Material'nyi svit ditei v roky Holodomoru ta shcho vriatuvalo ikhni zhyttia," *Studii Holodomoru* (2020), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344394882_Materialnij_svit_ditej_v_roki_Golodomoru_ta_so_vriatuvalo_ikhni_zitta_Material_World_of_Children_in_the_Holodomor_and_What_Saved_Their_Lives, accessed September 15, 2023.
- 17 Roy Porter, "The Patient's View: Doing Medical History from Below," *Theory and Society* 14, no. 2 (1985): 175–98; Flurin Condrau, "The Patient's View Meets the Clinical Gaze," *Social History of Medicine* 20, no. 3 (2007): 525–40; Anne Hanley and Jessica Meyer, eds., *Patient Voices in Britain, 1840-1948* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

had occurred, the victims were silenced and only decades later, child survivors could speak out about their experience during the Holodomor. The U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine was founded in 1984 and was tasked with investigating the famine in Soviet Ukraine. As a result of its work, the Commission published three volumes of eyewitness testimonies in 1990. The interviews described the personal experience of hundreds of Holodomor survivors who had emigrated to North America after the Second World War. Despite residing outside the Soviet Union, many witnesses were afraid that Soviet government repercussions could affect their relatives in Ukraine and preferred to testify anonymously.¹⁸

The first attempt to collect eyewitness accounts in Soviet Ukraine took place in 1989 after the previously forbidden topics emerged in the public discourse during the new era of openness. *Silski visti*, the Ukrainian newspaper with the highest circulation, issued an appeal to Holodomor survivors to send their memoirs. Survivors (some of whom were barely literate) wrote thousands of letters in which, for the first time, victims shared their experience of surviving the mass starvation.¹⁹ Among other important sources are approximately one hundred video testimonies collected for the eightieth anniversary of the Holodomor.²⁰ Materials related to the Holodomor are also preserved in Holocaust collections such as the Visual History Archive at the USC Shoah Foundation.²¹

Survivors' personal accounts allow me to uncover the voices of children and their experience of medical treatment. They show that children could actively seek medical assistance and they understood that it was vital for their survival. For instance, an anonymous witness, who was fourteen years old during the Holodomor, recalled being sick after eating some food substitute: "My younger brother forced me to go three kilometres to the clinic near the market and post office. He found a woman in the white coat there and begged her to save me."²² Despite the

18 John Vsetecka, "Toward a Social History of the Holodomor and its Aftermath: Famine Survivor Testimonies in the Archive of the US Commission on the Ukraine Famine," *Ukraina Moderna* 30 (2021): 59–79.

19 Olga Klymenko, "History as a Narrative of the People: The Maniak Collection as a Source for the Social and Cultural History of the Holodomor," *Ukraina Moderna* 30 (2021): 80–119.

20 The short extracts of the interviews can be viewed at <http://sharethestory.ca/>, accessed March 15, 2023. The full-length video testimonies are deposited at the Ukrainian Canadian Research & Documentation Centre in Toronto.

21 Inna Gogina, "Representations of the 1932–33 Ukrainian Famine in the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive," *Ukraina Moderna* 30 (2021): 37–58.

22 The victim lived in Kaharlyk (a town in the Kyiv region), with presumably better access to medical facilities than most peasants. "Case History SW1 and SW2," in

children's pleas, the woman, who spoke Russian, refused them medical treatment, and she expelled them from the clinic: "But my brother didn't give up. He screamed. More people in white coats ran to us, and finally, some old Ukrainian woman saved me."²³ Although witnesses mentioned a lack of or inadequacy of assistance, many were saved by hospital personnel. At the same time, the treatment could leave visible scars on their bodies that reminded them about the famine and disease:

I contracted malaria, and I was taken to the hospital where I got some food. I was happy to be in the hospital because they fed me. [...]. My hand swelled [due to injections]. It didn't hurt, but there was a large swelling. After I had left the hospital, I visited the doctor, and he cut my hand. I have the scar here. [...]. I have a reminder on my own body.²⁴

All collections of testimonies were created in different political climates, but as scholars and activists recorded testimonies many decades after the famine, the collections share similar shortcomings. Because of the distance between the events and their recollections, witnesses could forget details, and subsequent life experiences could influence their testimonies. However, based on a systematic examination of the Starachowice labor camp survivors' testimonies, Christopher Browning argues that the "core memory" was mostly stable despite the time and geographic distance from the events.²⁵ Following Browning's terminology, Joanna Michlic notes that essential episodes of Holocaust child survivors' "wartime autobiographies remain almost intact."²⁶ Frequently traumatic but also positive experiences (the latter often related to some trivial everyday pleasures) were among those that constituted core memory.²⁷ Similarly, in the

Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932–1933: Oral History Project of the Commission on the Ukraine Famine, vol. 2, eds. James E. Mace and Leonid Heretz (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 722.

23 "Case History SW1 and SW2," 722.

24 At the time of the famine, Oleksiy Ohienko was seven years old. Ohienko, Oleksiy. Interview by Ariadna Okhrymowych. Vita, 01 Aug. 2008, Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Center, <https://vitacollections.ca/HREC-holodomordigitalcollections/3796531/data?g=d&n=3>, accessed September 15, 2023.

25 Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 9–10.

26 Joanna Beata Michlic, "The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources: Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. S. Horowitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 178.

27 Michlic, "The Aftermath and After," 142.

context of the Holodomor, the death of parents and relatives, abandonment, acute starvation but also simple acts of kindness are reoccurring memories in the young victims' testimonies.²⁸ Although scholars should be aware of limitations and of the context in which testimonies were collected, there are few early memoirs of Holodomor survivors. These late collections are thus valuable sources for studying the personal experience of the famine.

Soviet Healthcare and the Famine in Ukraine: Research Questions

Healthcare professionals informed authorities about mass starvation long before the famine entered its deadliest phase, which started in the spring of 1933. Due to their work, doctors were well aware of the mass starvation and increasing spread of famine-related medical conditions in the countryside and urban areas. Medical information and statistics circulated among party regional and republican leadership.²⁹ In the spring of 1933, medical professionals lost control over the spread of epidemic diseases, which became a serious threat to the urban population, and this period marked the start of an organized medical relief campaign. During the

28 For instance, some children remembered the kindness of physicians during the famine. Oleksandra Ovdiuk from the Kyiv region wrote: "I will always remember with gratefulness the doctor Eva Borysivna Hin. The Red Cross sent her from Kyiv to support starving children. In the spring of 1933, she came with a supply of fish oil, and she gave children a tablespoon of fish oil every day for a whole month. When she ran out of fish oil and left the village in tears, we lost even this support." Oleksandra Ovdiuk and Alisa Maslo, "Svidchennia," in *33-i: Holod narodna knyha memorial*, ed. Lidiia Kovalenko, and Volodymyr Maniak (Kyiv: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1991), 243. An anonymous witness testified for the U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine about his experience as a teenage boy in one of the Kharkiv hospitals: "I recovered in three days or week, but the doctor kept me at the hospital the whole month, so I could gain some weight." Case History LH56," in *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932–1933: Oral History Project of the Commission on the Ukraine Famine*, vol. 2, eds. James E. Mace and Leonid Heretz (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 608.

