

UNITED STATES  
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM  

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CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

**Children and the Holocaust**

Symposium Presentations

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES  
UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM  
2004

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First printing, September 2004

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## Contents

<i>Foreword</i> .....	i
Paul A. Shapiro	
<i>Immigration Policy and Forced Emigration from Germany: The Situation of Jewish Children (1933–1945)</i> .....	1
Susanne Heim	
<i>Heroic Acts and Missed Opportunities: The Rescue of Youth Aliyah Groups from Europe during World War II</i> .....	19
Sara Kadosh	
<i>Childhood in the Warsaw Ghetto</i> .....	33
Barbara Engelking-Boni	
<i>Transformation and Resistance: Schooling Efforts for Jewish Children and Youth in Hiding, Ghettos, and Camps</i> .....	43
Lisa Anne Plante	
<i>Facilities for Pregnant Forced Laborers and Their Infants in Germany (1943–1945)</i> .....	65
Evelyn Zegenhagen	
<i>The Destruction and Rescue of Jewish Children in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria (1941–1944)</i> .....	77
Radu Ioanid	
<i>“Unknown Children”: The Last Train from Westerbork</i> .....	93
Daphne L. Meijer	
<i>The Role of Children in the Rehabilitation Process of Survivors: The Case of Bergen-Belsen</i> ..	103
Hagit Lavsky	
<i>Bergen-Belsen: The End and the Beginning</i> .....	117
Menachem Z. Rosensaft	
<i>Appendix: Biographies of Contributors</i> .....	137

## Foreword

Well over a million children were murdered in the Holocaust. In addition to Jewish children, Romani children, institutionalized children, and handicapped children also were killed. Among Jews, the toll on children was particularly heavy. Although all Jews were marked for death, only six–eleven percent of Jewish children survived versus thirty-three percent of adults. Children, like their families, were persecuted for racial, religious, or political reasons in ghettos; concentration, transit, labor, and extermination camps; foreign lands to which they escaped, often without their parents; and in hiding.

Although their young voices were silenced forever, we can still hear some of these children through the rare bits of writing they left behind. Such is the case with fifteen-year-old Dawid Sierakowiak; an October 1939 entry in his Lodz ghetto diary notes: “The work at the square was supervised by a single soldier...with a big stick. Using rude words, he told me to fill puddles with sand. I have never been so humiliated in my life as when...I saw the happy, smiling mugs of passersby laughing at our misfortune.”<sup>1</sup> The last entry in Dawid’s diary, after over three years of grueling decline into starvation and disease, reads as a deadly premonition: “There is really no way out of this for us.”<sup>2</sup> Dawid Sierakowiak died in the ghetto in August 1943. None of his family survived.

More often, the words detailing the fates of children came from their murderers. At the end of October 1941, the Romanian Military Commander of Chisinau (Kishinev), Bessarabia, reported to the Military Governor of the province: “I have the honor to inform you that on October 31 the last major transport of Jews (from the Chisinau ghetto) was dispatched. The orphanage with 38 children, including four still at the breast and the rest from one to six years old, will be evacuated on Monday, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November.”<sup>3</sup> They were sent to Transnistria. Only an echo of their existence remains.

On September 4, 1942, Chaim Rumkowski, Elder of the Jews in the Lodz Ghetto, delivered one of the most infamous speeches of his or any other time: “Brothers and sisters, hand them over to me! Fathers and mothers, give me your children!”<sup>4</sup> Almost all the Lodz ghetto children under the age of ten were taken away and murdered.

Not all of the story was taking place in Europe, however. Between January and July 1939, the United States Congress debated legislation introduced by Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York and Representative Edith Rogers of Massachusetts; it would have authorized the admission of 20,000 additional Jewish children to the United States, beyond the immigration quota for Germany. The legislation had the support of leading Catholic and Protestant clergy, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ, the Quaker community, Eleanor Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, Alf Landon, Rabbi Steven S. Wise, Eddie Cantor, and others. A week after the May 17 issuance of the British “MacDonald” White Paper, which effectively closed the door on Jewish emigration from Europe to Palestine, the following exchange occurred before the House Immigration Committee in Washington. The chair of the committee was questioning a journalist who had reported from Germany during and following the November 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom and who had witnessed the arrival of Kindertransport in Britain:

Dickstein: Do you contemplate that there will be another pogrom?

Reynolds: I not only contemplate it. I am confident that the complete pogrom is not very far away.

Dickstein: In other words there will be a new slaughter?

Reynolds: Yes....

Dickstein: Annihilation?

Reynolds: Yes, a complete pogrom.<sup>5</sup>

The Wagner-Rogers bill languished for several weeks, while Jewish children under the age of fourteen, who might have been rescued under the proposed law, were labeled by one congressional witness as “thousands of motherless, embittered, persecuted children of undesirable foreigners.” When the president of the University of North Carolina, Frank P. Graham, testified that the proposed legislation was consistent “with the American tradition of offering haven to religious and political refugees,” the committee chairman responded, “[t]hat is our form of government, but as a matter of fact, we have never done the things we preach.”<sup>6</sup> No action was taken. Principle—and the children—were abandoned to the Holocaust.

Despite this failure of *public* policy, approximately 1,000 European Jewish children were rescued, brought to the United States, and placed with foster parents through the efforts of dozens of private organizations and hundreds of private

individuals between 1934 and 1945. Some other European Jewish children also survived through luck or initiative, in hiding or passing as Aryans. Their fates varied extraordinarily according to where they were, when they were brought face-to-face with Nazi intentions, how old they were, how healthy they appeared, what they looked like, whether they were boys or girls, who cared about them or was able to help, and what avenues of escape or survival opened up for them.

After the war, those who survived struggled to reunite with family members. Many had to face the fact that they were now orphans and, in some cases, the only surviving members of their entire families. In the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp, however, children were central: “children...came as some consolation, some replacement for the million and a half children murdered in the Holocaust....Around them and their families the whole social and cultural system was built.”<sup>7</sup> Those children predominantly made their way to Palestine, and then the State of Israel, or to the United States.

Why organize a symposium on children and the Holocaust? Because we were all once children. We all, somewhere, remain children. If the Holocaust has universal implications, that reality is felt nowhere as strongly as when one considers the children.

*Children and the Holocaust* was organized by the Museum’s Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies (CAHS) as part of its continuing symposium series to draw together Holocaust scholars to share research results and encourage networking, collaborative research, and discussion of research methodologies. Ten scholars presented new research into the Nazi war on children and examined what children targeted by the Nazis, their allies, and their collaborators endured before, during, and after the Holocaust. The scholars presented their research after three days of intense deliberation, stimulated in part by the Museum’s special tenth anniversary exhibitions *Anne Frank the Writer: An Unfinished Story* and *Life in Shadows: Hidden Children and the Holocaust*.

The mission of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies is to promote research and study of the Holocaust; to encourage the growth of the field of Holocaust studies at American universities; to foster strong relationships between American and foreign scholars of the Holocaust; and to ensure the ongoing training of future generations of scholars capable of doing research on and teaching sensitively about the Holocaust.

Nechama Tec, Holocaust survivor, professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut, Stamford, and member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council and its Academic Committee, delivered opening remarks on the compelling nature of the topic and drew on her recently published *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* to describe how children had to grow up quickly during the Holocaust, or not grow up at all.<sup>8</sup> She vividly recalled her father saying in Poland in 1939, “Childhood is a luxury that Jewish children cannot afford” because “children, by definition...promised the Jewish future, and...the last thing that the Germans wanted was any kind of a future for the Jewish people.” These remarks set the context for the scholarly presentations that followed.<sup>9</sup>

The symposium was divided into three sessions. The first session was entitled *Emigration and Mischlinge*. Susanne Heim of the Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science, and 2003 Charles H. Revson Fellow at CAHS, analyzed the challenges, processes, and impact of Jewish child and adolescent emigration from Germany between 1933 and 1945. Sara Kadosh, Director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, described the actions taken by the European leadership of Youth Aliyah to rescue Jewish young people in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. She described as an unexpected obstacle the “bureaucratic stodginess” of Youth Aliyah’s Jerusalem head office, which prevented it from recognizing the seriousness of the Nazi threat and ultimately contributed to its failure to extricate more children. Cynthia Crane, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, discussed the plight of German children from Jewish-Christian mixed marriages; their struggles for cultural, religious, or national identity continued long after the war had ended.<sup>10</sup>

The theme of the second session was *Ghettoization, Hiding, and the Camp Experience*. Barbara Engelking-Boni of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences painted a grim picture of childhood in the Warsaw Ghetto. The increasingly severe deprivation and hardship in the Ghetto forced young people into distorted “adult” roles as they struggled to help their families survive. Amsterdam author and journalist Daphne Meijer focused on the puzzling circumstances surrounding the extraordinary survival of forty-eight young Dutch children—the so-called “Unknown Children”—who were hidden with non-Jewish families without any record of their real identities. During the last year of the war they were denounced and deported from Westerbork to Bergen-Belsen to Theresienstadt, then liberated and



returned to Holland in June 1945. California State University, San Marcos, Professor Lisa Plante closed the session by analyzing the ways in which Jewish children and adults resolutely maintained schooling efforts in camps, ghettos, and in hiding as a way of retaining some semblance of “normality” and preparing them for a future that few would live to see.

The third session, entitled *The Surviving Remnant and Reconstruction*, began with Radu Ioanid, Director of International Archival Programs at the Museum. Dr. Ioanid shared new information about the fate of Romanian Jewish children in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria at the hands of German and Romanian military and civilian authorities. Renowned author and poet Henryk Grynberg then shared profoundly personal insights into his life as a Polish Jewish child hiding as a Christian Aryan. As a Holocaust survivor, he has used writing to come to terms with his memories and the shattered world to which he returned.<sup>11</sup> Professor Hagit Lavsky of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem closed the session by describing the central role of children in the rehabilitation of survivors as both individuals and as a community in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp.

Following the symposium, the Center participated in the conference *Understudied Aspects of Children and the Holocaust* at Millersville University in Pennsylvania. Two of the papers presented at the Millersville conference are included in this volume. Menachem Z. Rosensaft, a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council and founding chairman of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, described the important historical role that Bergen-Belsen played as a Nazi concentration camp, a post-war displaced persons camp, and—in his own life—as a birthplace. Evelyn Zegenhagen, Helen Bader Foundation Research Fellow at CAHS, detailed the German killing process directed against the infants of women forced laborers who were brought to the Reich from Poland, Russia, and other parts of Eastern Europe.

The articles in this collection are not verbatim transcriptions of the papers as presented. Some authors extended or revised their presentations by incorporating additional information and endnotes, and all of the contributions were copyedited. Although the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum makes every reasonable effort to provide accurate information, the Museum cannot guarantee the reliability, currency, or completeness of the material contained in the individual papers. The

papers represent work in progress. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Museum.

The Center's symposium *Children and the Holocaust* was made possible through the support of the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. Many members of the Center's staff deserve thanks for their work on the symposium and proceedings: Robert M. Ehrenreich, Suzanne Brown-Fleming, and Lisa Grandy for devising, developing, and organizing the symposium; Severin Hochberg and Ann Mann Millin for their smooth moderation of panels; and Ellen Blalock, Eliot Werner, Aleisa Fishman, and Laura Brahm for preparing the papers for publication. Finally, and most important, the scholars deserve our greatest thanks for their excellent presentations and their subsequent participation in the editing of those presentations for this publication.

Paul A. Shapiro  
Director  
Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies  
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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## NOTES

1. Sierakowiak, Dawid, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Łódź Ghetto* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996), p. 47.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
3. USHMM Archives, RG-25.003M, Romanian Ministry of National Defense, Archive of the General Staff concerning the Holocaust in Romania, Reel 126, File #29, p. 361.
4. Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides, eds., *Łódź Ghetto: Inside a Community under Siege* (New York: Viking, 1989), p. 328.
5. House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Admission of German Refugee Children*, CR LXXXIV, part 13, 76<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1st sess., A2473, p. 117.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945–1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), pp. 217–18.
8. Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).
9. Professor Tec's remarks are available in audio format on the Museum's website at [www.ushmm.org/research/center/symposia](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/symposia).
10. Cynthia Crane's paper is available in audio format on the Museum's website at [www.ushmm.org/research/center/symposia](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/symposia). Professor Crane dealt with this same subject in her recently published *Divided Lives: The Untold Stories of Jewish-Christian Women in Nazi Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
11. Henryk Grynberg's paper is available in audio format on the Museum's website at [www.ushmm.org/research/center/symposia](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/symposia). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has also published an occasional paper by Henryk Grynberg, "The Holocaust as a Literary Experience," based on the Monna and Otto Weinmann Annual Lecture he delivered at the Museum in May 2004.

## **Immigration Policy and Forced Emigration from Germany: The Situation of Jewish Children (1933–1945)**

**Susanne Heim**

Eva Wohl left public school at the age of about thirteen because of the numerous Nazi edicts that excluded Jewish students. During the ensuing six years, she attended three Jewish schools in various German cities. In spring 1939, only a few weeks before she was due to graduate from high school (which was postponed because of the imprisonment of most of her Jewish teachers after *Kristallnacht*), she left school to emigrate to Palestine before her visa expired. In Jerusalem, however, school officials requested three more years of religious studies as a condition for a high school degree, which she never fulfilled. When Wohl's daughter Tamar finished school, she convinced her mother to go to university too. But when Wohl asked German authorities for her high-school equivalency certificate (*Abitur*), however, they rejected her request because she had already received compensation for her interrupted education. This refusal was all the more bitter for her, since boys in the German military and girls in the League of German Girls who had been unable to finish high school because of the war usually received such certificates (*Notabitur*).<sup>1</sup>

The interruption of school careers was quite common for Jewish children who left Germany because of Nazi persecution. Although the suspension of education influenced their lives in the long run, for many children it was not the most traumatic event of their emigration. Most of them experienced the loss of friends and increasing isolation as a consequence of growing antisemitism. They felt the restrictions on Jewish life in Germany and the social degradation of their families due to a loss of income. All this usually happened before emigration, which for many Jewish youngsters also meant separation from their families.

About 80,000–100,000 Jewish children under the age of fifteen were living in Germany in 1934.<sup>2</sup> An estimated 15,000–18,000 Jewish children left Germany during the following years without their parents.<sup>3</sup> These emigration statistics are contradictory and incomplete, however, and categorizations such as age or time span are not uniform. Jewish organizations dealing with emigration from Germany registered only those who emigrated with the support of their organizations. Thus only approximate figures are available.

Children emigrated under a variety of conditions. About 4,000 left as members of Zionist groups and started a new life in kibbutzim in Palestine. Others were forced to form a relationship with foster parents somewhere in the English countryside and with little contact with either their families in Germany or the Jewish community and rescue organizations.

The main routes through which children left Germany without their parents were the Youth Aliyah movement to Palestine and the “children’s transports” (*Kindertransport*) to England. The emigration of children to other countries was less significant.

### **EMIGRATION TO PALESTINE: THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT**

The first group to initiate a debate about the future of Jewish youth in Germany were the Zionists, who represented only a minority among German Jewry in 1933. The largest Jewish organization, the Central Union of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (*Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens*), was not opposed to emigration but was reluctant to promote it as a general policy and thus diminish the standing of the Jewish community in Germany.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, when it came to the emigration of Jewish youngsters, German Jewish organizations and the Zionists were able to cooperate on a practical level. As a consequence of the Nazis’ exclusion of Jews from traditional professional fields such as trade and academia, Jewish organizations established new paths for educating young Jews as part of a concept of “job stratification” (*Umschichtung*) for German Jewry. Vocational training in handicraft jobs and agriculture was supported by Jewish organizations with a view to possible emigration.

German anti-Jewish policy developed in a similar direction. After a chaotic outburst of atrocities during the first months of the regime, the Security Police (*Sicherheitsdienst* [SD]) and Gestapo officials who worked on various solutions to the “Jewish question” demanded the emigration of primarily young Jews. In 1934 the SD outlined its position: “For the Jews, living conditions have to be restricted—not only in the economic sense. Germany for them has to be a country without a future, where the remnants of the old generations can die, but the young can’t live, so that the incentive for emigration remains vital.”<sup>5</sup>

The idea of encouraging children to emigrate had first been proposed even before the Nazis seized power. Recha Freier, the wife of a Berlin rabbi, introduced an

initiative in 1932 that was designed to provide Jewish children with a better life in Palestine. Her concept of Youth Aliyah was a reaction to the general plight of many Jewish children in a social climate shaped by antisemitism and economic crisis rather than a response to the specific threat of the growing Nazi movement.<sup>6</sup> In the beginning even Zionist organizations opposed Freier's plans. After 1933, however, this attitude changed and the idea of Youth Aliyah gained more support. A branch headed by American Zionist Henrietta Szold was established in Palestine, while in Germany the "Working Body for Children and Youth Aliyah" was formed by the Zionist youth movement.<sup>7</sup>

Children, predominantly between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, went through a six-month training course in Germany, where they were carefully screened.<sup>8</sup> From February 1934 until March 1939, 3,262 children from Germany, about 1,000 from Austria, and 400 from Czechoslovakia left for Palestine;<sup>9</sup> approximately sixty percent were boys and forty percent were girls.<sup>10</sup> After the Austrian *Anschluss* in March 1938, the emigration of twelve- to fourteen-year-olds was also planned from there. About 5,000 families in Palestine had agreed to adopt a child. Until 1941, however, only 670 children had entered the country within the framework of Youth Aliyah adoption.<sup>11</sup>

Organizing preparatory courses for the emigrating Jewish youngsters became a main activity in the rapidly growing Zionist youth movement.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the movement also had a strong influence on those who could not—or at least could not yet—emigrate.