29 "Dopovidna zapyska holovnoho likaria do holovy sektsii ohorony zdorovia," in *Natsionalna knyha pamiati zbertv Holodomoru 1932-1933 rokiv v Ukraini. Misto Kyiv*, ed. V.I. Marochko (Kyiv: Feniks, 2008), 117; "Zvedennia komisii z predstavniŭ ykiv medychnykh ustanov," in *Natsionalna knyha pamiati zbertv Holodomoru 1932-1933 rokiv v Ukraini. Kirovohradska oblast*, ed. O. O. Babenko et al. (Kirovohrad: "Imeks-LTD", 2008), 847–49; "Dopovidna zapyska Narkomatu okhorony zdore ov'ia" in *Natsionalna knyha pamiati zbertv Holodomoru 1932-1933 rokiv v Ukraini. Kyivska oblast*, ed. V.I. Ufiznchenko (Kyiv: Feniks, 2008), 1296.

campaign, children were a prioritized group, but officials tried to conceal mass starvation and did not mention it directly in the documents. Instead, the only indication of the famine was orders to medical workers and the Red Cross to prevent homelessness by “mobilizing” food resources for additional daycares and playgrounds and providing some food for schoolchildren.³⁰ Simultaneously, the authorities introduced disciplinary measures to stop the spread of epidemics.³¹ This study explores how the atmosphere of secrecy shaped the medical relief campaign that aimed to provide medical assistance to children and examines the relationship between total state violence and public healthcare during the Holodomor. Did doctors withhold medical treatment from any group of young patients? How did children perceive public health orders and medical treatment? Did young patients consider Soviet medical workers to be rescuers or perpetrators? The study of the relationship between medical professionals (state employees in positions of power) and young patients further allows us to uncover mechanisms of the Holodomor.

30 “Z postanovy prezydii kharkivskoho oblyvkonkomu,” in *Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv u m. Kharkovi stolytsi USRR*, ed. V.V Kalinichenko et al. (Kharkov: Oryhinal, 2009), 117–18.

31 “Z protokolu zasidannia uriadovoi komisii,” in *Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv u m. Kharkovi stolytsi USRR*, ed. V.V Kalinichenko et al. (Kharkov: Oryhinal, 2009), 131–33; “Epidemiolohichne zvedennia zakhvoriuvan’,” in *Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv u m. Kharkovi stolytsi USRR*, ed. V.V Kalinichenko et al. (Kharkov: Oryhinal, 2009), 149; “Z protokolu zasidannia epidemichnoi komisii,” in *Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv u m. Kharkovi stolytsi USRR*, ed. V.V Kalinichenko et al. (Kharkov: Oryhinal, 2009), 186–89; “Mandat, vydanyi nadzvychainoiu sanitarnoiu komisieiu,” in *Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv u m. Kharkovi stolytsi USRR*, ed. V.V Kalinichenko et al. (Kharkov: Oryhinal, 2009), 197.

Intersectional Approaches to Jewish Youth During the Holocaust in Hungary

My doctoral research project develops age, specifically youth, as an intersectional category of analysis by exploring young Hungarian Jews' responses to persecution during the Holocaust. Drawing on multi-archival research using Hungarian, French, and English language sources, I deepen our understanding of youth and youth agency in times of crisis by exploring different inter- and intra-generational perspectives. I also incorporate understudied territories and temporalities into English-speaking scholarship. While there is a strong historiography on the Holocaust in Hungary, few English-language studies examine areas outside of Budapest before the German invasion.¹ Similarly, in Hungarian-language research, the history of provincial antisemitism has been told mainly through general regional studies of Hungarian Jewish history.² By studying Jewish youth associations in provincial cities, my research contributes to an enhanced understanding of Jewish life in wartime Hungary, going beyond the narrow focus on Budapest and post-March 1944 in the existing historiography. Furthermore, with antisemitism and controversies over wartime collaboration and resistance on the rise in East and Central Europe, my research also refutes politically driven narratives of national resistance and the influence of Cold War ideologies on historiography.

- 1 For an outline of the latest historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary, see: Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); Tim Cole, *Traces of the Holocaust: Journeying in and out of the Ghettos* (London: Continuum, 2011); Robert Rozett, "Information About the Holocaust in Hungary Before the German Occupation, Revisited," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 1 (2022), 68–76.
- 2 The Hungarian language "Yizkor" Memorial Books for regional Hungarian Jewish communities provide detailed local histories. See, for example: Ágnes Szegő Orbánné, *A Heves Megyei Zsidóság Története: A XVIII. Századtól a Holocaustig* (Tiszafüred: Tiszafüredi Menóra Alapítvány, 2001); László Szilágyi-Windt, *Az Újpesti Zsidóság Története* (Tel Aviv: Lahav, 1975).

These narratives continue to shape contemporary debates about the history and memory of the Holocaust in Hungary. By employing age as an intersectional category of analysis—probing how it interacted with gender, religion, ideology, etc.—my research enhances our knowledge of Jewish subjective experience.

My project takes a roughly chronological approach to chart how Jewish youth evolved from the interwar period, during the war, and in the immediate postwar years, covering approximately 1920–1946. In so doing, it becomes possible to understand their progression through the lifecycle during times of significant social, political, and geographical change. Key themes are threaded throughout my research, showing how experiences built on each other and intensified over time. This long-term approach also develops an understanding of the social and political context of wartime experiences. Instead of viewing the Holocaust in isolation, the historical context of Judaism in Hungary provides the basis for understanding the intergenerational clash brought about by antisemitic persecution. Indeed, family is one of these key themes, as Jewish families faced an assault in different ways across the period. Gender, place, and—of course—youth are also themes that intersect with each other and weave through every element of my research. As a result, I show how these categories of analysis acted in different ways and took on new meanings dependent on the place, time, and circumstance.

My research begins with a survey of Jewish childhoods in interwar Hungary, detailing Jewish youth identity through their intersections with Judaism, youth, gender, family life, and geopolitics. By exploring these experiences, I seek to establish how the generation of young people born in the 1920s and 1930s held a unique position in Hungarian Jewish society, with distinct perspectives and opportunities to those of their parents. I then move on to their wartime experiences, exploring how the war and new antisemitic policies interrupted young people's lives and reformed family structures. Drawing on examples of antisemitic laws and how they were felt, I show how wartime Hungary became a state that increasingly excluded Jews from society, with a detrimental impact on their family and youth. I then explore the fundamental moment of the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 and the impact that it had on Hungarian Jewish family life. Building out from the moment of occupation, I outline the changes that young people experienced in their lives, including the closure of Jewish schools, limits on their daily activities, and the emotions they felt at the arrival of soldiers.

My research then follows the approximate four hundred and forty thousand Hungarian Jews deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, exploring

their trajectories through the concentration camp system, how they adapted to life in the camps, and how their youth and gender formed their experiences. I focus on a case study of one thousand Hungarian Jewish women—of whom over ten percent were aged eighteen or under—who were deported from Auschwitz to a munitions factory in Allendorf, Germany in August 1944 as an example of the wider camp system. While these women were in the camp system, Jewish organizations in Budapest (the only remaining city in Hungary where Jews had not been deported by the summer of 1944) stepped up rescue and resistance efforts. Approaching these activities, my research places the Jewish community's responses and young people's wartime communal life at the forefront. By looking in depth at the youth work by and for young people in 1944, I paint a picture of the diverse youth community at the time, complicating traditional narratives that focused simply on certain groups and revealing the complex web of interactions between different parts of the Jewish community. To close, I explore how young people and youth groups engaged in rescue efforts in the final months of the war, raising questions about youth agency and identity. Finally, my research ends by reflecting on young people's lives after the war. I chart how anti-semitism continued to impact young people's lives in later years and where and how they rebuilt their homes.

Throughout the aforementioned period, youth is a defining category, creating distinct spaces, experiences, and roles in society.³ It is also forward-looking, intersecting with a community's fears and hopes for the future. For Hungarian Jews born in years between the 1920s and the 1940s in a country renegotiating its relationship with Jews, youth is a particularly important category of analysis. These Jews held a special position in Hungarian society, living in the time between high interwar Jewish emigration and the collapse of Jewish fertility after further

3 For an outline of some of the literature on youth as a category of analysis, see: Mark Bennett, "Children's Social Identities," *Infant and Child Development* 20 (2011): 360; Joanna B. Michlic, "An Untold Story of Rescue: Jewish Children and Youth in German-Occupied Poland," in *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis*, ed. Patrick Henry (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 318; Gill Valentine, "Boundary Crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood," *Children's Geographies* 1 (2003): 48; Mary Jo Maynes, "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 123; Steven Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 93; Barnabas Balint, "Coming of Age During the Holocaust: The Adult Roles and Responsibilities of Young Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 1 (2021): 20–40, 24.

antisemitic laws in 1938. My research identifies the specific experiences of these young people, which were different from those of adults and younger children. It explores how their identities were formed within the highly charged and uncertain religious, cultural, and political context of interwar and wartime Hungary. Employing youth as an intersectional category of analysis thus offers a window into the composition of the Hungarian Jewish communities, how they responded to persecution, and how they interacted with wider Hungarian society.

Being on the cusp of adulthood, this generation entered the war at a time of their lives when they often wanted and felt capable of taking on new responsibilities, as well as being perceived by the adults in this way. My research presents the history of Alan Brown, who was sixteen years old when he was imprisoned with his family in the Miskolc ghetto. Because of his age, the ghetto authorities conscripted Brown as a member of the “youth service,” responsible for running errands. In a video testimony, Brown tells us how he had special privileges because of this work and was able to move in and out of the ghetto, something that he leveraged to improve his and his family’s living conditions.⁴ Far from losing his youth, it was precisely his young age that influenced how he experienced the Holocaust.⁵ Young people’s age—in between that of children and adults—also positioned them well to become involved in later resistance and rescue work, often within the context of youth movements.⁶ My research showcases examples from the Zionist youth movements, many of whose members were in their late teens and early twenties, which led rescue work both across Hungary and internationally.⁷ I also show how ideas about youth were central to constructing the ideal Zionist pioneer figure that dominated debates around *Aliyah* (Jewish immigration to the British Mandate of Palestine in the 1930s and early 1940s) from Hungary.

Finally, my research applies youth as an intersectional category of analysis. Treating those within this age range as subjects of a distinct analytical category changes how we think about young people as histori-

4 Alan Brown Interview, University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive/14639.

5 Martha Stroud, “Barnabas Balint Lectures about Growing Up Jewish During the Holocaust in Hungary,” last accessed July 10, 2023, dornsife.usc.edu.

6 Asher Cohen, *The Halutz Resistance in Hungary, 1942–1944* (Boulder, CO: Columbia University Press, 1986); Robert Rozett, “Armed Resistance in Hungary,” *Yad Vashem Studies* XIX (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988), 269–88.

7 Barnabas Balint, “The Tiyul: Rescuing Jews by Smuggling across the Hungarian-Romanian border,” in *Anti-Axis Resistance in Southeastern Europe, 1940–1944: Forms and Varieties*, ed. John Paul Newman, Ljubinka Škodrić, and Rade Ristanović (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

cal actors, introducing age-based nuance to the otherwise uniform categories of ideology, religion, and gender. I reveal, for example, how youth and gender acted together to form both young men's and women's experiences. Young Jewish men were generally conscripted into slave labor with the Hungarian army even if they did not reach the minimum age threshold of twenty-one. This removed many men of "working age" from the ghettos, changing the demographic composition of the communities there and during the deportations to the concentration camp system. In an environment where young people's lives were transformed by persecution, youth-specific elements of their gendered, ideological, or religious lives were, in turn, constructed, performed, and challenged.

Given the subjective nature of this project, its sources are intentionally personal. My research is rooted in the individual histories of ordinary people, telling their experiences through their own words as far as possible. These include a wealth of varied source material from archives across the world, including in the United States, Israel, Hungary, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In particular, survivor testimonies—written, oral, and video—form a central part of my source base, drawing heavily on research and reflection conducted during a Research Fellowship at the University of Southern California's Center for Advanced Genocide Research, where the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive contains over fifty-five thousand video testimonies. Such oral histories provide powerful insight into the way events are remembered and the deeply emotional ways that persecution was felt. This thesis forms a part of the latest research methods on oral histories, drawing insights from visual cues and narrative construction, as well as making inferences about the meanings of impromptu remarks.⁸

Testimonies are combined with documents such as school yearbooks, official reports, parliamentary debates, and Jewish community material (letters, adverts, speeches, etc.) to provide a more holistic picture of Jewish life and responses to persecution. These are drawn from specialist archives in Hungary, as well as the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, the Hungarian Cultural Heritage Portal, and the archives at Yad Vashem, where I held a European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) Conny Kristel Research Fellowship. These sources provide insight into the everyday activities of young Jews and make it possible to

8 KP Truong, GJ Westerhof, SMA Lamers, and Franciska De Jong, "Towards Modeling Expressed Emotions in Oral History Interviews: Using Verbal and Nonverbal Signals to Track Personal Narratives," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 29, no. 4 (2014): 621–36; Jeffrey Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

intersect the individual with the community. School yearbooks, for example, spanning long periods of time allow individuals to be traced through the school system at the same time as a broader analysis of trends in schooling. Furthermore, contemporaneous letters, speeches, and reports provide direct insight into people's thoughts at the time, unencumbered as they are by issues of memory and postwar influence.

Finally, camp-related lists, registration cards, and allied intelligence reports on the camp system make it possible to analyze young people's lives in the concentration camps and their journeys through them. Material from the Arolsen Archives (formerly the International Tracing Service) is particularly relevant here as it contains extensive documentation from the deportation and camp systems. Despite being open to the public since 2007, much of this material has yet to be used for research, enabling this thesis to tell new histories and develop methodologies for including such material.⁹ Indeed, by showing how close readings of Arolsen Archive material can contribute to the social history of the Holocaust, this thesis introduces novel ways of understanding documentary sources and telling personal stories from dehumanizing documentation.