### **PREPARING FOR EMIGRATION: THE TRAINING CAMPS**

For some Jewish youngsters in Germany, the youth movement became even more important than their families. In a general atmosphere of intimidation and humiliation, it provided them with self-confidence and a positive Jewish identity that their parents often were no longer able to provide.<sup>13</sup>

Professional training—mainly in nonacademic fields in preparation for emigration—was provided in several training (*Hachsharah*) camps in Germany,<sup>14</sup> many of which were in the environs of Berlin. As a rule youngsters in these camps expected to emigrate to Palestine. The Gross Breesen camp in Silesia (led by Curt Bondy) also prepared Jewish youngsters for emigration to places other than Palestine,<sup>15</sup> but as the situation in Germany deteriorated, training facilities were established in the Netherlands, Denmark, England, Switzerland, and Sweden. Youngsters in these

training camps, as well as Jewish children in schools outside Germany, bore the consequences of the contradictory German policy on emigration. In 1934 the restrictions against transferring money abroad made it nearly impossible to send money from Germany to German citizens in other countries. This affected several thousand Jewish children, whose enrollment in schools outside Germany could no longer be supported by their families.<sup>16</sup> Later a special agreement, the “education clearing,” was instituted allowing Jews to transfer money to their children who attended schools or training centers abroad.<sup>17</sup>

In 1935 Germany prohibited the remigration of Jews once they had left the country, although this rule was not always followed. Thus another problem arose for Jews receiving educational training abroad. Those individuals who could not provide a document proving that their re-admission to the country would be in the economic interest of the Reich were rejected at the border. In late 1936 the German consulate in Lüttich, at the German-Belgian border, reported that many Jewish teenagers were unaware that the German authorities required such a document and thus were forbidden to visit their parents during the Christmas holidays. This led, as the consulate official reported to his superiors in Berlin, “to unpleasant differences and to wailing scenes.” German officials had no empathy for the children but felt embarrassed that they cried in public, drawing attention to the fact that they were refused entry at the border, “which should at all costs be avoided in the interest of the German image.”<sup>18</sup>

After the war began, the Hachsharah camps outside Germany became a refuge for thousands of Jewish youngsters. From there many managed to reach Palestine, or at least some neutral countries, by convoluted and often dangerous means such as the illegal immigration to Palestine (*Aliyah Bet*).<sup>19</sup> In the Netherlands some 300–400 young Jews were captured in Hachsharah camps after the German occupation and deported to death or slave-labor camps such as Mauthausen or Bergen Belsen.<sup>20</sup>

### **EMIGRATION TO OTHER COUNTRIES**

There were several other initiatives for transferring children—even unaccompanied—to other countries in addition to the emigration of children to Palestine. Although many Jewish parents were initially reluctant to send their children away alone, more parents tried to find hospitable places for their children after the adoption of the Nuremberg Laws.<sup>21</sup> In 1933 the American Jewish Congress adopted a resolution expressing the hope that some 50,000 children would find refuge in countries around the world, but

especially in the United States.<sup>22</sup> The prospect of removing tens of thousands of Jewish children from Germany turned out to be illusory, however. The first group of nine German Jewish boys between the ages of eleven and fourteen arrived in America on November 9, 1934.<sup>23</sup> The difficulty of doing more, however, has to be seen in the context of general anti-immigration attitudes in the United States. Among other associations, the American Federation of Labor—which opposed all immigration—rejected the initiative, seeing children as a future labor force and thus as competition to American workers.<sup>24</sup>

The problems related to achieving large-scale immigration of children were partly financial. Foster parents received \$500.00 in annual support, which German Jewish Children's Aid was soon unable to pay. The organization also could not find enough homes for the number of children whose immigration permits had been successfully obtained. As a result, in 1937 Children's Aid requested permission for 120 children, although the U.S. Department of Labor—which was responsible for the immigration—had given authorization for 250.<sup>25</sup> The initiators even thought that “the expenditure would seem out of proportion” regarding the amount actually required for general relief in Germany.<sup>26</sup>

The initiative was interrupted for two years and was restarted in 1937, but as of September 1939, no more than 500 German Jewish children had emigrated to the United States within the framework of the children's refugee program.<sup>27</sup> More children from other European countries found refuge in the United States during World War II. Between 1,000 and 1,200 Jewish children emigrated to the United States in the years 1934 to 1945.<sup>28</sup> Among the first were mostly thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds and more boys than girls. Most children who had relatives in the United States or who were received by foster parents remained in the New York City area, although this pattern changed in later years. More children came who had no family members to care for them, and Jewish organizations were eager to distribute refugee children around the country<sup>29</sup> in order to support further assimilation and to prevent the rise of anti-German or anti-Jewish sentiments in large American cities, which would have mainly hurt the children.

The number of Jewish children who were eventually able to enter the United States was miserably low compared to the initiative's ambitious hopes. Considering the number of child emigrants to other countries, however, the U.S. example represented a success for the refugee and children's aid organizations. In comparison, these



organizations were able to achieve the transfer of ten orphans to Glasgow in 1934–35; forty-three children to England in 1936–37; six children to the Netherlands; three boys to Canada; and forty-four Jewish youngsters to Australia in 1938.<sup>30</sup> Norwegian authorities accepted sixty children from Austria and Bohemia-Moravia after the German Army had annexed both lands.<sup>31</sup> Children who emigrated to European countries were not admitted permanently but required to leave after the war.

### **THE CLIMATE CHANGES**

The situation changed completely in 1938. The *Anschluss* of Austria to the German Reich, the Munich Agreement, the German annexation of the Sudetenland, and Kristallnacht hastened political developments in refugee affairs in a way that was disastrous for the refugees. The expansion of the German Reich, the denaturalization of thousands of Romanian Jews, the promulgation of anti-Jewish laws in Italy and the expulsion of all Jews who had entered the country after 1919, the deportation of about seventeen thousand Polish Jews from Germany (some of whom had lived in Germany for generations), the pogroms throughout the Reich in November 1938—all considerably increased the number of refugees and the need for refuge.

Approximately 30,000 Jewish men were imprisoned in concentration camps after November 9, 1938. The Gestapo agreed to a man's release only when he could confirm an opportunity to emigrate. Jewish wives did their best to pick up visas, steamship tickets, or landing permits—and to bribe travel agencies or German officials—in order to secure the documents necessary for emigration and free their husbands from imprisonment. The black market for visas and forged passports flourished and people who knew how to cross a border secretly were in great demand.

Throughout 1938 immigration restrictions were tightened in nearly all countries of refuge. Beginning in France in May, the denaturalization of Jews was facilitated while even limited work permits for refugees became much harder to obtain. The well-known chain reaction of closing the borders became blatant at the 1938 Evian Conference (one country after another declared itself incapable of accepting more refugees; a reaction prompted by the fear that countries with less restrictive immigration policies would have to accept refugees unwanted everywhere else). Some bureaucratic restrictions that had previously hindered immigration to the United States much more effectively than had the official quota, which was never filled before 1939, were relaxed. However, in July 1938 the U.S. embassy in Berlin decided not to accept

any applications for immigration visas for at least six months, because the number of applications already requested would have been enough to fill the immigration quota for the following two–three years.<sup>32</sup> Swiss authorities rejected refugees and those pushed by the Gestapo across the border; in late 1938 a German and Swiss police delegation agreed to mark Jewish passports with a stamped “J” that made disguised emigration much more difficult for Jews. Portugal accepted foreign Jews only as tourists and for a maximum period of thirty days.<sup>33</sup> In October the Dutch government initially decided to allow no more than 2,000 refugees to enter the country provided that they lived in camps, but a few weeks later the country’s borders were completely closed to German refugees.<sup>34</sup>

Viewed in hindsight, however, it seems that these events—and particularly the pogroms, as terrible as they were as a personal experience—opened at least a small door for Jewish children. For a short time public opinion in the receiving countries was dominated by compassion for the beleaguered German Jews.

### **THE KINDERTRANSPORT**

Under these circumstances the famous Kindertransport initiative became possible.<sup>35</sup> Immediately after Kristallnacht the Council for German Jewry—an umbrella institution of Zionist and non-Zionist organizations in Britain—selected Helen Bentwich to develop a plan for the evacuation of children from Germany. Bentwich was a political activist, the niece of the influential Viscount Herbert Samuel and the wife of Norman Bentwich, the Vice High Commissioner for Refugees from Germany. Dennis M. Cohen, chairman of the Emigration Department of the Jewish Refugee Committee, joined her in formulating the scheme, which was drafted within a few days and presented to the British government.<sup>36</sup> On November 15 a delegation of leading British Jews “consisting of Lords Samuel, Bearsted, and Rothschild together with the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Weizmann, and Neville Laski”<sup>37</sup> was received by the prime minister and home secretary. The Jewish representatives argued that if the government was unable to open the doors to all the Jews who wanted to leave Germany, it should at least admit a large number of children. The Jewish community would guarantee the funding of the rescue operation and pay for the children’s maintenance and education. Thus no public funds would be used for the children.<sup>38</sup>

After a debate in the Cabinet the following day, the British government agreed and publicly announced permission for an unlimited number of Jewish children up to

the age of sixteen from Germany and Austria (and later also from Czechoslovakia) to come to England. During the preceding months and after Kristallnacht, public opinion in Great Britain had shifted in favor of German Jews who were seeking refuge abroad. The British government was under pressure because of growing criticism of its appeasement policy toward the Germans and its restrictive immigration policy on Palestine. This situation favored immigration initiatives such as the Bentwich-Cohen Plan. The refugee aid organizations found Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare, a Quaker, to be more open minded toward immigration than his predecessor.<sup>39</sup> Eventually the idea was that the children would stay in Great Britain only for a limited period and that they would be trained for further emigration.

The transports were organized by the newly formed Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, which merged several refugee organizations and in March 1939 changed its name to the Refugee Children Movement. The movement, whose chairmen were Lord Samuel and Sir Wyndham Deedes,<sup>40</sup> cared about both Jewish and “non-Aryan Christian” children and cooperated with the Department for Child Emigration (*Kinderauswanderung*) of the Reich Representative of the Jews (*Reichsvertretung der Juden*) in Germany, the Friends Service Committee, the Jewish religious community (*Jüdische Kultusgemeinde*) in Vienna, and later also with the Jewish community in Prague to help locate and select the children and coordinate the Kindertransports in Germany and Czechoslovakia.<sup>41</sup> The first transport started in early December 1938. Originally the children were to travel by ship to Great Britain via Hamburg, but eventually they went by rail through the country. At the border they were received by representatives of the Dutch Jewish aid organizations and accompanied to Hoek van Holland, a port in the north of the Netherlands, from where they took a ship to Harwich. About 10,000 Jewish children had arrived before the war began in September 1939.

The Kindertransports were also possible because parents’ attitudes had changed after the pogroms. When it became obvious even to the most traditionally loyal and patriotic German Jewish citizens that there was no longer any future for Jews in Germany, parents tried to rescue their children by applying for places on Kindertransports. Decisions usually had to be made within a few days, however, and often by the mothers since many Jewish men were still imprisoned.<sup>42</sup>

Even if the concerned family members survived the war, which only about ten percent actually did, not all families were able to overcome the rupture in the

relationship between child and parent that was caused by sudden departure and lengthy separation. Until the beginning of the war, contact was possible via mail, but later family members were only allowed to send and receive Red Cross letters—which limited communication to a small number of words. Even this contact eventually broke down when the remaining family members were deported to ghettos and concentration camps. The youngsters in England were left with little more than grief and questions about the lack of correspondence.

Although these children were saved by the Kindertransports, many suffered greatly through separation from their families, confrontation with a foreign culture, and severe limits on their communication—at least at the beginning—due to a lack of knowledge of English. Not all foster parents were willing or able to establish an emotional relationship with the children. Some seem to have expected cheap domestic labor; a few children even reported sexual assaults.<sup>43</sup> Those who went to boarding schools rather than to families at least stayed among other children. Sometimes they were even lucky enough to be received in the pleasant conditions of a progressive school with teachers who cared about their individual development. After several months children who were placed in cities were evacuated to the countryside because of the Blitz, which meant another displacement and rupture. A similar situation occurred when foster parents were no longer able to keep them or pay their school fees.

Many children from the Kindertransports faced mistrust and suspicion during the war. Frequently they were regarded primarily as Germans and not as victims of German anti-Jewish policy. Some of those above the age of sixteen were interned as enemy aliens and even deported to the British dominions, such as Australia. Generally they were expected to be grateful and humble, although they actually felt lonely and not always welcome. Because of growing anti-German resentment, many of these children were even asked to change their only link with their distant families—their names—in order not to stand out as Germans.<sup>44</sup> Some changed their names voluntarily, or were even proud to contribute to the British war effort by working, for example, in armaments factories.

Despite the numerous difficulties that the children had to face, the unparalleled enterprise of the Kindertransport not only saved their lives but for many provided a new homeland in Great Britain.

**THE WAGNER-ROGERS BILL**

A similar effort was also begun in the United States after the November pogroms. Senator Robert F. Wagner and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers presented legislation—the Wagner-Rogers Bill—that proposed to permit the entry of 10,000 German children per year for 1939–40. This figure was in addition to the regular quota for immigration from Germany, which was 27,000 persons per year.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately the initiative was unsuccessful.

Although there had been a wave of sympathy in the United States for the victims of Kristallnacht, sixty-six percent of the population (according to polls) opposed the children’s bill in early 1939. The House of Representatives debates took place in May as the *S. S. St. Louis* drama unfolded. In neither case did President Roosevelt support the entry of refugees; further, he believed that the Wagner-Rogers Bill had no chance to win a congressional vote. The only likely way for the children to enter would have been a presidential executive order, which Roosevelt was not willing to issue since he felt that it would be an unpopular decision during an election cycle. He believed in a more comprehensive solution for the refugee crisis in the form of settlement projects, but for the Jews who had to leave Germany in early 1939, this approach did not solve their problem.

When it became obvious that the Wagner-Rogers Bill would fail to win a majority in Congress, the draft text was fundamentally changed to propose that the children immigrate within the quota and thus at the expense of adults for whom emigration might have meant liberation from concentration camps. Wagner, who found this unacceptable, withdrew his proposal.<sup>46</sup> The proceedings of the debate are an embarrassing testament to the antiforeign resentment that was common among immigration restrictionists in the 1930s. In the name of an alleged “national interest,” opponents of the bill claimed many reasons to block it, including the “immorality” of saving 20,000 children while leaving so many others—not only in Germany but also in China and other parts of the world—to their miserable destiny.<sup>47</sup> The fact that non-Jewish children from Great Britain were granted refuge in the United States only a few months later without facing such obstacles indicates that antisemitism played a role in the defeat of the Wagner-Rogers Bill.<sup>48</sup>

## **OTHER RESCUE EFFORTS**

Other initiatives to save German Jewish children by emigration were also attempted. In Denmark, for example, 320 children between the ages of fourteen and sixteen were accepted.<sup>49</sup> In Holland 1,500 children who were accommodated in homes were reported to have been accepted in March 1939. Because the government regarded their stay as transitory, they were not allowed to be placed with families or attend ordinary schools.<sup>50</sup> During the first half of 1939, 300–400 children entered France. In Switzerland in June 1939, the Comité Suisse was caring for between 1,000–1,300 children.<sup>51</sup>

Reichsführer-SS and Chief of the German Police Heinrich Himmler issued an order in late December 1938 that passports for children and youngsters should be issued as quickly as possible in order to promote emigration.<sup>52</sup> German authorities did not always wait for emigration opportunities to be arranged for children, however. A State Department official wrote about a visit to Europe in early 1939.

The Germans have recently adopted the practice of placing children from three to ten years old on trains with a tag pinned on their chest stating, "I'm so and so, going to join my mother in Brussels." Of course, there is no mother in Brussels, and the children have to be taken care of upon arrival by the Red Cross and other agencies.... They carry no papers or other indications of who they are or where they come from.

Many of these children knew only their first names. Concerning their number, the official wrote, "Belgium will soon have over one thousand children on its hands."<sup>53</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the emigration experiences of children differed depending on the conditions of their emigration, some general patterns emerge. Whether they left Germany in a Youth Aliyah group, a children's transport, or via another opportunity, children had to have a high degree of adaptability.