My research, therefore, draws on a wide variety of sources from archives across the world. This is indicative of the history that it tells; postwar Jewish migration stretched across the globe, scattering documentation in disparate locations. Through extensive cross-archival work that pulls together sources from London to Los Angeles and Budapest to Jerusalem, it becomes possible to create a corpus of material that works together to create a convergence of evidence. Comparisons between sources allow for correcting errors, revealing silences, and consideration of the process and meaning behind their creation—all crucial elements of this study on young people in a time of crisis. This is particularly insightful when a specific individual can be traced through multiple archives, offering different perspectives on their life. Working with a variety of source types also enables evidence to be deployed where it is most effective for illustrating different aspects of the Holocaust. While testimonies illuminate the personal, emotional, and subjective experience, sources from the Jewish communities allow a close analysis of their activities, and newspapers and other documents provide contextual and more detailed information.

In its use of this wide range of source material, my research employs both traditional and new methodologies, including oral history and

9 Dan Stone, *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after World War II and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

digital humanities. Combining both primary source material and the latest academic research developments in the English, Hungarian, and the French-speaking world, I bring together and translate knowledge from across national borders, incorporating a broader array of perspectives and raising awareness of little-known sources and histories that enrich our appreciation of other cultures. By drawing on oral history testimonies to understand individuals' subjective experiences and comparing these with contemporary documentation, I also develop a more complex picture of Holocaust memory and personal identity, while grappling with issues of how memory influences our understanding of the past. Finally, by employing cutting-edge digital technologies in ArcGIS to create map visualizations of people's trajectories through early life, ghettoization, deportation, the camp system, and postwar life, I offer a better understanding of global movement, patterns of experience, and the composition of Jewish communities.¹⁰

Combining personal testimonies with broader documentation as well as emerging research on the history of childhood, gender, identity, and Judaism in Hungary, and utilizing some of the latest methodologies for historical research, my research contributes to our understanding of how young people's lives, identities, and experiences were formed during the Second World War and, specifically, the Holocaust.

10 Maja Hultman, "The GIS Prism: Beyond the Myth of Stockholm's Ostjuden," in *Jewish Studies in the Digital Age*, ed. Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, Zaagsma Gerben, Miriam Rürup, Michelle Margolis, and Amalia S. Levi (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), 125–46, 127.

Ambivalent but Not Indifferent: Interview Narratives of *Lebensborn* Children Born in the Wienerwald Maternity Home, 1938–1945

Klaus Steiner was born on February 23, 1943 in Feichtenbach, Austria, where the Wienerwald Home (known as the *Ostmark* Home until 1942) was located. Only women who were classified as Aryan were allowed to give birth in this maternity home run by the *Lebensborn* association. The central tasks of *Lebensborn* included “supporting racially and hereditarily valuable large families,” “accommodating and caring for racially and hereditarily valuable expectant mothers who, after careful examination of their own family and the family of the biological father by the *Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt-SS* (SS Race and Settlement Main Office, RuSHA), can be expected to give birth to equally valuable children,” “caring for these children,” and “caring for the mothers of these children.”¹ During the naming ceremony at the Wienerwald Home, a pseudo-religious ceremony conducted by the Home’s Director Norbert Schwab, Steiner became a part of the so-called *SS Sippen-gemeinschaft*.² This is also evident from the letter of congratulations written by his mother’s superior, Richard Jury, a member of the *Gauleitung* (*Gau* leadership) of the *Reichsgau* (Reich District) *Niederdonau*. Jury conveyed his congratulations to

1 Provincial Archives of Lower Austria (NÖLA), Office of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government, Provincial Office I/2, number 33/1975, *Lebensborn* e.V. in Munich, brochure, Miesbach, 8. All translations from German are the authors’ own.

2 The *SS Sippen-gemeinschaft* was a term Heinrich Himmler used in keynote speeches to not only describe the male members of the SS but also their wives and children, thus establishing them as an elite component of the people. Isabel Heinemann, *“Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut”: das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 49; Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite. Ehefrauen in der “SS-Sippen-gemeinschaft”* (Hamburg: HIS, 1997).

the family “on the birth of your young SS man Klaus Ferdinand. My wife and I hope that he will have every happiness. Above all, mother and child are healthy.”³

The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on Consequences of War (BIK) conducted thirty-four interviews with *Lebensborn* children formerly from the Wienerwald Home, including an interview with Steiner, in a three-year project running until 2023.⁴ The following project description provides insight into the topic, the scope and range of the project, conducting the interviews, analysis of the interview data, and, based on Steiner’s biography, how *Lebensborn* children deal with their family and life history. To this day, the *Lebensborn*, or rather the taboo surrounding it, its distortion, and its concealment continues to impact and burden some of those who were under its care, as well as their descendants.⁵

Defining the Parameters: Childbirth in a Lebensborn Maternity Home

“Racial hygiene” was one of the central elements of National Socialist ideology. It was based on eugenic, social Darwinist, racist, and population policy ideas which had been discussed nationally and internationally since the end of the nineteenth century. However, after the National Socialists came to power, the radicalism of propaganda related to “racial hygiene” and the implementation of “racial hygiene” policies differed considerably from pre-1933 Germany and other countries. The *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses* (Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased

3 Private collections of Klaus Steiner, Letter from *Gauamtsleiter* Richard Jury, 1943.

4 BIK, Project *Geboren im Lebensborn-Heim Wienerwald. Sammlung, Dokumentation und Aufbereitung lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews*, funded by the Future Fund of the Republic of Austria, P21-4314 (Project Lead: Lukas Schretter).

5 One of the most well-known works on family memory and family history concerning the Nazi period is by Welzer et al. The authors analyse family discussions in order to understand what “normal Germans” remember about the past. See: Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, “*Opa war kein Nazi.*” *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2014). See also, among others: Margit Reiter, *Die Generation danach. Der Nationalsozialismus im Familiengedächtnis* (Vienna: Studienverlag, 2006); Gabriele Rosenthal (ed.), *Der Holocaust im Leben von drei Generationen. Familien von Überlebenden und von Nazi-Tätern* (Gießen: Psychosozial, 1997); Harald Welzer, Robert Montau, and Christine Plaß, “*Was wir für böse Menschen sind!*” *Der Nationalsozialismus im Gespräch zwischen den Generationen* (Tübingen: Edition discord, 1997).

Offspring) in 1933 created the basis for forced sterilizations. The *Nürnberger Gesetze* (Nuremberg Laws) in 1935 were one of the legal foundations for the persecution of Jews; persecution which would eventually lead to the Holocaust. In 1939, the “Euthanasia” Memorandum was another step on the path from exclusion to the murder of population groups who were classified as “racially undesirable,” “inferior,” or “unworthy of life.” It authorized the selection of patients “deemed incurably sick” and the administering of a “mercy death” (*Gnadentod*).