For many children emigration ended their childhood regardless of how old they actually were. They had to take responsibility not only for their own life—and sometimes for that of their younger brothers or sisters—but all too often they were expected or felt obliged to rescue their parents from Germany by providing them with a certificate for Palestine, a visa to another country, or a job. Since only very few were able to afford this, "survivor guilt" is a frequent phenomenon among people from the

childrens' transports. The fact that they were too young to have understood the danger to their families and therefore may not have said goodbye to their parents appropriately (sometimes even blaming them for "abandonment") does not ease these feelings.

Many children had to interrupt or even stop their education because of unfavorable conditions or in order to earn a living. Those who were able to finish school often had to accept an occupation that differed greatly from their previous plans and projects. In Palestine as well as in England, they were expected to contribute to that country's needs. Academic education was not encouraged, and those who emigrated via children's transports had no right to receive funds for studying at a university.

Eva Wohl, whose story began this overview, finally succeeded in taking a test for talented students. Even without the German Abitur, she earned her B.A. in art history at the age of nearly sixty.

## NOTES

1. Eva Wohl, *So einfach liegen die Dinge nicht. Erinnerungen. Von Deutschland nach Israel*, ed. Astrid Mehmel (Königswinter, Germany: Edition Lempertz, forthcoming).
2. Yehuda Bauer (*My Brother's Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee 1929–1939* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication of Society of America, 1974], p. 123) mentions the figure of 101,000 German Jewish children under the age of fifteen in 1934. Herbert Strauss (“Jewish Emigration from Germany: Nazi Policies and Jewish Responses,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, vol. 25 [1980], pp. 313–61, here p. 319) published a statistic that 82,700 children of that age lived in Germany in June 1933. See also Herbert Strauss, “Jewish Emigration from Germany: Nazi Policies and Jewish Responses (II),” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, vol. 26 (1981), pp. 343–409.
3. Strauss (“Jewish Emigration,” p. 328) writes that “at least 18,000 children had left Germany as ‘unaccompanied children’ to be placed in foster homes or families.” Other authors give somewhat smaller numbers. Barbara McDonald Stewart (*United States Government Policy on Refugees from Nazism 1933–1940* [New York: Garland, 1982], p. 519), referring to statistics of German Jewish organizations, writes that until the outbreak of the war, 9,354 children went to Great Britain, 1,500 to the Netherlands, 1,000 to Belgium, 600 to France, 300 to Switzerland, and 450 to Sweden.
4. Abraham Margalio, “Emigration: Planung und Wirklichkeit,” in *Die Juden im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* [The Jews in Nazi Germany] 1933–1943, ed. Arnold Paucker (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), pp. 301–16.
5. Memorandum des SD-Amtes IV/2 an Heydrich, 24. Mai 1934, Betr.: “Zur Behandlung der Judenfrage.” Sonderarchiv Moskau, 500/1/18; reprinted in Michael Wildt (ed.), *Die Judenpolitik des SD 1935 bis 1938: Eine Dokumentation* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995), pp. 66–69 (doc. 1).
6. Recha Freier, *Let the Children Come: The Early History of Youth Aliyah* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961). Marian G. Greenberg, *There Is Hope for Your Children: Youth Aliyah, Henrietta Szold, and Hadassah* (New York: Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, 1986), p. 7. Gudrun Maierhof, *Selbstbehauptung im Chaos: Frauen in der jüdischen Selbsthilfe 1933–1943* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2002), pp. 227–34.
7. Greenberg, *Hope*, pp. 9ff. Irving Fineman, *Woman of Valor: The Story of Henrietta Szold* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).
8. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 122.



9. Deutsche Bibliothek Frankfurt (ed.), *Die jüdische Emigration aus Deutschland 1939–1941. Die Geschichte einer Austreibung. Eine Ausstellung der Deutschen Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main unter Mitwirkung des Leo Baeck Instituts, New York* (Frankfurt: Buchhändler-Vereinigung, 1985), pp. 155ff.

10. Shlomo Adler Rudel, *Jüdische Selbsthilfe unter dem Naziregime 1933–1939: Im Spiegel der Berichte der Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1974), p. 98.

11. Greenberg, *Hope*, p. 33.

12. Hagit Lavsky, *Before Catastrophe: The Distinctive Path of German Zionism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), pp. 242ff.

13. Herbert Strauss, *Über dem Abgrund: Eine jüdische Jugend in Deutschland 1918–1943* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1997), p. 83. Susanne Heim, “Emigration and Jewish Identity: ‘An Enormous Heartbreak,’” *Journal of Holocaust Education* 10 (2001), pp. 21–33.

14. Deutsche Bibliothek, *Die jüdische Emigration*, pp. 153ff.

15. Walter Laqueur, *Geboren in Deutschland: Der Exodus der jüdischen Jugend nach 1933* (Munich: Propyläen, 2000), p. 38. On the various camps of the Zionist youth movement, see Eliyahu Kutti Salinger, “Nächstes Jahr im Kibbuz”: *Die jüdisch-chaluzische Jugendbewegung in Deutschland zwischen 1933 und 1943* (Paderborn: Universität Paderborn, 1998), pp. 179–216; Werner T. Angress, “Auswandererlehrgut Gross-Breesen,” in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, vol. 10 (1965), pp. 168–87.

16. James McDonald, high commissioner of the League of Nations, in his report to the Governing Body, November 1, 1934; PAA, R 49414. Letter from Chamberlain to McDonald, October 29, 1934 (McDonald Papers, Columbia University, Herbert Lehman Suite: D–361: General Correspondence).

17. According to this agreement, Jewish parents could deposit school fees in Germany for their children living abroad. The foreign aid organizations paid the equivalent of the related sum to the Jewish youngsters in schools and Hachsharah camps abroad, while the money in Germany was used to help Jews in Germany. Thus the Jewish organizations in Germany and abroad and the children’s parents “were able to finance their respective activities without providing the German government with hard currency” (Amy Zahl Gottlieb, *Men of Vision: Anglo-Jewry’s Aid to Victims of the Nazi Regime 1933–1945* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998], p. 99). According to Gottlieb, this agreement was already in place in 1934. Adler Rudel (*Selbsthilfe*) gives two different dates for the introduction of the education clearing: 1935 (p. 70) and 1937 (p. 101). The general consent of German authorities was probably secured in

McDonald's meeting with high representatives of the Reichsbank on November 13, 1934 (Fritz Kieffer, *Judenverfolgung in Deutschland: Eine innere Angelegenheit? Internationale Reaktionen auf die Flüchtlingsproblematik 1933–1939* [Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2002], p. 48). Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 126, note 48.

18. German Consulate Lüttich to German Foreign Office, December 12, 1936; PAA, R 49417.

19. Laqueur, *Geboren in Deutschland*, pp. 59ff. Without giving more detailed information, Adler Rudel (*Selbsthilfe*, p. 99) states that during World War II, Youth Aliyah managed to get about 10,000 endangered children and youngsters out of the countries involved in fighting.

20. Laqueur, *Geboren in Deutschland*, p. 56.

21. Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 123.

22. Judith Tydor Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise: Rescue and Resettlement of Jewish Refugee Children in the United States 1934–1945* (Juneau, AK: Denali Press, 1990), p. 15.

23. *Ibid.* (p. 18) and Bauer (*My Brother's Keeper*, p. 123) report that the first group, arriving in November 1934, consisted of fifty-three children and that the original quota of 250 was reached in early 1937.

24. On the controversial debate on the emigration of children in 1934–35, see Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry 1933–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 24ff.

25. Joseph Chamberlain to Herbert L. May, April 17, 1934 (McDonald Papers, Columbia University, Herbert Lehman Suite: D-361: General Correspondence; correspondence with Joseph Chamberlain).

26. Quotation in Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 123.

27. Bauer (*ibid.*, p. 123) mentions the number of 433 children, while Adler Rudel (*Selbsthilfe*, p. 100) reports on 500 children who emigrated to the United States.

28. Baumel (*Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 141) gives the number of 1,000 unaccompanied Jewish refugee children. In a recently published newspaper article, the number of 1,200 Jewish children who emigrated to the United States is mentioned (Susan Levine, "Beyond Hitler's Reach," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2003, p. W.12). The total number of unaccompanied children, Jewish and non-Jewish, coming to the United

States was much higher; the U.S. Children's Bureau registered the names of 5,022 children from September 1938 to January 1, 1941 (Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 71).

29. Adler Rudel, *Selbsthilfe*, p. 101.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 99ff.

31. Einhart Lorenz, *Exil in Norwegen: Lebensbedingungen und Arbeit deutschsprachiger Flüchtlinge 1933–1943* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1992), pp. 287–89.

32. *Tribune*, July, 19, 1938, referring to a meeting of the Hebrew Immigrant and Sheltering Aid Society in New York on the same day. According to the article, the embassy had already received 60,000–70,000 visa applications. YIVO Mikrofilm MKM 25.2.

33. Avraham Milgram, "Portugal, the Consuls, and the Jewish Refugees, 1938–1941," *Yad Vashem Studies* 27 (1999), p. 133.

34. Bob Moore, *Refugees from Nazi Germany in the Netherlands 1933–1940* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), pp. 35ff.

35. Karen Gershon (ed.), *Wir kamen als Kinder* (Frankfurt: Alibaba-Verlag, 1988). Barry Turner, . . . *and the Policeman Smiled* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990 (these notes refer to the German edition, *Kindertransport: Eine beispiellose Rettungsaktion* [Berlin: Aufbau-Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001]). Rebekka Göpfert, *Der jüdische Kindertransport von Deutschland nach England 1938/39* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1999). Anja Salewsky, "Der olle Hitler soll sterben!" *Erinnerungen an den jüdischen Kindertransport nach England* (Munich: Classen, 2001). Mark Jonathan Harris and Deborah Oppenheimer (eds.), *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

36. Gottlieb, *Men of Vision*, p. 103.

37. Ronald Stent, "Jewish Refugee Organisations," in *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*, ed. Werner Mosse (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991), p. 590.

38. *Ibid.* Turner, *Kindertransport*, p. 48. Ari Joshua Sherman, *Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich 1933–1939*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 184.

39. Turner, *Kindertransport*, p. 47. Sherman (*Island Refuge*) and Louise London ("British Immigration Control Procedures and Jewish Refugees 1933–1939," in *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*, ed. Werner

Mosse [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991], pp. 485–517), however, highlight that Hoare stressed that the government could go only “as far as public opinion would allow” (Sherman, *Island Refuge*, p. 176). He regarded the refugee problem in general as an international one, emphasizing the necessity of strict individual control of all refugees and “that we should neglect no opportunity which presented itself of pushing on with refugee settlement in other parts of the world” (London, “British Immigration,” pp. 508ff.).

40. Gottlieb, *Men of Vision*, p. 107.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 109. Stent, “Jewish Refugee Organisations,” pp. 590ff.

42. Naomi Shepherd, *Wilfried Israel: Germany’s Secret Ambassador* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), p. 148.

43. Turner, *Kindertransport*, pp. 139ff.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

45. See David Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1938–1941* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), pp. 75–98; Barbara McDonald Stewart, *United States Government Policy*, pp. 495–553.

46. Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy*, pp. 73, 107.

47. “Admission of German Refugee Children, Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization,” House of Representatives, 76th Congress, 1st Session (May 24, 25, 31, and June 1, 1939) on H.J. Resolution 165 and H.J. Resolution 168; Joint Resolution to Authorize the Admission to the United States of a Limited Number of German Refugee Children, RG No. 287. Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*, pp. 27ff.

48. Zosa Szajkowski, “The Attitude of American Jews to Refugees from Germany in the 1930’s,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 61 (1971), pp. 101–43. Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy*, p. 73. Henry Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust 1938–1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 151ff.

49. Jorgen Hastrup, *Passage to Palestine: Young Jews in Denmark 1932–1945* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), p. 97.

50. Robert Pell to Pierrepoint Moffat, March 8, 1939, National Archives at College Park, RG 59, M–1284, roll 25, 840.48 Refugees/1538.

51. Baumel, *Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 206.

52. Kurt Pätzold, *Verfolgung, Vertreibung, Vernichtung: Dokumente des faschistischen Antisemitismus 1933–1942* (Frankfurt: Röderberg-Verlag, 1984), pp. 210ff.

53. Robert Pell to Pierrepont Moffat, March 8, 1939, National Archives at College Park, RG 59, M-1284, roll 25, 840.48 Refugees/1538. Referring to various sources, Baumel (*Unfulfilled Promise*, p. 206) gives the number of 600–1000 refugee children in Belgium in 1939, although “following Kristallnacht the Belgian government agreed to accept 2,000 children and no other refugees.”

**Heroic Acts and Missed Opportunities:  
The Rescue of Youth Aliyah Groups from Europe  
during World War II**

Sara Kadosh

On September 1, 1939, a group of Jewish children in Vienna was given half an hour's notice to come to a designated meeting place. The children then traveled by bus for thirty hours to Germany, where they were joined by a group of Jewish children from Berlin; they then continued by train to Copenhagen. On route to Denmark they learned that World War II had begun.<sup>1</sup>

During the next six months, more than 300 children were sent from Germany and Austria to Denmark where they were placed in the homes of local farmers, under the supervision of a Danish women's organization. In April 1940 Denmark was occupied by the Germans, but several groups of children were still able to leave for Palestine in late 1940 and early 1941. Most of the remaining children were evacuated to Sweden in 1943 together with the Danish Jewish community. All the children survived the war.<sup>2</sup>

These children were sent to Denmark by Youth Aliyah, the Zionist organization that was responsible for bringing youngsters to Palestine. What was Youth Aliyah? How did it become a rescue organization? How was it able to bring thousands of Jewish youngsters to Palestine in the midst of World War II?

**THE FOUNDING OF YOUTH ALIYAH**

Youth Aliyah was founded in Germany in 1932 by Recha Freier. Its purpose was to send German Jewish youngsters of high school age to Palestine for two years of agricultural training. Youth Aliyah sought to remove these youngsters from the antisemitic atmosphere in Germany and transform them into productive manual laborers through work on kibbutzim (communal settlements).<sup>3</sup>

Candidates for Youth Aliyah were chosen by the various Zionist youth movements. They were required to attend a six-week preparation camp to prove their fitness for life in a communal settlement and to present medical certification that they were healthy and could perform agricultural labor. In order to gain entry to Palestine, they needed certificates from the British government.

In November 1933 the Jewish Agency established a head office for Youth Aliyah in Jerusalem under the direction of Henrietta Szold, the legendary founder of Hadassah (the Women's Zionist Organization of America). Her task was to apply to the British government for certificates for the children and to supervise the placement and training of Youth Aliyah groups after their arrival in Palestine.<sup>4</sup> She was assisted by Hans Beyth and Georg Landauer, two German Jews who emigrated to Palestine in the 1930s. Landauer served as treasurer of Youth Aliyah.

With the spread of Nazism, Youth Aliyah expanded its activities to countries outside Germany—first to Austria after the *Anschluss*, then to Czechoslovakia after the Munich Pact. Between 1933 and 1939, it sent approximately 5,000 young people to Palestine from Nazi-occupied Europe. Youth Aliyah's success in rescuing children from Europe resulted from its ability to obtain certificates from the British government, even at a time when the British were restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine. By 1939 approximately fifteen percent of all certificates granted by the British went to Youth Aliyah.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in 1935 Youth Aliyah received major financial support from Hadassah for its activities in Palestine. Support for Youth Aliyah groups in Europe came from local Jewish communities and international Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). In 1938 Youth Aliyah opened an office in London, under the direction of Eva Michaelis Stern, to help with fundraising and distributing certificates.<sup>6</sup>

### **RESCUING JEWISH CHILDREN FROM THE THIRD REICH**

After *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, it became increasingly dangerous for Jewish youngsters to remain in the Third Reich. Those over the age of sixteen had to report daily to the Gestapo and were in constant danger of arrest or imprisonment. Youth Aliyah leaders in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia began transferring Youth Aliyah candidates to countries outside the Third Reich (such as Denmark, the Netherlands, England, and Sweden) where the youngsters could work for local farmers and wait for their certificates in safety. By the end of 1939, there were approximately 1,000 Youth Aliyah candidates in transit countries.<sup>7</sup>

Following the outbreak of World War II, Youth Aliyah leaders tried frantically to arrange for youngsters who were still in transit countries to travel to Palestine, as well as to bring other children from the Third Reich to transit countries in their place.<sup>8</sup>

Youth Aliyah leaders had to decide which groups of children in transit countries were in the greatest danger, who should be evacuated first, and how the movement of thousands of children should be financed. The need to act quickly to rescue the children led to conflicts between Youth Aliyah leaders in Europe and the Youth Aliyah administration in Jerusalem, which insisted on extensive screening of candidates, detailed medical reports, preparation camps, and the careful selection of settlements in Palestine where the children were to be placed. As a result, months of work were required to organize a Youth Aliyah group for departure to Palestine.<sup>9</sup>

Youth Aliyah leaders in Europe now realized, however, that if they were going to save the children's lives, they would have to bend the rules and accelerate the process. They began to use any means—including illegal ones—to rescue the youngsters in their charge. They smuggled children across borders, sent them to Palestine on illegal immigration ships, accepted children whose ages did not conform exactly to the requirements of Youth Aliyah, and took in children with medical problems that previously would have disqualified these youngsters for the movement.<sup>10</sup>

The Youth Aliyah administration in Jerusalem did not approve of the flexibility shown by the leaders in Europe and opposed the use of illegal means to rescue Jewish youngsters. The heads of Youth Aliyah were not aware of the true conditions in Europe and did not understand the extent of the danger. They continued to demand that Youth Aliyah leaders in Europe conduct preparation camps and prepare detailed medical reports with information on the strength of eyeglasses and the condition of teeth. Szold pointed out that Youth Aliyah was not a rescue organization but a movement to help build the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine).<sup>11</sup> Stern later recalled in her memoirs, "No notice was taken—either by the Mandatory Government or by the Youth Aliyah administration in Jerusalem—of the fact that Europe was at war and the lives of thousands were at stake."<sup>12</sup>

Differences also emerged over the use of funds sent by Hadassah. Youth Aliyah leaders in Europe wanted to use these funds to transfer youngsters from the Third Reich to neutral countries, where they might be able to obtain certificates in the future. However, the head office in Jerusalem insisted that funds contributed by Hadassah must be used for Palestine and not for activities in Europe, which ought to be covered by the JDC or other international Jewish organizations. The heads of Youth Aliyah would not even agree to use Hadassah funds to cover the increased cost of bringing Youth Aliyah candidates to Palestine during the war.<sup>13</sup>



Unable to convince the Youth Aliyah administration in Jerusalem of the urgency of their requests, Youth Aliyah leaders in Europe acted independently. They sent misleading information to the head office in Jerusalem and secured funds directly from Hadassah and other Jewish organizations without consulting Szold. The success of Youth Aliyah in rescuing youngsters during this period was due largely to the bold initiatives undertaken by local Youth Aliyah leaders. The failures were partly the result of the slowness and inflexibility of the Youth Aliyah bureaucracy in Jerusalem.

### **TWO CRITICAL OBSTACLES**

The policies of the Youth Aliyah office in Jerusalem represented only one difficulty facing Youth Aliyah leaders in Europe. The two most important factors complicating Youth Aliyah rescue efforts were British policy on certificates and the lack of direct transportation routes to Palestine.

Following the outbreak of the war, the British declared that they would no longer grant certificates to individuals from enemy-occupied countries for fear that these individuals might be enemy agents. This meant that youngsters in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia or in countries later occupied by the Nazis could no longer receive certificates. The British eventually made a number of concessions for children—on the grounds that children could not possibly be enemy spies—and allowed several hundred youngsters from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia who had received certificates prior to the outbreak of the war to proceed to Palestine. They also granted certificates to the Youth Aliyah children in Denmark and even agreed in principle to admit to Palestine all Jewish children under the age of fifteen who succeeded in reaching neutral countries.<sup>14</sup>

On the whole, however, British policy was to restrict the number of certificates granted to potential immigrants to Palestine—adults as well as children—during the years when escape routes from Europe were still open. On a number of occasions, the British canceled the semiannual certificate allocation altogether without making exceptions even for Youth Aliyah candidates. These cancellations were made because a large number of illegal immigrants had entered Palestine. The British deducted the number of illegal immigrants from the total number of certificates that were to be allocated and refused to allocate more. Faced with a shortage of certificates, Szold and Moshe Shertok (Sharett) of the Jewish Agency appealed to the British to issue a special

grant of certificates for children, so that children in Europe who were in imminent danger could be rescued. The British, however, rejected their appeal.<sup>15</sup>

Even when certificates were granted, British bureaucracy often prevented them from being used.<sup>16</sup> Youth Aliyah candidates in several countries were trapped by the advance of German forces while waiting for their certificates to arrive. Youth Aliyah candidates in the Netherlands, for example, received their certificates a week after the Nazis invaded and the certificates could no longer be used.<sup>17</sup>

Transportation routes, visas, and the high cost of travel were additional problems. Until June 1940 Youth Aliyah candidates could cross the Mediterranean to Palestine. After Italy's entry into the war, however, they had to travel through the Soviet Union, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. It took months to receive Soviet and Turkish visas and there were restrictions on the number of children who could travel through each country at any one time. For this reason many Youth Aliyah candidates in Denmark, Sweden, and Lithuania did not succeed in leaving Europe before the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union closed off this escape route.<sup>18</sup>

Youth Aliyah leaders used various stratagems to overcome these difficulties and to rescue youngsters despite them. For example, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, Denmark agreed to accept youngsters from Germany and Austria provided that a guarantee be given for their reemigration to Palestine. Knowing that the British would never issue such a guarantee, Stern wrote a guarantee on her own authority and sent it to Denmark, where it was accepted by the Danish government.<sup>19</sup> As a result of this initiative, more than 300 Jewish children were saved in Denmark alone.

Another successful rescue effort was carried out by Youth Aliyah founder Freier. In summer 1940 Freier had to escape on short notice from Germany and was taken to Yugoslavia by smugglers. Realizing that this was a viable escape route, she asked the German Jewish leadership to send Jewish youngsters to Yugoslavia, using the same route that she had taken. During the succeeding months, until February 1941, small groups of youngsters reached Yugoslavia from Germany and Austria. The Youth Aliyah office in Vienna arranged for them to be smuggled across the border. The project continued with the tacit consent of the Gestapo until an item about it appeared in the Yugoslav press. One hundred twenty children had reached Yugoslavia before the Germans blocked this escape route.<sup>20</sup>

Freier applied to the Youth Aliyah office in Jerusalem for certificates for these children, only to be informed by Szold that certificates could not be granted to children

who had been in enemy countries at the start of the war. Despite this initial refusal, Szold eventually sent ninety certificates to Yugoslavia for the children. What made her change her mind? It appears that Richard Kohn, head of the Palestine office in Zagreb, assured Szold that the children had entered Yugoslavia prior to the outbreak of the war. Relying on these assurances, Szold sent the certificates. The ninety children who received certificates left Yugoslavia only days before the Nazi invasion in April 1941.

Thirty children who had not received certificates remained in Zagreb under Nazi occupation. These children were smuggled into Italy by their Youth Aliyah teacher Joseph Indig. In 1943 Indig smuggled the children to safety in Switzerland. The youngsters reached Palestine after the war.<sup>21</sup>

The Youth Aliyah groups in Denmark and Yugoslavia survived the war. What happened to other Youth Aliyah groups who were trapped under Nazi occupation and whom Youth Aliyah was unable to rescue? Two countries for which we have information are the Netherlands and France.

When the Nazis invaded the Netherlands in April 1940, there were about sixty Youth Aliyah candidates in the country. When deportations began in August 1942, the Youth Aliyah leaders—aided by a non-Jewish resistance network—hid the children with Dutch families and then smuggled a number of them into France and from there to Spain. More than half the children survived.<sup>22</sup>

Twenty-five Youth Aliyah candidates were trapped in Nazi-occupied southern France as a result of both British bureaucracy and decisions made by the Youth Aliyah office in Jerusalem. The children had come to France from Germany and Austria after *Kristallnacht* and had applied for certificates in November 1940. After protracted negotiations among the British, the U.S. State Department, and the Youth Aliyah office in Jerusalem, certificates were finally issued in fall 1941.<sup>23</sup> By that time the only remaining route to Palestine was by sea—around the coast of Africa. Szold refused to authorize the journey on the grounds that it was too expensive and risky, despite appeals by Hadassah and Stern to remove the children from France as quickly as possible.<sup>24</sup> In November 1942 the Germans occupied the south of France. Most of the children were hidden with Christian families or smuggled into Switzerland by French Jewish underground organizations. Of the twenty-five children, twenty-two survived.<sup>25</sup>

### **A CHANGE IN YOUTH ALIYAH POLICIES**

At the end of 1942, the Youth Aliyah administration in Jerusalem finally realized that the policy of carefully screening candidates was no longer relevant. The Germans now prevented the emigration of Jews—including children—and blocked all escape routes from Europe. Few children could be rescued and many certificates remained unused. Children who succeeded in escaping to neutral countries or reaching Palestine were now accepted by Youth Aliyah regardless of their background or medical condition. Hundreds of children came from Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. In 1943 Youth Aliyah took in 800 Polish Jewish children who had reached Teheran after several years of wandering through the Soviet Union, and in 1944 it absorbed 700 child survivors from Transnistria who reached Turkey from Romania on illegal immigration ships.

The policies of the Youth Aliyah office in Jerusalem with regard to rescue closely paralleled those of the Jewish Agency and other Zionist institutions in Palestine. From 1939 to 1942, these institutions shared with Youth Aliyah the concept of selective immigration. Those who received certificates were to be young, physically fit, and dedicated to building the country through agricultural labor. The aim of the Jewish Agency and other Zionist organizations was to develop the Yishuv economically in order to prepare for the influx of thousands of survivors whom they anticipated would arrive after the war. Like the heads of Youth Aliyah, the leaders of the Jewish Agency did not fully comprehend the situation in Europe and were unwilling to devote large sums to rescue efforts. Only when news of the “Final Solution” reached Palestine in late 1942 did the Jewish Agency and other Zionist bodies change their attitude and mobilize for rescue.<sup>26</sup>

### **THE CASE OF LITHUANIA**

The conflicts between the Youth Aliyah office in Jerusalem and Youth Aliyah leaders in Europe and the difficulties that these leaders faced in their efforts to rescue children are most clearly illustrated in the case of Lithuania.

In October 1938 thousands of Jews expelled from Germany congregated in the Polish border town of Zbaszyn. Twenty-year-old Bernard Gelbart, a Zionist activist from Hamburg, took forty youngsters from Zbaszyn to a Zionist training farm near Warsaw. When war broke out in September 1939, Gelbart fled east with these youngsters. They traveled by foot under frequent bombardment by the Germans and, after a harrowing journey, reached Vilna in Lithuania.<sup>27</sup>

In Lithuania Gelbart made efforts to secure certificates from Youth Aliyah for the children in his group and send them to Palestine. He also tried to obtain certificates for 300 other Jewish refugee children in Lithuania who applied to Youth Aliyah. Gelbart's efforts to rescue all these children continued for a year and a half.<sup>28</sup> What caused the delay?

The first difficulty was the lack of sufficient certificates for all the youngsters.<sup>29</sup> Gelbart received only 200 certificates and had to divide them among 300 children. Each of the various Zionist organizations in Lithuania tried to secure as many certificates as possible from Gelbart for the members of its respective youth movement.

A second issue was the screening of candidates. Szold urged Gelbart to ensure that the candidates conformed to the age requirements and medical standards of Youth Aliyah.<sup>30</sup> She suspected that Gelbart would not follow her instructions, and indeed he did not. When the certificates did not conform to the ages of the youngsters, he altered passports or bribed officials to enable the children to proceed to Palestine.<sup>31</sup>

A third cause for the delay was that Szold would not allow Youth Aliyah groups to come to Palestine until all the arrangements for their placement had been made.<sup>32</sup> This led to postponement of the children's arrival. Szold's policies so infuriated David Ben Gurion that, in November 1942, he proposed removing her from control of Youth Aliyah. "The main question," Ben Gurion said, ". . . is . . . to save the children . . . and not which settlements will receive them here. . . . I say it is better to give the children bad treatment in Palestine than to have the Nazis take care of them."<sup>33</sup>

Transportation also represented a major difficulty. By summer 1940 the only available route to Palestine was through the Soviet Union and Turkey. It took months to secure Turkish visas and only fifty children could pass through Turkey at any one time. To cover the high transportation costs, Gelbart obtained funds from Hadassah without Szold's knowledge—as well as from the JDC and the World Jewish Congress.

An additional problem was the presence of the Soviets, who had occupied Lithuania in June 1940. Since Zionist activity was illegal under Soviet rule, preparations for departure to Palestine had to be carried out clandestinely and permission had to be obtained from the Secret Police to leave the country.

Youth Aliyah children finally began leaving Vilna in early 1941. Gelbart arrived in Palestine in March 1941 with the last group allowed by the Soviets to depart from Lithuania. Of the 300 Youth Aliyah candidates in Vilna, 152 succeeded in

reaching Palestine. Sixty children with certificates did not escape before the borders were closed.

When Gelbart arrived in Palestine, Szold refused to meet him. She was furious that he had forged documents and brought over-age children to Palestine who might not be suitable for the Youth Aliyah program. She was afraid that this would damage her reputation and that the British might close down Youth Aliyah.

When she finally did agree to meet Gelbart, the confrontation was dramatic. Szold told him, “You must understand that as a public figure I have never lied. . . . I have never lied to the British and that’s why they trust me, and you’ve made me a liar in the eyes of the British. It’s hard for me to forgive that.” “I sat and heard this,” Gelbart recalls, “and I remember what I said.”

Imagine that you are twenty years old and responsible for forty children whose parents gave them to you in the middle of the war. One died of typhus, one spoke a word of German and was arrested, and you can save all the rest, but one has a terrible fault—he is two months older than the age limit on his certificate. You know that with one line, you can change his passport and save his life. What would you do? Would you leave him behind?<sup>34</sup>

For a long time, Szold was silent. Then she said, “It could be that if I were in that situation, I would have done the same thing.”

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the efforts of Youth Aliyah, approximately 6,000 children reached Palestine from Nazi-occupied Europe between September 1939 and the beginning of 1945 and were placed in agricultural settlements where they began to rebuild their lives.<sup>35</sup> The successful rescue of these children was Youth Aliyah’s greatest achievement during World War II. At the same time, however, because of the difficulties and obstacles faced by Youth Aliyah leaders, thousands of other Youth Aliyah candidates remained trapped in Europe. Some of these youngsters arrived in Palestine after the war; most were never heard from again.

**NOTES**

1. Eva Michaelis Stern to Henrietta Szold, September 7, 1939, Central Zionist Archives (hereafter cited as CZA), S75/991. Miriam Warburg at the National Youth Aliyah Committee of Hadassah, November 20, 1939, CZA, S75/1068. “Our Activities Abroad” (translation of letter from London written in Hebrew, apparently by Eva Stern), October 10, 1939, CZA, S75/1173.
2. For a full account of the Youth Aliyah children in Denmark, see Jorgen Haestrup, *Passage to Palestine: Young Jews in Denmark 1932–1945* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), pp. 83ff.
3. For a comprehensive account of Youth Aliyah during the years 1933–45, see Sandra Berliant Kadosh, “Ideology vs. Reality: Youth Aliyah and the Rescue of Jewish Children during the Holocaust Era 1933–1945” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1995); Pinhas Rosenbluth, *‘Aliyat Ha-no’ar* (Jerusalem: ha-Histradrut ha-Tsiyonit, 1968); Recha Freier, *Let the Children Come: The Early History of Youth Aliyah* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961).
4. For biographical information on Henrietta Szold, see Joan Dash, *Summoned to Jerusalem: The Life of Henrietta Szold* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
5. See the Marchioness of Reading to Eva Michaelis Stern, December 12, 1938, CZA, S75/961. For statistics on Youth Aliyah certificates, see Report of the Central Bureau for the Settlement of German Jews in Palestine, 1939, Table 4.
6. Eva Michaelis Stern and Dolf Michaelis, *Emissaries in Wartime London 1938–45* (Jerusalem: Hamaatik Press, 1989), pp. 15–20.
7. See Report of Youth Aliyah Work during the Past Few Months in Berlin, unsigned, CZA, S75/686; Kurt Goldman, “LeAchar HaTeshii BeNovember,” in *Sefer Aliyat Hanoar*, ed. Bracha Habas (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1941), pp. 158–61.
8. “Our Activities Abroad,” October 10, 1939, CZA, S75/1173.
9. Schattner to Szold, June 10, 1940, CZA, S75/1175. Minutes of Meetings Held with Mr. Barlas (in London), December 8 and 10, 1939, Hadassah Archives, file 66.
10. See, for example, Yitzhak Swerzenc, *Machteret Halutzit BeGermania Hanatzit* (Tel Aviv, 1969), pp. 70, 81, 86; Dalia Ofer, *Derekh Ba-yam: ‘Aliyah 2 bi-tekufat ha-Sho’ah, 1939–1944* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsevi, 1988), pp. 97, 151.
11. Szold to Youth Aliyah London, May 28, 1940, CZA, A125/94.