In contrast to antinatalist policies, Nazi racial and population policies also included the promotion of “hereditarily healthy” offspring. In 1935, Heinrich Himmler founded the *Lebensborn* (which can be translated as “fount of life”) association to increase the number of births of children of “Aryan” origin.⁶ Based on racial theories and so-called positive eugenics, *Lebensborn* served the ideals and goals of the SS.⁷

Lebensborn initially aimed to provide the best possible care for unmarried pregnant “Aryan” women who faced societal challenges and pressures at the time. *Lebensborn* hoped to discourage them from having illegal abortions and thus promote the growth of a strong “racial elite” among the German population. It offered the opportunity to give birth secretly

6 NÖLA, Office of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government, Provincial Office I/2, number 33/1975, *Lebensborn e. V.* in Munich, brochure, Miesbach, 3.

7 Georg Lilienthal, *Der “Lebensborn e. V.” Ein Instrument nationalsozialistischer Rassenpolitik* (Stuttgart and New York: Gustav Fischer, 1985). Further studies on the history of *Lebensborn* include, among others, chapters in the following volumes: Angelika Baumann and Andreas Heusler, *Der Lebensborn in München. Kinder für den “Führer”* (Munich: Schiermeier 2013); Gisela Heidenreich, *Born of War – Vom Krieg geboren. Europas verleugnete Kinder* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2017). Monographs published on *Lebensborn* include: Thomas Bryant, *Himmlers Kinder. Zur Geschichte der SS-Organisation “Lebensborn e. V.” 1935–1945* (Wiesbaden: Marix, 2011); Catherine Clay and Michael Leapman, *Herrenmenschen. Das Lebensborn-Experiment der Nazis* (Munich: Heyne, 1997); Marc Hillel and Clarissa Henry, *Lebensborn e. V. In Namen der Rasse* (Cologne: Zsolnay, 1975); Dorothee Neumaier, *Das Lebensbornheim “Schwarzwald” in Nordrach* (Marburg: Tectum, 2017); Kåre Olsen, *Vater: Deutscher. Das Schicksal der norwegischen Lebensbornkinder und ihrer Mütter von 1940 bis heute* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2002); Rudolf Oswald, *Den Opfern verpflichtet. Katholische Jugendfürsorge, Caritas und die SS-Organisation “Lebensborn” nach 1945* (Munich: Sankt Michaelsbund, 2020); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, “Deutsche Mutter, bist du bereit ...” *Der Lebensborn und seine Kinder* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2010); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, *Kind L 364. Eine Lebensborn-Familiengeschichte* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2007); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster and Tristan Vankann, *Lebenslang Lebensborn. Die Wunschkinder der SS und was aus ihnen wurde* (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2012); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, *Unbrauchbare Väter. Über Muster-Männer, Seitenspringer und flüchtende Erzeuger im Lebensborn* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022).

in its maternity homes, away from the gaze of family members and acquaintances. In addition, *Lebensborn* offered mothers financial support and, in rare cases, adoption services. Strongly influenced by Nazi racial policies and theories of eugenics, it only accepted healthy applicants who could prove their “Aryan” ancestry and rejected those with health problems. If applicants had a family history of physical, mental, or psychiatric disabilities, they were denied because of their alleged racial impurity.

Moreover, *Lebensborn* encouraged SS men, whom Himmler believed to be the biological and racial elite of Nazi Germany, to have large families. These men and their wives had already been required to pass medical examinations and have their “Aryan” ancestry established before marriage. Along with unmarried pregnant women, the brides and wives of members of the SS and police could take advantage of the services offered by the *Lebensborn* maternity homes. Additionally, following Himmler’s wishes, all children born in *Lebensborn* maternity homes who met the criteria of the SS were—as was the case with Steiner—to be subjected to a naming ceremony instead of a Christian baptism, and thus admitted to the SS.⁸

Between 1936 and 1945, *Lebensborn* maintained a total of nine maternity homes in Germany (present-day German borders) and fifteen more in Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium, France, and Norway. After the outbreak of the Second World War, German SS, military, and civilian personnel had children with women living in these countries. *Lebensborn* assumed control of these children if the mother’s health, family history, and “Aryan” ancestry could be established. *Lebensborn* maternity homes in the German Reich and in German-occupied territories were designed to be pleasant places where “Aryan” women could receive prenatal care, deliver their babies, and recover from labor. The Wienerwald Home, established in 1938, was one of the largest maternity homes in terms of the number of births. When Steiner was born in February 1943, approximately 950 children had already been born there. By the end of the war, this number had increased by approximately 350 births.⁹

From 1942 onwards, *Lebensborn* was also involved in the so-called Germanisation of children classified as “Aryan,” from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Thousands of children were kidnapped because they had German ancestry or because of their supposed racial features. *Lebensborn* placed these children with selected German families. In Austria, a second

8 Lilienthal, *Der “Lebensborn e. V.”*, 99–100.

9 BIK, database on the *Lebensborn* Maternity Home Wienerwald, Registry Office Pernitz II, 63/1943.

Lebensborn facility, the Alpenland Home near Gmunden, “germanized” kidnapped children and afterward placed them with selected childless couples. After the war, searches for these children’s biological families have often been futile. They described the return to their home countries as painful—and emphasized the further traumatization caused by their non-recognition as victims.¹⁰

Laying the Groundwork: Scope and Scale of the Oral History Project

How did BIK come into contact with people born in the Wienerwald Home, the so-called *Lebensborn* children? The oral history project is part of a comprehensive research study by BIK on *Lebensborn*, which started in early 2020 and included the analysis of data obtained from historical files on hundreds of children born in the Wienerwald Home between 1938 and 1945.¹¹ As some *Lebensborn* children only accidentally learned of

- 10 Ines Hopfer, *Geraubte Kindheit. Die gewaltsame Eindeutschung von polnischen Kindern in der NS-Zeit* (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 2010). Also see: Verena Buser, “‘Mass Detective Operation’ im befreiten Deutschland: UNRRA und die Suche nach den eingedeutschten Kindern nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg,” *HISTORIE* 8 (2016): 347–60; Isabel Heinemann, “‘Bis zum letzten Tropfen guten Blutes.’ The Kidnapping of ‘Racially Valuable’ Children as Another Aspect of Nazi Racial Policy in the Occupied East,” in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. Dirk Moses (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2004), 244–66; Isabel Heinemann, “Fundament der Volksgemeinschaft. Familientrennungen und -gründungen in der nationalsozialistischen In- und Exklusionspolitik,” in *Familientrennungen im nationalsozialistischen Krieg. Erfahrungen und Praktiken in Deutschland und im besetzten Europa 1939–1945*, ed. Wiebke Lisner, Johannes Hürter, Corenlia Rau, and Lu Seegers (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022), 57–80; Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, *Raubkind. Von der SS nach Deutschland verschleppt* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2018).
- 11 BIK Project *Lebensborn-Heim Wienerwald, 1938–1945. Tabu und Projektion*, funded by the Jubilee Fund of the Austrian National Bank (18270) and the Province of Lower Austria (Project Lead: Barbara Stelzl-Marx). Existing research on *Lebensborn* in Austria includes: Hiltraud Ast, *Feichtenbach. Eine Tallandschaft im Niederösterreichischen Schneeberggebiet* (Vienna: Brüder Hollinek, 1994), 61–77; Corinna Fürstaller, “Lebensbornheime in Österreich” (Master’s thesis, University of Graz, 2010); Elisabeth A. Märker, “‘Rassisch wertvoll.’ Die positive Eugenik: Ihre Handhabung am Beispiel des Lebensbornvereins im ‘Heim Alpenland’ und ‘Heim Wienerwald’” (PhD diss., University of Innsbruck, 1999); Sandro Rupprecht, “Aktion Lebensborn – Die Züchtung von Herrenmenschen in Feichtenbach,” in *Wie es bei uns in Niederösterreich war 1938–1945. Spurensuche im Nationalsozialismus. Materialien zur Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Franz Vonwald and Margarethe Kainig-Huber (Berndorf: Kral, 2015). Recent works of fiction dealing with *Lebensborn* in