12. Stern and Michaelis, *Emissaries*, p. 35.
13. Stern to Greenberg, February 22, 1940, CZA, S75/1069. Szold to Stern, March 13, 1940, CZA, A125/101. Szold to Schnattner, March 13, 1940, CZA, S75/1174. Mrs. David B. Greenberg to Dr. Hedwig Eppstein, May 3, 1940, CZA, S75/1069. Stern to Szold, April 16, 1940, CZA, S75/1186.
14. Telegram from High Commissioner to Secretary of State for Colonies, April 16, 1940, Public Record Office, Colonial Office (hereafter cited as PRO CO), 733/535. Downie to Snow, January 3, 1941, PRO CO, 733/536. For a review of British policy on this issue, see Kadosh, "Ideology," pp. 235–46. See also Ronald Zweig, *Britain and Palestine during the Second World War* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 1986).
15. Schattner to Goldman, July 26, 1939, CZA, S75/991. Szold to Greenberg, May 15, 1940, CZA, S75/1069.
16. M. Shertok, Minute of an Interview with Mr. E. Mills, Commissioner for Migration and Statistics, April 15, 1940, CZA, S75/961.
17. See Kadosh, "Ideology," pp. 278–81; Stern to Mrs. David B. Greenberg, May 15, 1940, CZA, S75/1174.
18. Szold to Mrs. Greenberg, April 13, 1941, CZA, S75/924. See also Haim Barlas, "Doch al Ha-Aliya Le-eretz Yisrael Derech Turkia," August 1940–May 1941, CZA, S75/1795.
19. Stern, *Emissaries*, pp. 23–25. Haestrup, *Passage*, pp. 83ff. Walter Gross, *Youth Aliyah in Wartime 1939–41* (Jerusalem: Youth Immigration Bureau, 1942), p. 11.
20. Freier, *Children*, pp. 65ff. Kadosh, "Ideology," pp. 281–89. Elizabeth Klemper, *LeHitraot BeEretz Yisrael: Maavako shel Aharon Menczer LeHatzalat Yeladim Yehudim BeVienna HaNatzit*, trans. Hannah Weiner (Vienna: Federal Prime Minister's Office, Government Press Office, 2000 [Hebrew]).
21. See Yosef Itai, *Yaldei Villa Emma* (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1983). Kohn to Szold, April 9, 1941, CZA, S75/1749. Yael Orvieto, "Parashat Yaldei Villa Emma: Sippur Hatzalata Shel Kvutzat Yeladim BeTekufat Hashoah" (M.A. thesis, Hebrew University, 1996).
22. See Haim Avni, "Escape to Spain from Holland and France," in *Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Second Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Efraim Zuroff (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977), pp. 557–58; Adina Kochba (ed.), *Hamachteret Hahalutzit BeHoland HaKevusha* (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighter's House, 1969).



23. See correspondence PRO CO, 733/563, including Hofstaetter to Mrs. Weizmann, March 5, 1941, PRO CO, 733/536. See also Linton to Jewish Agency, Jerusalem, January 19, 1941, CZA, S75/1664; Szold to Greenberg, June 4, 1941, CZA, S75/1924; Stern to Szold, October 6, 1941, CZA, S75/1665; Szold to Barlas, June 6, 1941, CZA, S75/1795.

24. Szold to Stern, February 4, 1942, CZA, A125/101.

25. See Kadosh, "Ideology," pp. 289–97; Shaike (Yeshayahu) Ben Porat, *Et le-hazkir* (Tel Aviv: Zemorah-Bitan, 1994), p. 96.

26. See Dina Porat, *Blue and the Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust 1939–45* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Hava Eshkoli (Wagman), *Elem: Mapai le-nokhah ha Sho-ah 1939–1942* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsevi, 1994); personal interview, Eva Michaelis Stern, January 1985; Eva Michaelis Stern, "Die Jugend-Alijah in Europa: 12 Jahre unter dem Nazi Regime," *Mitteilungsblatt des Irgun Oleh Merkaz Europa*, December 9, 1983–April 23, 1984; Stern and Michaelis, *Emissaries*, p. 35.

27. For an account of the group in Lithuania, see Bernard Gelbart, "Report on Flight from Grochow," CZA, A125/101; Dan Gelbart "Mizbonszyn LeEretz Yisrael," *Yalkut Moreshet* 2 (1964), pp. 41–44; Kadosh, "Ideology," pp. 257–68; personal interview, Bernard Gelbart, August 12, 1996; interview with Bernard Gelbart, Yad Vashem, 03/100225; P. L. Cray, "Tachat Matar Hapezazot," in *Sefer Aliyat Hanoar*, ed. Bracha Habas (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1941), pp. 184–86; Dina Porat, "Rikuz Haplitim Hayehudim BeVilna Bashanim 1939–1941: Maamazei Hayeziah" (M.A. thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1973).

28. Gross, *Youth Aliyah*, p. 16.

29. Schattner to Szold, March 22, 1940, CZA, S75/1174.

30. See Szold to Barlas, February 16, 1941, CZA, L15/163; Zerach Warhaftig, *Palit ve-sarid bi-yemei haShoah* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984), pp. 147–48; Szold to Children and Youth Aliyah, London, May 28, 1940, CZA, A125/94.

31. Personal interview, Bernard Gelbart (some of the same material appears in Gelbart's Yad Vashem interview and also in an interview in the Department of Oral Communication, Institute for Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University, Jerusalem [OH 175/26]).

32. Szold to Schattner, March 4, 1940, Hadassah Archives, file 66.

33. Protocols of Mapai Central Committee, December 9, 1942, Labor Party Archives

(*Beit Berl*).

34. Szold to Shertok, May 29, 1941, CZA, S75/1279. Personal interview, Bernard Gelbart (some of the same material appears in Gelbart's Yad Vashem interview and also in an interview in the Department of Oral Communication, Institute for Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University, Jerusalem [OH 175/26]).

35. This figure includes approximately 2,500 children who arrived in Palestine from Greater Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria; 730 children who arrived from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia via transit countries; 1,100 children who escaped from Poland and arrived in Palestine via transit countries; and approximately 1,500 children who arrived in Palestine as dependents through the efforts of Youth Aliyah. These figures are based on the Child and Youth Aliyah Bureau, Jerusalem, Monthly Statistical Statement, March 1, 1945, CZA, S75/1364, and the Jewish Agency for Palestine, Child and Youth Immigration Bureau, Statistical Statement for the period February 19, 1934 to September 30, 1944, in *Statistical Bulletin*, CZA, S25/2542.

Youth Aliyah issued monthly statistical statements. Estimates of the total number of children accepted into Youth Aliyah will vary in different sources depending on the date of the statistical statement that is being used.

In addition to the children who actually reached Palestine during the war, several hundred Youth Aliyah candidates in transit countries survived the war through the efforts of Youth Aliyah.

Several thousand Youth Aliyah candidates remained trapped in Europe. According to Klemper (*LeHitraot*, p. 35), for example, only seven percent of the youngsters registered with Youth Aliyah in Austria in 1941 survived the war. For further information on Youth Aliyah groups who remained in Europe during the war, see Klemper, *Lehitraot*; Kadosh, "Ideology," especially p. 241; Sara Kadosh, "Youth Aliyah Policies and the Rescue of Jewish Children from Europe," in *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division B: History of the Jewish Population*, ed. Ron Margolin (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001).

## **Childhood in the Warsaw Ghetto**

**Barbara Engelking-Boni**

The Germans closed the Warsaw ghetto on November 16, 1940, imprisoning 450,000 Jews. From fall 1940 until summer 1942, the average monthly death rate was about 2,500 people; the average birth rate was about 200. Until mid-July 1942, when the extermination in Warsaw began, about 100,000 people died—not only of poverty, hunger, and cold, but also of typhus and many other diseases. Frequently parents died first because they gave their small food portion to their children, but even their parents' love was not enough to protect the children from hunger and death. Many orphans—begging and dying on the ghetto streets—required help. Social welfare workers tried to bring children to orphanages and community centers to give them their sole daily meal (some soup in the kitchen), teach them in the clandestine schools, and treat them in the hospitals, but no human effort was enough.

We can talk about the ghetto childhood in different ways and using diverse categories. I do not intend to say everything possible about the children, but rather to show some aspects of what it meant to be a child in the ghetto. Of course some of them—it is impossible to estimate how many—had “normal” childhoods despite the war. With enormous effort, luck, and money, their parents succeeded in giving them food, love, and (most important) safety, but even in these families these goods were temporary and limited. So let me focus on more representative examples of the ghetto reality, where people's relationships and their everyday lives were diminished by German-made rules.

### **CHILDREN AT PLAY**

There are two core elements of a child's identity. The first is to play. How did children play in the ghetto? Play often reflects reality and this was true during the war. One of the best novels about the ghetto, *Empty Water* by Krystyna Żywulska, includes a scene describing children's games. She writes about her neighbor, six-year-old Szymuś, who used to ask her, “Has the wall always been here? Why are the Jews worse than others? Can I be a non-Jew or do I have to be a Jew forever?” One day the author observed Szymuś and Anulka, a five-year-old girl from the neighborhood, playing in the staircase. He was building some complicated structures from blocks; she was kicking

and destroying everything that he built. He rebuilt his structures and explained to Żywulska, who asked what was going on,

Because I am building a forest. And I say to her: this is the green tree named the oak. The oak is a tree with leaves. And there is a tree named a pine and it has needles. And then she destroys the blocks and says that there are not any trees anywhere in the world. But my Mom told me that there are many trees because she saw them herself. And these trees smell and when I am big we will go to see them.

“There are no trees, you are lying!” said Anulka.

“You see, she doesn’t believe me,” said Szymuś. “She never believes me but anyway my Mom doesn’t lie. Yesterday she didn’t believe there was water named a river. With this river water is flowing and together this is called the Vistula river. So tell her that the Vistula exists; you saw it, didn’t you? Did you see the Vistula or not?”

“There is no river,” said Anulka, scowling and stamping her feet. “There is no river at all.”

“You see,” said Szymuś, “she doesn’t believe me again.”

“Leave her in peace, Szymuś,” Krystyna intervened. “You can play other games. Perhaps Anulka would like to build something from the blocks herself. Let her do it and don’t quarrel anymore.”

“She wants to play only the wall and the gendarme,” replied Szymuś. “She always builds the wall. Then she shouts at me ‘Stop smuggling!’ or ‘I’m the gendarme and now I will kill you!’ But I don’t want to play such a game. I don’t want to be a smuggler.”<sup>1</sup>

This short scene conveys how children’s play reflected the surrounding reality. They did not believe in the existence of trees, rivers, and space; they did not know what the sea, mountains, or a cow looked like; but they knew a great deal about walls, smuggling, and death.

## **CHILDREN IN SCHOOL**

The second element of a child’s identity is to learn, to attend school. This subject brings us back to the question of the number of children in the ghetto. Because of a lack of documents, most of which were destroyed during the two Warsaw uprisings, today we can only estimate the demographic data about the war period in Poland.

In January 1942 there were approximately 48,000 children between the ages of seven and fourteen in the Warsaw ghetto. A few months earlier, the Germans allowed the Jewish Council (*Judenrat*) to open schools in the ghetto; previously all the schools

had been closed to Jews, in November 1939. In October 1941 the first six schools opened in the ghetto. In June 1942, at the end of the only school year in the ghetto, there were nineteen schools with 6,700 pupils. This raises the question of why only fourteen percent of the children attended the schools, where they were provided not only with knowledge but also (and perhaps most important) with breakfast and lunch. In trying to answer this question, we should consider that the schools were paid for and the children needed to be dressed and have enough strength and will to attend. Besides, about 10,000 children in the ghetto had already been attending clandestine classes for two years.

Underground education and other forbidden activities were forms of moral and spiritual resistance. Jews resisted terror and violence and tried to maintain an area of internal freedom. Referring to underground education, Pola Rotszyld—a Warsaw ghetto teenager born in 1926—wrote in her diary:

These lessons were our happiness, our oblivion. Outside there was a war-storm, the groans of people dying of hunger, and the animal-like screams of Germans beating up people on the street were heard. And somewhere in the corner of the room on Pawia or Nowolipki Street, some girls between 13–15 years of age were sitting around the table with a teacher, engaged in studying. They all forgot about the whole world, even about the fact that they were a bit hungry, maybe more than a bit.<sup>2</sup>

More than studying clandestinely, Pola and her friends created an informal self-education group that aspired to spiritual and religious evolution. Pola recalls:

From this moment the most beautiful period of my life began, which lasted for more than a year. It was the time when I was really alive. I knew why and what I lived for. I was thinking much less about myself than about others. Every day had its own content and value, each rally, talk, and discussion. The good deeds were beautiful, joyful experiences. We decided . . . that our aim was to be a Jew, a woman, and a human being. We systematically studied Pirke Avot; we were learning German and reading and discussing novels and scientific books, mostly didactic and psychological. The most important task was working on ourselves. We elected one by one a certain character feature to work on. For example: telling the truth, praying, improving attitudes about other people, and resisting laziness. Every day each of us signed even the slightest lie into her “achievement notebook.” The results were read aloud on Saturday. One by one we added a new character feature, of course without neglecting those we had already been working on up till then.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to Pola, other girls in that group were Sara Fajfer, Andzia Adler, Guta Wołowicz, Luba Bursztyn, Gucia Rozenstrauch, Henia Majzlic, Dorka Jeleń, and Estera Gutgold—none of whom survived the war. These teenagers from the Warsaw ghetto did not have an opportunity to realize their plans. They did not have a chance to become mature Jewish women, but they were real human beings—and what is more, very extraordinary ones.

### **CHILDREN IN ADULT ROLES**

Let me now say a few words about adult roles played by children in the ghetto. These roles included being a smuggler, head of the family, worker, beggar, and old man.

The daily allocation of food in Warsaw during the German occupation was catastrophically insufficient; in 1941, 184 calories were allocated for Jews. The official food ration in the ghetto was 2.5 kilograms of bread and 10–20 dekagrams of sugar per month. The inhabitants of the ghetto were lucky if they obtained a piece of soap, a box of matches, some kerosene, some sauerkraut cabbage, a can of jam, 10 dekagrams of salt, and 1–2 kilograms of potatoes or rutabagas every few months. Twice, in April and June 1942, the children obtained an extra food ration: two eggs. How could people manage with 2.5 kilograms of bread monthly (equivalent to one thin slice of bread daily)? The only choice was to buy extra food on the black market. Those who had no money were condemned—even if they ate some soup in the welfare kitchen—to die from hunger. The prices on the black market were between five and ten times higher than those on the other side of the wall. In summer 1941 one kilogram of white bread was worth fifteen zlotys on the black market and one gold U.S. dollar was worth 170 zlotys, while a Jewish factory worker was paid five zlotys for twelve hours of work.

Bringing food to the ghetto was connected with a risk of being shot by the Germans. But despite this risk more than ninety percent of the food in the ghetto—in the estimate of the chief of the Warsaw Judenrat, Adam Czerniaków—came from illegal trade.

Food was smuggled into the ghetto in two ways. The “big smuggle” was organized jointly by Poles and Jews who bribed the guards at the ghetto gates and brought in huge cartloads of provisions. The “small smuggle” was organized by individuals crossing the ghetto border officially or—much more often—illegally. The main part of the small smuggle was done by Jewish children under ten years old who

were not obliged to wear the armband with the blue Star of David, which made their appearance on the “Aryan” side easier. Fast, agile, brave, and shrewd, they became the real heroes of everyday life. They had special inside pockets in their coats and were able to bring in tens of kilograms of potatoes, onions, or other provisions daily. One of the young smugglers, Jurek Erner, wrote in his testimony after the war, “I crossed the ghetto border a few times a day every time bringing in about twenty [kilos] of food. On every kilo of sugar or rye I made a profit of five zlotys, on every kilo of potatoes three zlotys. If I was lucky enough I earned 100 zlotys a day.”<sup>4</sup>

The children crossed the ghetto border through holes or gaps in the wall. On their return they were often stopped at the ghetto gates: carrying a heavy burden, they could not run so fast. They were regularly victimized by the Germans, who not only took supplies away from the children or beat and abused them, but frequently killed them.

One of the ghetto poets, Henryka Łazowertówna, wrote a popular poem about heroic Jewish children saving their families from hunger and death. The poem begins as follows:

“A Small Smuggler”

Thru guards, thru wires, thru holes  
Thru ruins, thru fences, thru walls  
Bold, brave and starving  
Like a cat I’m sliding.  
At noon, at night, at dawn  
In heat, in blizzard, in storm  
Again, for a hundredth time  
I risk this young life of mine  
Under my arm. A shabby sack  
On my back, a worn out rag.  
Quick, young legs but in heart  
Painful, everlasting freight.  
But you can bear everything  
You can suffer anything  
The bread delivery for ladies and gentlemen  
As quick and sufficient as I can  
Still brave, thru bricks, thru holes  
Cunning and starving—thru walls  
At dawn, at night by day  
A silently morning shade.  
And if I meet my terrible fate

A trap inevitable in this game  
Mummy, don't wait for me  
I'm not the one you're going to see  
You won't hear my calling  
The dust from the street is falling  
The lost child's life—they say  
There's only one thing—I pray  
The whisper will stay on the lips which are dead  
Who, tomorrow, will bring you Mum some bread?<sup>5</sup>  
*(Translated by Maria Kopyłowicz-Dymus)*

### **SURVIVAL IN THE GHETTO**

One way to survive in the ghetto, not only in the physical but also in the psychological sense, was to adapt to its inner rationality and normality. Remembering prewar standards of normality, and applying them rather than the principles of rational behavior that were obligatory in the ghetto, did not make survival easier: it only increased moral and physical suffering. Of course adaptation to the ghetto did not mean acceptance. Adaptation was a disguise that enabled people to fit in—the only rational way of behaving in view of the necessity of surviving. Many adults were absolutely unable to adapt to ghetto realities, which deprived them of human and moral dignity and accustomed them to the omnipresence of death. Children were more flexible. Seeing their parents mute and unable to play their adult roles, they became—not by choice but rather by necessity—heads of families. The role of the head of the family altered. The father ceased to play this role and was replaced by whoever earned a living, provided food, and was brave enough to make decisions.

Family life in the ghetto functioned in a deformed way. Both the structure and role of the family were different from those of peacetime. Families disintegrated because numerous family members had died or been murdered. The internal structure of the family was also deformed: children or youth became breadwinners. Children became independent and grew up earlier, a situation characteristic of wartime in general.

### **CHILDREN AT WORK**

During the war there was a complete change in the meaning of the term “work.” In the ghetto the word lost its meaning because work was often not work, and pay was not pay. The money that individuals received for working had no value: it was not enough



to buy food in the ghetto—in other words, to survive. The children in the ghetto had to work as hard as adults. For both of them the only pay that they often received was food. The children also smuggled victuals and sold everything that could be sold on the street (such as armbands, papers, and books) as a way of earning money.

Perhaps the best picture of abnormal work in the ghetto was given by Janusz Korczak, a famous writer and tutor. While living in the ghetto and caring for more than 200 orphans, he was offered several chances to escape and save his life. But he refused each time until finally he accompanied the children to the gas chamber at Treblinka.

In his diary Janusz Korczak reported a scene that he observed in one of the ghetto shops. The saleswoman told the customer:

My dear lady, these aren't any goods, and this isn't a shop, and you're not a customer, and I'm not a shopkeeper, and I'm not selling you anything, and you're not paying, because after all these bits of paper are not money. You're not losing anything, I'm not earning anything. Who's cheating whom at the moment and don't bother. But you have to do something, don't you?<sup>6</sup>

During the deportations in Warsaw, employment in German factories situated in the ghetto offered a slim guarantee of avoiding Treblinka. But that was not a simple prospect and required money or protection. Children who were lucky enough to get these jobs did their best to keep up with the requirements normally met by adults. But what will one not do to survive?

### **CHILDREN IN POVERTY**

The population of the ghetto was quickly pauperized (of course there were exceptions: the nouveaux riches, big smugglers, and collaborators) and everyday life in the ghetto changed swiftly and chaotically, usually for the worse. People who worked and somehow managed might at any moment find themselves among those who were barely subsisting. The possibilities of finding work and maintaining financial reserves shrank and charity was also reduced. The number of people who were ill, starving, and dying grew each month. There were ever more beggars; they gave the ghetto a specific appearance, smell, and sound. There were many children among them. Łazowertówna wrote about children begging at her courtyard.

Two children sing a strange song. It begins, “Four miles outside Warsaw...” but then there's nothing about the wedding of the hoopoe and

the jackdaw, only a bad father whose children propose to him various ways to commit suicide. The elder sister brings him in turn a knife, an axe, a rope.

“Hang yourself, father,  
Hang yourself, father . . .  
Kill yourself, father,  
Kill yourself, father.”

It sounds more than realistic: the authentic macabre. The singing children are ten years old. And I know, I already know who will “perform” later today.

There will be the boy screeching for hours in one place, “Give alms . . .” [*“Oc rachmunes”*] and the girl with “Have pity . . .” [*“Oc myclajch”*], and something tiny, you can’t tell whether it’s a girl or a boy, with its “Throw a bit of bread down” [*“Warf a rup a sztykele brojt”*]. There will be two brothers, horribly swollen, who were only moaning. Their legs—red blocks with big blisters as though they’d been scalded, and faces like Kalmucks: yellow globular cheeks, with the eyes simply lost in the swelling.

There will be my nice little perhaps-seven-year-old “orator” with a big basket, who pulls along his three-year-old brother with a bandaged head. The “oration” is always as follows: “Respected ladies and gentlemen, dear ladies and gentlemen, have pity on these two poor little children, give a little bit of bread, give a crumb of bread, or an old crust, or one potato. And in return, you will never be hungry and will never have to beg yourselves. Respected ladies and gentlemen, give a bit of bread for these two little hungry children.” And then the twelve-year-old boy: “I beg you” [*“Idysze kindoch, ich bejte”*]. And two skeletons—two red-haired girls with tuberculosis. And a father with two (I’m sorry, one’s already died) children. And a swarthy, raven-haired mother with a beautiful, dark two-year-old. And later on, after the gate has been closed, a terrible, twisted crippled boy with long arms like an ape, and legs bare to his bottom (he only wears bathing trunks and a strip of shirt).<sup>7</sup>

### **CHILDREN GROW OLD**

The elderly person realizes that he or she will soon die after having lived a long and full life. Childhood in the ghetto was so full of suffering, death, strong experiences, and fear that it was enough for many old people, for many lives. In the book by Adina Blady-Szwajger, a children’s doctor from the Warsaw ghetto, one can find a scene about the role of children as old men.

Some day in the spring 1942 six-year-old Ryfka came to our children's hospital. She still had a father at home, and in our hospital she visited her older brother and three-year-old sister. The younger sister died. I remember, I told Ryfka, "Take back this package you brought for your sister; she died." And Ryfka looked at me with her black, bottomless eyes and told me, "A human has to do the washing, to clean up and to cook—you don't have enough time and I didn't look after the child." And this "man," dressed in rags, turned round and went away, dragging her feet.<sup>8</sup>

Another picture of a child seen as an old man is given by Rachela Auerbach, a director of the "popular kitchen" (*kuchnia ludowa*) and collaborator on Emanuel Ringelblum's underground archives. She wrote in her diary about one of the kitchen customers who refused to be settled into the orphanage because he was responsible for looking after younger children begging together in the streets.

I will remember Hersz Lejb forever, the nine-year-old mature man. He visited us from the summer [1941]. Already then he had this triangular face without the drop of the blood covered with tissue skin, flatten nose.... These extremely sad eyes and behavior of a person carrying the burden of life. The face of an old Jew, the face of a person who had experienced the failures and every disappointment.<sup>9</sup>

On the first cold day in winter, Hersz Lejb stopped coming to the Auerbachs' kitchen.

## **CONCLUSION**

The children in the Warsaw ghetto played many roles. The children's roles were a parody of real childhood; nonchildrens' roles were a heavy burden. In fact, the children in the ghetto were deprived of their childhood. They were also devoid of the crucial privilege of childhood: a feeling of safety. The Germans denied—among other values—the idea of safety and the sense of being a child.

## NOTES

1. Krystyna Żywulska, *Pusta woda* [Empty water] (Warsaw: Iskry, 1963), pp. 21–22.
2. Personal testimony, Pola Rotszyld, Yad Vashem Archives, sign. 03/438.
3. Ibid.
4. Personal testimony, Jurek Erner, Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, no. 302/259.
5. Henryka Łazowertówna, *Pieśń ujdzie cało: Antologia wierszy o Żydach pod okupacją niemiecką*, ed. M. M. Borwicz (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej w Polsce [Publishing House of the Central Jewish Historical Commission], 1947), p. 115.
6. Janusz Korczak, *Pamiętnik* [Memoir] (Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia [Our Bookstore], 1986), p. 359.
7. Henryka Łazowertówna, letter to Roman Koloniecki, September 6, 1941, Muzeum Literatury, Warsaw, sign. 2235,2.
8. Adina Blady-Szwajger, *I więcej nic nie pamiętam* (Warsaw: Wolumen, 1994), p. 38.
9. Rachela Auerbach, unpublished diary, Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw; sign. Ring I, 654.

**Transformation and Resistance:  
Schooling Efforts for Jewish Children and Youth  
in Hiding, Ghettos, and Camps**

**Lisa Anne Plante**

Jews caught in the Holocaust tried in myriad ways to save themselves. They understood that physical survival was not enough; emotional survival and intellectual survival were necessary as well. For many, creating and keeping school—against the odds and despite German obstacles and orders to the contrary—was a vital part of survival. Their efforts reveal three worlds: one remembered but forever lost; one actual but cruelly destructive; and one anticipated, conjured from an audacious alchemy of hope and imagination. In the end all that they possessed was in their heads and hearts. Everything else—possessions, status, homes, and sustenance—were stripped away by the Germans. The life of the mind and the courage to go on were all that finally remained.

In attempting to understand the Holocaust, it is necessary to look at how people lived and what was important to them before they were taken to “assembly points” (*Umschlagplatz*), before the march to the mass graves in the ravines outside of town, and before the cattle cars that carried them to deaths in places of such horror that they beggar the imagination. It is essential to realize that for those spared immediate death in the selections at the camps, it was necessary to organize not only food and clothing but also some semblance of ordinary life. For children and youth, one way to organize life was to create and maintain schools. We ought not consider these efforts to be failures simply because the Germans murdered most children and youths who participated in them. While few children survived the Holocaust,<sup>1</sup> those who lived often highly valued their schooling experiences; for the murdered Jewish children and youths, education served to lessen the horrors that preceded their deaths. Schooling often served as a central experience in young lives eked out amid wretched conditions.

**FORMS OF SCHOOLING**

For Jews in hiding, schooling took various forms. In Western Europe in particular, many parents sought hiding places for their children in residential schools. Frequently these schools were Catholic and required parents to sign contracts stipulating that their children could be baptized and confirmed, and that parents would never seek to draw their children back to the Jewish faith.<sup>2</sup> In such schools Jewish children continued their

academic schooling and learned religious dogma and rituals intended to transform them from Jews into Catholics. Other Jews hid elsewhere, however, and for them schooling was also important.

In the concealed apartment where Anne Frank's family and their companions hid, everyone undertook some study. Their helpers brought them books and materials for their lessons, including correspondence courses. Anne reported in her diary that, in her hasty preparation to go into hiding, she packed her "diary . . . curlers, handkerchiefs, schoolbooks, a comb and some old letters."<sup>3</sup> In the Netherlands, Sara Spier, who left her home in Arnhem to go into hiding near Haarlemmermeer,<sup>4</sup> reported, "I took my schoolbooks with me and my mathematics."<sup>5</sup> Moshe Flinker, a Dutch Jew whose family fled Amsterdam for Brussels and hid by passing as Gentiles, also took schooling materials with him. Moshe ordered additional books to aid in his education. Intent on becoming a founder of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he studied Arabic—first from a German text aided by a Dutch-German dictionary, and later from a French text and French dictionary.<sup>6</sup>

Hidden children treasured rescued books and items such as single pages salvaged from Hebrew books and used them to learn the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>7</sup> Others, lacking light or materials, learned to read and write through letters drawn on the clay walls of their hiding places or the palms of their hands.<sup>8</sup>

In ghettos, schools of every sort sprang up. Many students attended small classes (*Komplety*) organized privately or by house committees and other organizations that met in homes or within the camouflage of public venues such as soup kitchens or shops. N. Korn, a teacher in one of Lublin's underground schools that met secretly in ghetto shops, described such schools.

With beating hearts we conducted lessons, simultaneously on the alert for the barking voices of the SS, who frequently raided Jewish homes. In such a case all incriminating traces immediately disappeared. Gone were books and notebooks. The pupils began to play and the teacher became a customer: In a tailor's house he began to try on clothes and in a shoemaker's house—shoes.<sup>9</sup>

Nehama Eckheizer-Fahn, a former student in the clandestine Yehudia school in the Warsaw ghetto, reported, "Lessons were conducted in a different place every day, in the houses of teachers or pupils. They were conducted clandestinely, in small groups, by the light of a single candle, each evening somewhere else."<sup>10</sup>

In some ghettos the Germans at times permitted certain categories of schools. In the Kovno<sup>11</sup> ghetto, the German-sanctioned vocational school—in addition to sheltering secret academic and Zionist educational programs—was the site of various other clandestine activities including at least one bris and a series of holiday observances in which students, teachers, and community members celebrated together.<sup>12</sup> Students from the Zionist program hidden within the vocational school used their new beliefs and learning to teach younger children.<sup>13</sup>

In the Vilna<sup>14</sup> and Lodz ghettos and the camp of Theresienstadt, among others, students engaged in fairly sophisticated studies of their cultural milieu. They gathered stories and descriptions of ghetto life, reported observations of life and language development in the ghetto, collected and recorded genealogical data, and gathered accounts of Jewish life between the wars. “We are investigating the history of Courtyard Shavler 4. For this purpose questionnaires have been distributed among the members, with questions that have to be asked of the courtyard residents . . . questions relating to the period of the Polish, Soviet, and German rule (up until the ghetto), and in the ghetto.”<sup>15</sup>

### **CLANDESTINE SCHOOLS**

In the ghettos and camps, teachers and parents disguised classes for young children from the German authorities—as well as from the small children who attended them. In order to prevent very young children in Tomaszów-Mazowiecki from revealing their secret schooling, adults referred to classes as “play groups.” Teachers taught lessons through songs, stories, and games.<sup>16</sup> In Theresienstadt the methodology for teaching young children was similar and the classes were referred to as “keeping busy” classes (*Beschäftigung*).<sup>17</sup> Although this nomenclature suggested something less than academic teaching and learning, it was a deliberate obfuscation meant to conceal the seriousness of those efforts and, instead of merely playing, the children were “kept busy” learning skills and knowledge typical of primary school. It is also important not to overlook the importance of keeping busy as an objective of schooling; the alternatives were chaos or sliding into a passive and declining state.

While the curricula of clandestine schools were generally not makeshift, the arrangements under which they operated sometimes were. However, some schools were quite elaborate. In Warsaw, the clandestine Hebrew High School rejected makeshift arrangements and organized space, furnishings, and materials suitable for a high school.

According to its principal, Natan Eck (Eckron), “The aim was to appear as much as possible as an organized school even under the conditions of the Ghetto Underground. . . [W]e wanted an actual school as well, and were not satisfied with any makeshift arrangement.”<sup>18</sup>

The administrators accepted résumés from prospective teachers, instituted enrollment criteria for prospective students, and organized a school replete with bells and bell schedules for class changes, assemblies, parent-teacher conferences, progress reports, and every detail typical of high schools.<sup>19</sup> The school also conducted celebrations of Jewish holidays attended by community members not part of the school. The Hebrew High School was unique in that it was not an attempt to continue a school that existed before the German occupation; nor was it a school meant only to serve a current need. Its founders planned it as a school that would exist beyond the ghetto in which they created it, and they intended that in the postwar era it would stand as a new type of education for Jewish youths.<sup>20</sup>

In Warsaw from fall 1939 through early summer 1942, a plethora of schooling arrangements existed. In addition to academic high schools (*Gymnasia*), high schools, *Komplety*, elementary schools, and vocational schools, there were religious schools, art and ballet schools, and postsecondary classes of all sorts—including schools of nursing and medicine in addition to a clandestine teachers’ college. When it suited their plans, the Germans temporarily allowed certain categories of schooling such as vocational schools for adolescents and primary schools for young children. This did not always mean anything since, after granting permission to open schools, they might soon suspend that permission “temporarily.” They sometimes offered excuses such as a need for required labor by students and teachers<sup>21</sup> or health risks; frequently the latter were either nonexistent or the result of German-imposed overcrowding, lack of sanitation, withholding of vaccinations, and embargos on medication.<sup>22</sup>

At other times the Germans went beyond merely giving permission and instead ordered communities to open certain schools. They sometimes demanded primary schools for the youngest children as a way to free women for forced labor and make it easier to effect roundups of children who were too young to be used as forced laborers. Kovno ghetto diarist Avraham Tory reported about one set of German instructions.

The second woman said she was a housewife and was taking care of her children. . . . “This is rubbish,” said Miller. Let them set up kindergartens. Such a young woman must work. . . . I [could not] tell him that we are not



very eager to set up kindergartens in the Ghetto. We do not want to deliver our children to destruction. In October 1941, more than 160 Jewish children and babies then in the hospital were executed.<sup>23</sup>

Perceiving the dangers inherent in allowing children to be concentrated in a few spots known to the German authorities, Jewish communities and individual families often resisted such schools. This did not prevent them sending children to school; they simply eschewed “official institutions” and arranged for the children to attend clandestine programs hidden from German eyes. In some instances the Germans also required vocational schools for adolescents in order to train skilled workers for involuntary labor.

Meanwhile, in ghettos across Eastern Europe, students made their way from homes or schools with books and papers hidden under their clothing and met in after-school academic clubs to continue their studies. Braving the dangers of streets ruled by the Germans and their henchmen, they made their way as unobtrusively as possible between their schools, classes, clubs, and homes. Children’s lives during the Holocaust were singularly hidden. If they did not hide themselves, they often lived under changed identities. Many of their daily activities were likewise hidden: clandestine schools and membership in Jewish or Zionist youth movements, smuggling and black marketing,<sup>24</sup> and resistance work.