their place of birth in adulthood, BIK estimates that others are not aware that they were born in a *Lebensborn* home. Confronting *Lebensborn* children with this aspect of their past for the first time via an interview request, and thus bringing to light potential family secrets or repressed memories, could have had incalculable personal or familial consequences. As a result, the decision was made to only trace and contact individuals for interview requests who had already gone public with their stories through autobiographical publications or media features.¹² Few interview partners have been referred to the institute through so-called snowball sampling, which is a sampling technique where currently enrolled research participants help recruit further research participants among their acquaintances.¹³ Calls for participation in the interviews published in Austrian media proved successful by the end of 2020.

Not every contact led to an interview, but, in total, thirty-four interviews were conducted with *Lebensborn* children. The interview phase

Austria include: Eleonore Rodler, *Feichtenbach. Eine Faktion* (Vienna and Klosterneuburg: Edition VaBene, 2009); Alois Hotschnig, *Der Silberfuchs meiner Mutter* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 2021). In 2001, Günther Knotzinger presented a manuscript with his research results on the history of the former Wienerwald Home, titled “Das SS-Heim ‘Wienerwald’ und die Geschichte des Hauses von 1904 bis zur Gegenwart.” The manuscript has not been published. At the time of publication of this paper, Knotzinger’s manuscript is available through Adelgunde Knotzinger, Feichtenbach.

- 12 Astrid Eggers, together with Elke Sauer, published her own life story and those of other *Lebensborn* children. See: Astrid Eggers, “Ich war die Marionette meiner Mutter,” in *Verschwiegene Opfer der SS. Lebensborn-Kinder erzählen ihr Leben*, ed. Astrid Eggers and Elke Sauer (Leipzig: Engelsdorfer, 2015), 134–50. Brigitta Rambeck also published an autobiography, see: Brigitta Rambeck, “Ich war ein Schubladenkind,” in *Born of War – Vom Krieg geboren. Europas verleugnete Kinder*, ed. Gisela Heidenreich (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2017), 155–61. Hilde S. (name changed) participated in various documentaries: Gesa Knolle and Birtha Templin, *Was bleibt*, Silvia Loinjak production, 57 minutes, 2008; Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser, *Liebe Geschichte*, Klub Zwei production, 98 minutes, 2010; Christoph Bendas, *Kinder für das Vaterland. Das Schicksal der Lebensborn-Kinder*, ORF2-Thema, December 5, 2016; Robert Altenburger and Andreas Nowak, *Lebensborn, die vergessenen Opfer*, ORF2-Menschen&Mächte, November 7, 2019. No contact could be established with Horst Martin Widdershoven, who participated in the following documentary: Beate Thalberg, *Geheimsache Lebensborn*, Cult Film production, 42 minutes, 2002.
- 13 The *Lebensspuren* association is a support group for people who were born in *Lebensborn* maternity homes or who were “germanized.” The association supports them and their families in coming to terms with their past. Astrid Eggers, its former chairperson, drew the attention of some *Lebensborn* children of the Wienerwald Home to the oral history project. Gisela Heidenreich and Dorothee Schmitz-Köster also arranged contact between *Lebensborn* children and BIK.

lasted several months due to restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, one interview was conducted with a *Lebensborn* mother, which, at her request and the request of her family, was recorded in writing rather than with an audio recorder. Another interview was conducted with a former student nurse, and others with several people from the vicinity of the former Wienerwald Home.

The focus of the oral history project was on the *Lebensborn* children of the Wienerwald Home; however, BIK also conducted interviews with their siblings and children. In some families, descendants of *Lebensborn* children born in the Wienerwald Home tended to not question the biographies of their (grand)parents but rather to perpetuate family narratives established in the decades after the Second World War—repeating that their (grand)parents were only marginally involved in the Nazi regime and did not benefit from it. In some families, on the other hand, the younger generation was interested in the family history and, because of their age and distance from the Nazi period, they critically engaged with it: What role did my family play during the Nazi regime? What has already been spoken about within the family, and what has been concealed? How do I gather further information and understand it? However, it is not only family memory that plays a role in passing on memories of *Lebensborn* to the following generations. Since the younger generation's image of the Nazi period is strongly influenced by movies and television, such depictions of *Lebensborn* are also of interest for research. As such, how grandchildren and great-grandchildren of *Lebensborn* mothers and fathers deal and dealt with the actions of their relatives during the Third Reich requires further attention.

Doing Oral History: Recording Interviews, Interview Analysis, and Use of Data

Most of the interviews with *Lebensborn* children were conducted in their home environment and recorded with an audio recorder. *Lebensborn* was the starting point and central topic of the interviews, but they ultimately encompassed the entire biography of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted by various interviewers and did not follow any pre-defined guidelines, rather allowing sufficient time for the interviewees to tell their stories to the extent they desired. The interviews, therefore, demonstrate a wide range of formats and content; the shortest interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and the longest approximately

320 minutes.¹⁴ Although designed to accommodate the wishes and needs of the interviewees as much as possible, the oral history project has been characterized by a structured and systematic planning process which considered the challenge that the families often did not talk openly about the Wienerwald Home and what the interviewees' parents did during the Nazi era. This planning included thorough research before the interviews, preparations for deciding on a suitable time and place for the interviews, and considerations about the rights of use of the recordings. Also, outside of the interviewing phase, external factors had to be considered, such as the health of the interviewees, as well as their gender, age, and class.

The transcripts of all interviews with *Lebensborn* children from the Wienerwald Home were indexed. The computer software MAXQDA was used for this purpose. This allows so-called *codes*, or keywords, to be created using both an inductive research approach (a bottom-up method in which researchers start with specific observations and then move on to more general ideas) and a deductive research approach (a top-down method in which researchers start with a general idea and test it through their observations). These keywords are then assigned to individual words, sentences, and passages of a transcript. In this project, more than fifty codes were keyworded on a wide range of topics, such as "Narrative of Own Stay at the Wienerwald Home," "Admission of Biological Mother to the Wienerwald Home," "Military Career of Biological Father," "Denazification," "*Lebensborn* Children Networking in Adulthood," "*Lebensborn* Grandchildren," and "Visits to Birthplace in the Postwar Decades." The keywords were assigned to six overarching themes: "*Lebensborn* Children," "Biological Parents of *Lebensborn* Children," "Staff of the Wienerwald Home," "Social and Family Environment of *Lebensborn* Children," "Dealing with One's Own Life and Family History," and "Noteworthy Occurrences During the Interviews."