Whole gangs of little children are organized, boys and girls from five to ten years of age. The smallest and most emaciated of them wrap burlap bags around their boney [sic] little bodies. Then they slink across to the “Aryan” side through the streets that are fenced off only by barbed wire. The bigger children disentangle the wire and push the smaller ones through.<sup>25</sup>

[The children] bear humps on their backs . . . an artificial, manufactured hump whose inside is filled with potatoes and onions.<sup>26</sup>

Children and adolescents hid some of their activities from their families as well as from the German authorities. Describing her secret Zionist club membership, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman recalled, “I was also involved in the clandestine Zionist organization. . . . We always met on Saturday afternoon and my parents were never aware of it . . . [although] they were Zionists! . . . But in the ghetto, [I hid it from them] because this was so dangerous.”<sup>27</sup>

While not every Jewish child or adolescent was able to attend school, it was not unusual to do so. Lucy Dawidowicz offered partial figures: in Warsaw 200 boys learned in at least eleven yeshivot; 2,000 youths studied in 180 clandestine religious elementary schools (*hedarim*) and Talmud Torahs; hundreds of *Komplety* in that city served an average of ten children each and met in public kitchens and private homes. By the time of the Great Deportation in July 1942, a school term had just ended with 7,000 students enrolled in nineteen schools. In 1940–41, 4,000 youths enrolled in vocational schools. Lublin boasted *Komplety* led by 100 teachers. At its peak the Lodz school system served 10,000 children in forty-five schools, and in Vilna, one secondary and several elementary schools served some 2,000 children. Religious schools were also available.<sup>28</sup>

### **SCHOOLING IN THE CAMPS**

As the Germans began “operations” (*Aktionen*) intended to clear the ghettos and send the inhabitants to death and labor camps, schooling altered and sometimes became less formally organized. For example, following the removal of the vast majority of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to the gas chambers at Treblinka in summer 1942, the tiny remnant of remaining Jews struggled to survive from that September until the final push to transport them in April 1943. Living in unbearable misery and tension, some youths and teachers arranged to meet individually when possible to continue lessons. Living “wild” in the Warsaw ghetto in the winter of 1942–43, Janina Bauman found work when she answered a work summons issued to her mother. She recalled that “I went to evening classes with another girl and Natan, my friend. The teacher was a middle-aged man, worn and scared. He lived ‘wild’ in a dark little room nearby which he shared with strangers—a family of three. We sat in this room trying to concentrate on logarithms, while the family of three gaped at us vacantly.”<sup>29</sup>

If they escaped immediate murder on arrival in the concentration camps, some Jews still found ways to create schools or educational partnerships. At Theresienstadt, where the Germans incarcerated many children along with well-known scientists, intellectuals, artists, and musicians (*Prominente*), clandestine education was nearly universally available. The Juvenile Welfare Department (*Jugendfürsorge*) decided to house children and adolescents in “juvenile homes” (*Jugendheim*)<sup>30</sup> to facilitate education. As in other camps, at Theresienstadt the Germans required adolescents to perform slave labor. However, at Theresienstadt when youths returned to their barracks,

they in fact returned to their schools as well. Each Jugendheim had teachers assigned, but also received lectures and lessons from Prominente who in normal life would have been unlikely to teach or lecture to children and young adolescents. In other camps and ghettos, children had similar experiences with teachers who typically would not have taken on such ordinary or youthful students. Recalled Lucien Duckstein, a young prisoner at Drancy:

From ten o'clock until twelve I forget about everything else. Loève is an absolutely remarkable teacher. I have no way of knowing it, but he is a great French mathematician, a familiar name to all those interested in probability. That he is teaching algebra to eleven-year-old kids is something incredible, something unheard of, and for us it is an enormous stroke of luck and a great honor.<sup>31</sup>

In other camps where the Germans admitted children, classes were also organized. At Bergen-Belsen a clandestine school took advantage of the horrific and unsanitary conditions in the camp that prevented many barracks inspections by the Germans. Teacher Hanna Lévy-Hass said

the SS “supermen” took good care not to get too close to the prisoners in the huts, because we were not regarded as human beings. They only came close in order to shout at us or beat us or pick people out for the slave gangs at the “roll calls.” . . . We did it at times when the Germans were unable to come. Sometimes they came unawares and then it was dangerous. But the children were so clever that nobody could see what we were doing.<sup>32</sup>

At Auschwitz II (Birkenau), twin boys selected for gruesome experiments by German physicians led by Josef Mengele attended classes conducted by Zvi Spiegel, known to them as “Twins’ Father” [*tsviling-foter*], the male prisoner assigned to care for them.<sup>33</sup> He received permission from Mengele to hold classes for them.<sup>34</sup> “I saw my most important task as maintaining the children’s morale. . . . I organized classes. I would teach them math, history, geography. We had no books, of course. But still I gave them simple exercises to do. I taught them whatever I could remember from my own school days.”<sup>35</sup> The twin girls did not have such experiences; with no adult to organize their care, the experience of Auschwitz II (Birkenau) was more alienating.<sup>36</sup> In addition, at Auschwitz II (Birkenau) for ten months in 1943–44, the ill-fated “family camp” (*Familienlager*) of Jews from Theresienstadt included a school. Prisoners

accustomed to the idea of providing a rich—yet clandestine—school experience at Theresienstadt did not hesitate to re-create school at Birkenau.<sup>37</sup>

In camps such as Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen, adolescents and young adults organized activities for themselves. For example, in their crowded bunks at night, they shared in posing and solving math problems; they asked and answered questions on various topics; they taught each other poetry; and they recounted books that they had read.<sup>38</sup>

### **THE JEWISH COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION**

Jews kept school for a variety of reasons. In addition to attempting to construct normal childhood experiences and resisting German attempts to degrade them, one reason was the strong camaraderie among students and between students and teachers. Sharing living conditions, starvation, fear, loss, and sorrow, they bonded to share work and learning as well.

More than once, teachers or staff were ill or weak from hunger, but I don't think there was ever more enthusiastic studying or teaching. It was not an escape from the dreadful reality but an expression of opposition to the iniquity and the desecration of cherished values. . . . Relationships between teachers and pupils also changed; continual fear in the cold evenings in darkened rooms created strong ties and great affection between us. We became one family.<sup>39</sup>

The old distance between teachers and pupils has vanished, we feel like comrades-in-arms responsible to each other.<sup>40</sup>

The vitality of that shared endeavor led to the formation of communities of active learners. Adults and youths worked together to create and sustain schools. They taught each other and sought knowledge together, and many students in turn served as teachers for younger children. Boundaries between adults and children, between teachers and students, blurred and often disappeared. In addition, as parents and other adults lost their ability to provide for their children and shelter them from danger, children and youths turned to their teachers—many of whom were young and some of whom were youth movement leaders and members of resistance organizations.

This camaraderie helped overcome the vicissitudes of life for Jews during the Holocaust. Narratives of students mention the warmth that emanated from their classes—not actual warmth since there was generally little or no fuel for the stove—but

warmth kindled in the camaraderie of the classroom. In his diary Yitskhok Rudashevski, a student in the Vilna ghetto, wrote, “I can scarcely hold out like this until I go to class. There it is cold, too, but while studying it somehow becomes warmer.”<sup>41</sup>

Others mentioned students “swallowing” the words of their teachers, as if their teachers’ words filled their empty bellies and obviated their torturous hunger.<sup>42</sup> Of his observation of classes held in Kovno ghetto, Tory wrote, “All their eyes are fixed on the place where the old rabbi is seated. They ‘swallow’ each word he speaks.”<sup>43</sup> Kimmelman reported, “We were there to learn. We were eager to . . . [pause] . . . to *breathe* for an hour or two the air filled with wisdom, with knowledge. We were swallowing the words of the teachers.”<sup>44</sup>

Students and teachers looked to a future wherein they would take active roles in creating a world where the injustices that they suffered would find no quarter. They looked forward to founding and maintaining a Jewish homeland and they anticipated new political models of freedom and dignity.<sup>45</sup>

Additionally, passing knowledge from one generation to the next is an important part of Jewish tradition and belief. Schooling, therefore, is an essential part of Jewish identity. The Talmud assigns to parents the task of providing their children with an education and charges the community with absorbing that responsibility if the parents cannot meet it.<sup>46</sup> Many persons persecuted as Jews were not Orthodox or even observant Jews; indeed, some had little or no knowledge of their Jewish ancestry. Many were highly assimilated and felt, at least initially, little connection to Judaism. Nevertheless, such traditions are slow to die. When the religious impulse was lost or neglected, families rooted in an understanding that one must be learned to be a Jew retained that idea, especially where secular learning had become the cornerstone of vocation and identity.

In interwar Poland Jews constituted approximately ten percent of the population, yet in 1921–22 they constituted nearly twenty-five percent of university students. That this figure steadily declined, and by 1937–38 was just under ten percent, resulted from an increase in antisemitic attitudes and rules.<sup>47</sup> Jews continued to fill the quotas set for them in schools and many sought higher education in other countries.<sup>48</sup>

Another reason for such commitment to schooling was that many Jewish schools during the Holocaust were imbued with themes of Zionism and Judaism. Many young Jewish students and teachers used schooling to transform self-images ranging from barely Jewish to Orthodox into more Zionist or neo-Jewish identities. Highly

secular, these identities often were deeply religious as well. Adults and children learned Hebrew, religious observance, and Jewish history to enhance their connection to Judaism; they learned Arabic and the geography of Palestine with an eye toward participating in the much anticipated formation of a Jewish homeland.<sup>49</sup> Wrote Tamara Lazerson and Moshe Flinker:

May 20, 1943. I am very pleased with myself. It seems to me that I had strayed and have been wandering about aimlessly. And now at last I have found an aim in life. I am no longer forlorn—an individual without a homeland and a people. No! I have found an aim: to struggle, to study, to devote my strength to advance the well-being of my people and my homeland. I am proud of it. I am no longer blind—God and fate have opened my eyes. I now see that my goals in life were false, and I have atoned.<sup>50</sup>

Lately I feel so lonely, so barren. . . . I found in the Hebrew library a Palestine school almanac. . . . A few days ago I again took it from the library and read it in a spirit entirely different from the first time. It now seemed like a letter to me, as a sign of life of the rest of my people. I love it so much that I can hardly bring myself to return it to the library.<sup>51</sup>

European Jews also recognized that education was imbued with powerful liberating possibilities: it was a means of preserving one of the few scraps of freedom possible for Jews—the freedom of the mind. In some cases schooling had a more practical effect as well: particularly in schools created by resistance organizations or led by resisters, students learned ideas leading to active resistance. For example, students of the Dror Gymnasium in Warsaw matriculated to the nascent resistance in that ghetto and thence into the Jewish Fighting Organization (*Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa* [ZOB]) that took a leading role in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that began in January 1943.

While the education of some European Jewish children brought them this fragile aura of freedom, others had educations that were libratory only in the sense that their intellects grew and their self-images strengthened even on the threshold of their tragic deaths. Even those who had the most enlightened educations, who came to understand most perfectly the hegemonic structures that had led to their persecution, could not fend off the “Final Solution.” Yet they refused to passively accept the fate decreed for them. They longed for light and air and they sought windows through which their minds and spirits could fly free even as they endured cruel imprisonment.

Writing in the Kovno ghetto, Lazerson said, “I am weighed down by my enslavement and have no time to write, to think, or even to read. I am mired in a morass, into which I sink as I daily labor from morning to night with the slave gang. Around me is darkness. I thirst for light.”<sup>52</sup>

Schooling was possible in part because German genocidal policies conflicted with a strongly rooted Jewish tradition of self-help and, whereas those Jewish efforts must in the end fail in the face of the concerted effort to effect a “Final Solution,” in the interim schooling was often part of broader self-help programs that sought to ameliorate conditions within Jewish communities. Such organizations provided funds and personnel that helped to sustain schooling and provided other resources such as space and concealment for schools that in some instances met in busy public places.

### **TEACHERS AND RESOURCES**

Some who adopted the task of teaching had prior experience working with children or youths. Some had been teachers in their free lives; others were youth movement leaders who had worked to further certain causes, including Zionism, anti-Zionism, socialism, democracy, and communism, not merely by speeches or political action, but through educational means. These activities included lectures, educational meetings, camps, and clubs. In the interwar years, the Jewish youth movements sought a variety of solutions to, and relief from, the resurgence of antisemitism. Some of the Warsaw youth movement leaders—including Zivia Lubetkin, Yitzhak Zuckerman, Joseph Kaplan, and Mordechai Anielewicz—were among twenty or so youth movement leaders who, following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, found safe havens outside the zones of occupation. Eschewing safety, they soon made their way to German-occupied areas in order to continue their work and provide leadership, education, and support to Jewish youth.<sup>53</sup>

Some teachers had already pursued pedagogy as a profession. Teaching was a familiar endeavor and gave them a sense of being able to do something positive. Students felt comfortable in their roles and, while circumstances forced on them more mature roles within their families and communities, in school they could again be young and eager learners. They learned to seek out educational opportunities, enlist teachers, and insist on changes and curricula that better met their needs.

Many educators affiliated themselves with groups that resisted German aggression and had previously resisted the hegemonies within European society,

including European Jewish hegemonies. They offered their students visions of new worlds organized according to principles outside the traditional realm of European Jewry—worlds in which they hoped that the injustices then heaped on Europe’s Jews would not find a foothold. Their students held great admiration for them as a result, although in offering such ideas, they often went against the beliefs of the cultural circles that the youths had formerly inhabited—and frequently directly contradicted family beliefs. In addition, they soon abandoned many longstanding customs of schooling. For example, some diarists noted that whereas schools in the 1930s were often still gender segregated, this was no longer practicable and coeducation quickly became accepted practice.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, with little or no access to traditional academic materials, students and teachers found or created them from the available resources. In her camp diary, Lévy-Hass wrote of creating materials with the children in her clandestine school at Bergen-Belsen.

It is not easy to work without any kind of book, and I have to write subjects down on dozens and dozens of little pieces of paper, some for the little ones who can scarcely read or write, others for the older ones. They get hold of pencils and paper in whatever way they can, selling their bread ration, or doing some other kind of deal, or simply stealing from each other.<sup>55</sup>

Since students and teachers were in desperate need of shelter, sustenance, and medical care, schools incorporated available community resources into the services offered. Because students yearned to understand their strange new environment, teachers who sought those same understandings helped design research projects—or encouraged students to design them—that fostered understanding of their ghetto and camp communities. When possible, adults and youths searched out the works of historians and sociologists to assist them or invited the experts themselves to participate in their lessons. Reflecting the best of Progressive tradition, teachers and students sought to make educational programs culturally relevant. Curricula and methodology focused on the cultural milieu in which the participants found themselves while acknowledging their shattered pasts and always cognizant of their hopes for the future.



## A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Yet schooling and educational efforts did not focus too nostalgically on students' past lives, which most understood were gone or at least forever altered. Nor did schools prepare them for the future at the expense of the present. Efforts that had future goals, such as the creation of a Jewish homeland, were firmly rooted in present concerns. If they sought to learn skills for a distant life, they also focused on using those skills more immediately. Some teachers and children studied Hebrew, Judaism, and Judaic culture—not only to prepare for life in the “Land of Israel” (*Eretz Yisrael*), which might not be possible, but also in order to live meaningful lives as Jews within the confines of the ghettos, camps, and hiding places from which they awaited deliverance. Some youths engaged in academic schooling but pursued agricultural and vocational training as well. Although intended to facilitate emigration to Palestine and an anticipated Jewish homeland, they meanwhile put such training to use to feed and enhance their communities.<sup>56</sup>

The grounds around our school are supposed to be cultivated by the students. We have to work for our education. . . . I don't mind the work, though, because I'll get to know the soil a little better. Everything may yet prove useful.<sup>57</sup>

Today I was on duty at the exhibition of the work of our school. . . . Looking at these designs, I often find it hard to believe that they are the work of our hands under these terrible conditions. . . . There are plans for modern residential blocks and drawings of postwar one-family houses surrounded by gardens; these houses have many windows. The visitors at the exhibition look with pride at these housing projects for the Jewish population of the free Poland of the future, which will abolish the crowded houses of Krochmalna and Smocza Streets, where the darkest cellars of the ghetto are situated. But when will this come about, and which of us will live to see it?<sup>58</sup>

Narrators reported field trips and fieldwork sponsored by schools and educational clubs or circles. For example, in writing of his Gymnasium in the Lodz ghetto, Dawid Sierakowiak reported, “Our class went on an ‘excursion’ to the hospital at Lagiewnicka Street to see the x-ray machine and x-ray examinations that are made there. We witnessed an x-ray examination of elementary-school children who are sent there by the anti-tuberculosis dispensary. Almost all of them have signs of tuberculosis.”<sup>59</sup>

In addition to studying life within the ghettos and camps, older youths participated in planning and staging various activities and facilities for younger children. Lazerson, a student in the Kovno vocational school and its clandestine academic and Zionist classes, wrote, “I am engaged in important work, Celia and I have become attached to the pitiful children of Zeznier. We help them; they are so dependent on us. We comfort them, teach them Jewish values, and inspire them with goals for living. I am alive and dynamic. I feel that I am needed and useful.”<sup>60</sup>

Diarist Mary Berg, who studied graphic arts at a Warsaw ghetto vocational school, reported on her class’s participation in a community project to create a playground for young children.