The central work undertaken on the interviews was carried out by two BIK team members, who independently keyworded each of the transcripts. The results were subsequently compared, discussed, and merged. The process of keywording with dual control formed the basis for the interpretation of the interviews. This yielded a comprehensive understanding of the narrated content, enabling the team members to reflect

14 In preliminary telephone conversations, *Lebensborn* children already shared aspects of their life and family history which they considered important for the topic. Central to the research process was, therefore, the creation of so-called memos, or protocols, which accompanied the pre-interview phase, served as preparation for the individual interviews, and also documented the post-interview phase.

on the framework conditions of the respective interviews and to jointly answer open questions that arose while working through the transcripts. Keywording did not replace the detailed study of individual lives and family stories, but it was an essential part of the analysis process intended to capture the overview content of the entire interview sample.

Methodological and ethical considerations are relevant in every oral history project—starting with the recruitment and selection of interviewees, through the conduct and follow-up of the interviews, to the storage of research data, and the publication of research results. For example, of the thirty-four interviews conducted, only the twenty-eight that were conducted face-to-face and not via telephone were subjected to a detailed analysis. Three interviews were not included because they could not be recorded with a recording device. Two further interviews, which were emotionally challenging for the interviewees, had to be terminated and were also not included in the keywording process. Furthermore, the use of interviews with *Lebensborn* children is only possible to a limited extent. For the time being, most interviewees agreed to the preservation and use of the interview files exclusively for BIK research projects on *Lebensborn*; therefore, any availability for general research will be on a case-by-case basis and only after consultation with the interviewees and interviewers.

Some of the interviewees expressed an interest in learning more about the racial ideological background of *Lebensborn*, exchanging perspectives with others, and visiting their birthplace. For the first time in Austria, BIK organized a non-public meeting of *Lebensborn* children, which included the disclosure of personal files by the former home registry office in the municipal administration of Feichtenbach/Pernitz, together with the registrar. Additionally, a public event with a panel discussion took place, in which four *Lebensborn* children talked about their biographies, and a visit to the abandoned building of the former maternity home took place. In a follow-up project, BIK continued to investigate various aspects of the history of the Wienerwald Home together with people whose lives and family stories are connected to *Lebensborn* in different ways.¹⁵

15 BIK, Project “MEMORY LAB. Partizipative Forschung zum Lebensborn-Heim Wienerwald, 1938–1945,” funded by the Open Innovation in Science Center of the Ludwig Boltzmann Society (Project Lead: Lukas Schretter).

*Lebensborn in Family Memory: A Brief Case Study
of Coming to Terms with the Past*

Klaus Steiner was one of few interviewees who had already intensively dealt with the history of *Lebensborn* before the oral history project—unlike others who had become interested in the history of *Lebensborn* in advanced adulthood, or when they read and responded to the media call to those born in the maternity home to participate in this oral history project. As detailed below, Steiner tried to trace his family history and gain certainty about what his parents did during the Nazi period.

Steiner's father Ferdinand Steiner, born in Hallstatt in 1909, joined the NSDAP in August 1932.¹⁶ Until the so-called *Anschluss* in March 1938, the NSDAP was illegal in Austria. In April 1933, Steiner's father became a member of the SS. From 1933 onwards, he was a member of what was later called the *Österreichische Legion* in Nazi Germany.¹⁷ He married Klaus Steiner's mother, Margaretha Theiner, in 1940. During the Second World War, Ferdinand Steiner served as a member of the *Waffen-SS* in the Netherlands, France, the Soviet Union, Finland, and finally Italy. In June 1944, it was proposed that he would be promoted to *SS-Hauptsturmführer*. After the end of the war in 1945, he became a prisoner of war in Italy. From 1947, he stayed in Bolzano, where he remarried in 1950 after divorcing his wife. In 1951 he moved to Innsbruck. Sentenced by the *Volksgericht* in Innsbruck, he was soon pardoned against the background of the Cold War.¹⁸

As the wife of a member of the *Waffen-SS*, Steiner's mother, born in Vienna in 1920, met the requirements for giving birth in the Wienerwald Home. During the war, she worked for the *Reichsbund der Deutschen*

16 BIK, Interview with Klaus Steiner, conducted by Lukas Schretter, Vienna, 22 June 2020.

17 The *Österreichische Legion* was formed in 1933, after the NSDAP was banned in Austria, and was made up of Austrian Nazis who had fled to the German Reich to receive military training for a German invasion of Austria. Michael Holzmann, "... und steht die Legion auf dem ihr zugewies'nen Posten." *Die Österreichische Legion als Instrument früher NS-Aggressionspolitik* (Berlin: LIT, 2018); Hans Schafranek, *Söldner für den Anschluss. Die Österreichische Legion 1933–1938* (Vienna: Czernin, 2011).

18 Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch), Personnel files of the SS and SA, R 9361-III/199681. The *Volksgerichte* (people's courts) were an Austrian juridical instrument which was installed in 1945 and terminated in 1955. Based in Vienna, Graz, Linz, and Innsbruck, the *Volksgerichte* dealt with investigations on suspicion of Nazi crimes or illegal Nazi membership before 1938. For more information, see Claudia Kuretsidis-Haider, Winfried R. Garscha, and Siegfried Sanwald, "Verfahren vor den österreichischen Volksgerichten. Die Tätigkeit der Volksgerichte 1945 bis 1955," in *Verfolgung und Ahndung*, ed. Christine Schindler (Vienna: DÖW 2021), 15–104.

Beamten im Gau Niederdonau, first as a typist and later as a secretary. Her place of work was at the *Gauleitung* in the Palais Todesco opposite the State Opera in Vienna.¹⁹ After giving birth to her child in the Wienerwald Home, she moved to Hallstatt, where her parents-in-law lived. In the postwar period, after her divorce, she remarried the local dentist.

In his interview, Steiner reported that early on, “I realized what it meant to be the child of an old Nazi.”²⁰ Growing up in Hallstatt in the postwar years, he was confronted with the social contrasts in the village community. In Hallstatt, there were socialists and “those who belonged to the saltworks and the mountain”²¹ on the one hand, and the bourgeois and the former Nazis on the other. However, no one in the family talked about his parents’ Nazi past: “It was kept quiet and concealed from A to Z.”²² Steiner was not even informed about his true place of birth; instead, he was told that he was born in Muggendorf, a neighboring community of Feichtenbach.

As his father had lost his Austrian citizenship after becoming a member of the *Österreichische Legion*, according to Steiner, this led to problems when he entered primary school. His mother, therefore, made an agreement with the local priest: she would comply with the priest’s wish to have Steiner baptized and in return, the priest would ensure that he was allowed to go to school. After primary school, Steiner attended a private secondary school in Bad Aussee for four years, and then he switched to public school in Gmunden.²³ After the Second World War, the Second Austrian Republic failed to address the large number of Austrian Nazis, including those in teaching and academic professions. Due to Cold War tensions, the United States, Britain, and France helped to downplay Austria’s responsibility to secure the state against the Soviets.²⁴

19 BArch, R 9361-III/199681.

20 BIK, Steiner, minute 4.

21 BIK, Steiner, minute 4.

22 BIK, Steiner, minute 15.

23 The private secondary school in Bad Aussee had been founded in 1952 by Wilhelm Höttl—who was an *SS-Sturmbannführer* and, from 1944, Head of Intelligence and Counter Espionage in Central and South East Europe. Höttl had been an employee of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office, RSHA) and the SD. In the postwar period, he worked for Allied intelligence services. The school he founded was attended by well-known personalities such as artist and musician André Heller, author Barbara Frischmuth, automobile racing drivers Jochen Rindt, Helmut Marko, Harald Ertl, and Niki Lauda, film director Karin Brandauer, and politician Thomas Prinzhorn. Martin Haidinger, *Wilhelm Höttl. Spion für Hitler und die USA* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2019), 156–58 and 170–71.

24 Siegfried Göllner, “*Da waren die Nazis ja noch humaner*” – *Sichtweisen ehemaliger NationalsozialistInnen auf die Entnazifizierung in Österreich 1945–1957* (Göttingen:

In 1961, Steiner started studying architecture in Vienna. At that time, he visited his father in Innsbruck to ask him for financial support for his studies. However, he refused the amount his father offered because it was so small. This was Steiner's first and last time meeting his biological father, with whom he sought less and less contact both because of his father's Nazi sentiments and because of Steiner's disappointment at his father's lack of care for him. During his studies at the Technische Universität (Technical University) in Vienna, Steiner had teachers who were former Nazis. Consequently, as a student, Steiner was surprised "that there was exactly the same ensemble at the Technical University in Vienna as in the Salzkammergut. All of them old Nazis."²⁵ For example, his teachers included the artist Rudolf Hermann Eisenmenger, who had been a member of the illegal Nazi party in 1933, and the art historian and later president of the *Bundesdenkmalamt* (Federal Office for the Protection of Monuments), Walter Frodl, who had been director of the *Gaumuseum* (district museum) and *Gaukonservator* (district curator) during the Second World War.

After having completed his university education, during which he worked for the influential architects Harry Glück and Carl Auböck, Steiner was assistant to the Viennese architect, spatial planner, and professor Rudolf Wurzer. Steiner reported that he stopped working for Wurzer when the latter suggested honoring architect Friedrich Tamms. During the war, Tamms had been an employee of Albert Speer, an artist listed in the *Gottbegnadeten-Liste* (list of artists considered crucial to Nazi culture), a professor at the Technische Hochschule (Technical University) in Berlin, and was responsible for the construction of flak towers in Vienna.

Steiner was an employee of the Vienna City Planning Department for several decades. In addition to his profession, he started researching the construction and planning activities of the Nazi regime in Vienna,

V&R Unipress, 2020); Heimo Halbrainer, Susanne Korbel, and Gerald Lamprecht, *Der 'schwierige' Umgang mit dem Nationalsozialismus an österreichischen Universitäten. Die Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz im Vergleich* (Graz: CLIO, 2022); Roman Pfefferle and Hans Pfefferle, *Glimpflich entnazifiziert. Die Professorenschaft der Universität Wien von 1944 in den Nachkriegsjahren* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014); Oliver Rathkolb, *Fiktion 'Opfer' Österreich und die langen Schatten des Nationalsozialismus und der Dollfuß-Diktatur* (Innsbruck, Vienna, and Bolzano: StudienVerlag, 2017); Dieter Stiefel, "Forschungen zur Entnazifizierung in Österreich: Leistungen, Defizite, Perspektiven," in *Entnazifizierung im regionalen Vergleich*, ed. Walter Schuster and Wolfgang Weber (Linz: City Archives of Linz, 2004), 43–57.

²⁵ BIK, Steiner, minute 8.

encouraged by the Austrian architecture critic Friedrich Achleitner. For the collection of documents and planning materials, he contacted city planning employees from the Nazi period and their relatives. According to Steiner, referring to his birthplace helped to gain trust and was “somehow a recommendation.”²⁶ In the interview, he spoke about his motivation to deal with Nazi architectural history and how this was linked to his parent’s involvement in the Nazi regime and his birth in a *Lebensborn* home; “Through the constant confrontation with these things, they slowly unfolded and cleared up for me. I therefore started with: Do not take me for a fool. I am fiercely interested in this now. I ask around and do research. Not in terms of being ambitious, but I just want to know.”²⁷

In 2011, the *Architekturzentrum Wien* (Az W) added all the documents Steiner had collected to its archive. It brought him a sense of professional achievement and recognition for his personal commitment, which had been challenging: searching for former Nazis in post-Nazi Austria, on the one hand, and dealing with his family history, on the other. The documents were the basis for the Az W’s temporary exhibition “Vienna. The Pearl of the Reich: Planning for Hitler” in 2015. The exhibition catalogue, which includes an interview with Klaus Steiner, states: “The material collected by Klaus Steiner since the 1970s still represents the most important collection of primary sources on Vienna’s architectural history during the Nazi period. The fact that immediately after the war, an extensive ‘cleansing’ of private holdings, as well as public archives took place makes this collection of original documents unique and an indispensable basis for coming to terms with Nazi history.”²⁸

Conclusion

The oral history project pursued the goals of collecting information about the history of the Wienerwald Home from 1938 to 1945 and examining how *Lebensborn* children dealt with this aspect of their life and family history. As if under a magnifying glass, ways of coming to terms with and dealing with Nazi family history become visible in *Lebensborn*.

26 BIK, Steiner, minute 10.

27 BIK, Steiner, minute 9.

28 Ingrid Holzschuh and Monika Platzer, *Wien. Die Perle des Reiches. Planen für Hitler. Ausstellung im Architekturzentrum Wien vom 19. Mai 2015 bis 17. August 2015* (Zurich: Park Books, 2015). See also: Klaus Steiner, interview by Renata Schmidkunz, *Ör*, June 5, 2015; Klaus Steiner in “Des anderen Glückes Schmid,” part 2, by Ute Maurnböck-Mosser, *Ör*, December 19, 2023.

The ways in which *Lebensborn* children deal with their place of birth are contradictory. Although not all interviewees described this aspect of their biography as decisive for their own identity, they are not completely indifferent to it. Some consider the racial-ideological background of *Lebensborn* to be of little importance and stated that their mothers chose this place for birth exclusively due to practical reasons, for example, because of the proximity to their hometown. Others emphasized the emergency in which their unmarried mothers found themselves. Without *Lebensborn*, they assume, their (unmarried) mothers would have decided to terminate the pregnancies. For other *Lebensborn* children, such as Steiner, the feeling that “something was wrong” accompanied them from an early age and throughout their adult life. It was part of their individual coming to terms with their parental Nazi past. Against the background of Steiner’s detailed explanation of his professional career, and his research on the construction and planning activities of the Nazi regime in Vienna, his interview is both a testimony to Austrian architectural history and a source of information for a family history connected with *Lebensborn* and the Wienerwald Home.

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