Jewish workmen have constructed swings, benches, etc. The pupils of our school went to paint a fresco of animal cartoons on one of the walls of the ruined house. All this is done to give the ghetto children a feeling of freedom. . . . The smiling rosy faces of the children were perhaps the best reward of those who had created this little refuge of freedom for the little prisoners of the ghetto.<sup>61</sup>

Within the schooling experience, youths and adults strove to re-create some vestige of their past lives and give birth to new lives as well. Clinging to the past with varying degrees of tenacity, they nonetheless pulled themselves toward the future.

Ideas about schooling were not static; rather, they evolved as participants came to see educational efforts differently as time and circumstances rushed toward the hideous end. Once news of the horrific massacre of the Jewish children, women, and men of Vilna reached Warsaw, ZOB second-in-command Yitzhak Zuckerman saw that “all the education work, which aspired to preserve the humanity of the younger generation and arouse in it the spirit of battle, would have been meaningless . . . unless together with it, and by virtue of its power, an armed Jewish self-defense force would come into being.”<sup>62</sup>

There was an element as strong, if not stronger, than the closeness of the individual bonds of schooling—the bond of community. The sense of community permeated nearly every schooling endeavor. In addition, not only did the sense of community matter within the schools, but also schools mattered greatly within their larger communities. Holocaust testimonies and extant documents mention school programs or projects that affected their communities. Contact with schools, and the

children and youths attending them, gave community members a sense of purpose and an energizing respite from the horrors surrounding them.

## CONCLUSION

Although it is tempting to see in those schooling efforts a glorious heroism, it is also important to understand schooling for what it was. Refusing to die or surrender, teachers and students engaged in the very ordinary effort of schooling. Only in contrast to the conditions under which they strove to create educational miracles, and to what we now know about the German intent to destroy them, do their efforts come to seem extraordinary. The only goal left was to survive—and to do so as civilized human beings—and schooling served a vital role in that endeavor. To view their efforts in that way is to see schooling as part of a grueling attempt to survive rather than as a campaign of heroics. Schooling, in the context of the Holocaust, says more about perseverance than posturing.

Yet there is in the narratives of many of these Jewish school makers, especially the older youths and the younger adults, a bit of bravado. Their narratives speak of schooling in terms of something they continued doing despite the difficulties. A certain satisfaction echoes in their descriptions of how they overcame obstacles. The Germans closed the schools—we meet in secret.<sup>63</sup> We have no classroom facilities—we make a chemistry lab in the kitchen.<sup>64</sup> We lack books—we invite guest speakers to lecture.<sup>65</sup> We are starving—we consume knowledge.<sup>66</sup> We are cold—we warm ourselves with ideas and camaraderie.<sup>67</sup> The Germans persecute us for our Jewishness—we study Judaism; we learn Hebrew; we become more Jewish.<sup>68</sup>

For Jewish youths and adults, schooling was a complex and vitally important part of their existence. As they negotiated the exigencies of life and death under the cruel, debilitating attempt to erase the rich and diverse reality of European Jewry, they strove to learn and teach. For all the differences of organization and immediate goals, in every instance certain fundamental similarities existed. Schooling was a means whereby European Jews, against all odds, sought to connect their cultural heritage to an uncertain future.

In 1942 during his imprisonment in Theresienstadt, Dr. Karel Fleishmann speculated that at least one Jewish adult would surely survive to teach Jewish children such things as writing, arithmetic, and music.<sup>69</sup> While that assumption proved correct, across Europe Jewish children, adolescents, and adults did not postpone education

while awaiting an uncertain liberation. They created lively schools and pinned on them their hopes and dreams for the future.

## NOTES

1. The survival rate for Jewish children in all of German-controlled Europe was approximately eleven percent. In some places, however, it was much lower—e.g., the survival rate for Jewish children in Poland was less than 0.5 percent. Debórah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 274–75, note 27.
2. Renée Fersen-Osten, *Don't They Know the World Stopped Breathing? Reminiscences of a French Child during the Holocaust Years* (New York: Shapolsky, 1991), pp. 95–96. Serge Klarsfeld, *The Children of Izieu: A Human Tragedy*, trans. Kenneth Jacobson (New York: Harry Abrams, 1984), p. 58.
3. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Otto H. Frank and Miriam Pressler, trans. Susan Massotty (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 20.
4. Dwork, *Children*, p. 35.
5. Quotation in *ibid.*, p. 75.
6. Moshe Flinker, *Young Moshe's Diary: The Spiritual Torment of a Jewish Boy in Nazi Europe*, eds. Shaul Esh and Geoffrey Wigoder (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1976), pp. 47–48.
7. Maxine B. Rosenberg, *Hiding to Survive: Stories of Jewish Children Rescued from the Holocaust* (New York: Clarion Books, 1994), pp. 77–78.
8. Yaffa Eliach, *There Once Was a World: A Nine-Hundred-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), p. 617. Jane Marks, *The Hidden Children: The Secret Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993), pp. 43–44, 61.
9. Quotation in Milton Meltzer, *Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 99.
10. Quotation in Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. Antony Polonsky, trans. Christopher Hutton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 11.
11. Kaunas is both the 1937 and the 2003 official name of the city; Kovne is the Yiddish name. This paper refers to the city by its Russian name, Kovno.
12. Avraham Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary of Avraham Tory*, ed. Martin Gilbert, trans. Jerzy Michalwicz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 307.

13. Solly Ganor, *Light One Candle: A Survivor's Tale from Lithuania to Jerusalem* (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), p. 250. Azriel Eisenberg, *The Lost Generation: Children in the Holocaust* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), p. 93.
14. Wilno is the 1937 official name of the city; Vilne is the Yiddish name; the official name in 2003 is Vilnius. This paper refers to the city by its Russian name, Vilna.
15. Yitskhok Rudashevski, *The Diary of the Vilna Ghetto: June 1941–April 1943*, trans. Perry Matenko (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighter's House, 1973), pp. 65–66.
16. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman, September 1, 1997.
17. Inge Auerbacher, *I Am a Star: Child of the Holocaust* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1986), p. 56.
18. Quotation in Eisenberg, *The Lost Generation*, p. 65.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Rudashevski, *Diary of the Vilna Ghetto*, pp. 52–53.
22. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 141–42. Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 143–44.
23. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 258.
24. Dwork, *Children*, pp. 198–201; Yitzhak Zuckerman (“Antek”), *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, ed. and trans. Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 129. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman. Jack Eisner, *The Survivor* (New York: William Morrow, 1980).
25. Mary Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1945), pp. 72–73.
26. Chaim Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, ed. and trans. Abraham I. Katsh (New York: Collier, 1973), pp. 327–28.
27. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman.

28. Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), pp. 252–55. Dawidowicz estimated 40,000 children and youth of school age in Warsaw during the ghetto period.

29. Janina Bauman, *Winter in the Morning: A Young Girl's Life in the Warsaw Ghetto and Beyond, 1939–1945* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 92.

30. Sources translate *Jugendfürsorge* and *Jugendheim* as “Youth Welfare Department” and “children’s homes,” respectively. However, a literal translation of *Jugend* is “juvenile”; this literal translation is preferred by USHMM and so is used here. In American English, terms such as “juvenile home” often carry a certain connotation. However, in this context the terms “Juvenile Welfare Department” and “juvenile homes” are meant simply to refer to a department that supervised the welfare of children and adolescents and their housing arrangements.

31. Lucien Duckstein, *Lucien's Story*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Evanston, IL: Marlboro Press/Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 15.

32. Hanna Lévy-Hass, *Inside Belsen*, trans. Ronald Taylor (Sussex, UK: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 70–71.

33. Lucette Matalon Lagnado, *Children of the Flames: Dr. Josef Mengele and the Untold Story of the Twins of Auschwitz* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 19. Lagnado recorded Spiegel's title as *Zvilingefater*, which perhaps represents an earlier form of Yiddish transliteration. Contemporary Yiddish transliteration renders it as *tsvilung-foter*. Nancy Segal also wrote about these children and noted that Spiegel was known to the twins as “Uncle Spiegel.”

34. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

36. Nancy L. Segal, “Holocaust Twins: Their Special Bond,” *Psychology Today*, August 1985, pp. 56–57.

37. Nili Keren, “The Family Camp,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), p. 431.

38. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman.

39. Nehama Eckheizer-Fahn, quotation in Lewin, *Cup of Tears*, pp. 11–12.

40. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, pp. 32–33, 55.

41. Rudashevski, *Diary of the Vilna Ghetto*, pp. 92–93.
42. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman.
43. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 369.
44. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman.
45. Nehama Eckheizer-Fahn, quotation in Lewin, *Cup of Tears*, p. 12. Flinker, *Young Moshe's Diary*, pp. 36, 81. Tamara Lazerson, quotation in Eisenberg, *Lost Generation*, pp. 92–93. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 254, 308–309. Marie Ruth Krizková, Kurt Jirí Kotouc, and Zdenek Ornest (eds.), *We Are Children Just the Same: Vedem, the Secret Magazine by the Boys of Terezin*, ed. Paul R. Wilson, trans. R. Elizabeth Novak (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), p. 51.
46. Ben Zion Bokser and Baruch M. Bokser (eds.), *The Talmud: Selected Writings*, trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 34, 36–38, 49, 196.
47. Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), pp. 14, 28.
48. This was not a strictly European phenomenon; a similar quota system came into being in the United States as well. Between 1920 and 1940, formal and tacit quotas at U.S. schools resulted in a steep decline in Jewish enrollments and professorships. Led by Harvard and followed by other Ivy League schools, this trend expanded to approximately 700 liberal arts colleges. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom: Ethical, Spiritual, and Historical Lessons from the Great Works and Thinkers* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), pp. 484–85.
49. Egon Redlich, *The Terezin Diary of Gonda Redlich*, ed. Saul Friedman, trans. Laurence Kutler (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), pp. 52, 60. Flinker, *Young Moshe's Diary*, pp. 46–48, 81.
50. Tamara Lazerson, quotation in Eisenberg, *Lost Generation*, p. 92.
51. Flinker, *Young Moshe's Diary*, p. 81.
52. Quotation in Eisenberg, *Lost Generation*, p. 93.
53. Gutman, *Resistance*, p. 123.



54. Bauman, *Winter*, p. 41. Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto*, ed. Alan Adleson, trans. Kamil Turowski (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 40–41.

55. Lévy-Hass, *Inside Belsen*, p. 7.

56. Irma Lauscherová-Kohnová, “The Children,” in *Terezin*, ed. Frantisek Ehrmann, Otta Heitlinger, and Rudolf Iltis (Prague: Council of Jewish Communities in the Czech Lands, 1965), p. 94. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, p. 147. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 239.

57. Sierakowiak, *Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*, p. 86.

58. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, pp. 100–101.

59. Sierakowiak, *Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*, p. 121.

60. Quotation in Eisenberg, *Lost Generation*, p. 93.

61. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, p. 147.

62. Quotation in Mordecai Tenenbaum-Tamarof, *Pages from the Conflagration* (Jerusalem: Beit Lohamei ha-Getta’ot, 1948), p. 8.

63. Bauman, *Winter*, pp. 31–32. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, pp. 32–33. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman. Lévy-Hass, *Inside Belsen*, p. 70.

64. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, pp. 32–33.

65. Krízková et al., *We Are Children*, p. 148. Nili Keren, “Family,” p. 434.

66. Personal interview, Mira Ryczke Kimmelman. Tory, *Surviving*, p. 367.

67. Rudashevski, *Diary of the Vilna Ghetto*, pp. 92–93.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 253–56. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, p. 113. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 86–87. Zuckerman, *Surplus of Memory*, p. 64. Duckstein, *Lucien’s Story*, pp. 14–15.

69. See Lauscherová-Kohnová, “Children,” p. 77.

## **Facilities for Pregnant Forced Laborers and Their Infants in Germany (1943–1945)**

**Evelyn Zegenhagen**

The little creatures drank the milk so eagerly. . . . But none of them smiled. They just could not smile any longer. In the beginning, when their mothers had brought them, they still had chubby arms and strong voices. But soon they got quieter. More and more quiet.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, published in a German newspaper in 2002, is one of the rare descriptions of a “facility for the caring for the children of foreigners” (*Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätte*)—places that were established in Germany between 1943 and 1945 to care for pregnant forced Eastern laborers and their infant children. Despite the pompous name, these sites are more correctly described as “sites for forced abortion and infanticide” or, as the U.S. media referred to them after the war, “slave baby death farms.”<sup>2</sup> They were established to ensure the maximum economic profit from foreign forced laborers in Germany and their history is one of the most cynical aspects of the Third Reich. It is therefore all the more surprising that so little is known about them.

### **INSTALLING AUSLÄNDERKINDER-PFLEGESTÄTTEN**

Shortly after they introduced foreign forced labor in Germany, authorities confronted a special problem: some of their foreign forced laborers were pregnant or became pregnant. There were no institutions or guidelines to deal with these individuals. Until the end of 1942, pregnant women were usually sent home. Although the total number is not available, we know that about seven percent of Polish women sent back between 1941 and early 1943 were returned due to pregnancy. Soon the German authorities began to complain that these women were only becoming pregnant to avoid work and that returning them would strain transport facilities; the authorities also claimed that when they returned home the women would spread rumors about the poor working conditions in Germany. But the main complaint came from German industry: releasing pregnant forced laborers interrupted the production process since substitutes had to be trained and more forced laborers were needed as replacements.

A solution to this problem appeared to be essential by the end of 1942, especially for women from the East. Women constituted a significant portion of the total number of forced laborers from Eastern nations: 51.1 percent of all Russian forced laborers, 44.4 percent of Slovakian, and 34.3 percent of Polish were women, versus only 14.7 percent of forced laborers from Belgium and 6.6 percent of those from France.<sup>3</sup> In September 1944, 1.1 million Soviet women, almost 600,000 Polish women, and about 55,000 women from other Eastern European countries worked as forced laborers in Germany.<sup>4</sup> Thus the German authorities saw themselves confronted not only with the economic burden of women delivering babies and interrupting the production process, but also with a racial problem since the racially most “undesirable” offspring were arriving in the largest numbers.

From the beginning the discussion of a possible solution to this problem centered around these two focal points (the economic and racial aspects) that were central to the Third Reich. Thus not surprisingly, two authorities became heavily involved in developing solutions: Heinrich Himmler’s Reich Security Main Office, which focused mainly on the racial aspects; and Fritz Sauckel’s Office for Mobilization of Labor, which favored a solution focusing primarily on the economic aspects of the problem. Stiff competition between these two authorities started in late 1942 and led, in the course of less than a year, to the establishment of facilities for pregnant forced laborers and their babies. Although in the beginning the decrees and plans did not specify the nationality of women involved, during 1943 it was made clear that *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten* were only meant to care for the pregnant women and offspring of the largest groups of foreign female forced laborers—women from Russia, Poland, and other Eastern European countries.

It is not clear whether Jews were among the Eastern European women sent to *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten*. If these facilities did temporarily house Jewish women, the number was probably small since Jews were targeted for extermination rather than forced labor in Germany. Only as the war progressed and the labor shortage became more evident were foreign Jews included in the German forced labor program. The inclusion of Jewish women in the labor force did not start before the middle or end of 1943 and in 1944 may have involved pregnant Jewish women from Eastern European countries such as Hungary, who would have been sent to *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten* as well.

Himmler favored a racial solution to the problem: mothers and babies should be inspected for their “racial qualities.” “Racially valuable” babies should be taken to German orphanages and adopted by German families; “racially worthless” babies were to be kept in collection sites (the conditions of which were of no concern to German authorities) staffed with female forced laborers.<sup>5</sup> Sauckel, on the other hand, emphasized economic rather than racial considerations: *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten* had to guarantee that pregnant women lost as little time as possible with delivery and were able to return to work immediately afterward without being burdened by their infants. Thus he did not care about racial qualities or the fate of the babies as long as they did not interfere with the effectiveness of production. In the long run, his position would heavily outweigh Himmler’s racial concerns.

The first facilities for pregnant forced laborers and their infants were established in 1943. Labor and health offices—both in the states and private firms—were ordered to open facilities to deliver, nurse, and care for mothers and their babies. While the German Labor Front was responsible for these facilities in the industrial regions of Germany, the Reich Agricultural Organization was responsible for the countryside. These facilities were usually erected in a central, easily accessible geographical location that could handle the pregnant women of a larger region, but many firms and local communities were reluctant to invest in establishing the *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten*.

The reasons for this reluctant behavior are unclear. One may have been that infrastructure investments in such facilities were not desirable when nightly bombing attacks made it difficult to keep basic production running; another reason may have been that the financing was questionable. As far as we know, pregnant women often had to pay their travel expenses and the Reich Employment Fund (*Reichsstock für den Arbeitseinsatz*) paid a standard amount of forty Reichsmarks per delivery—from contributions to the unemployment insurance fund—to the institution concerned.<sup>6</sup> In general, however, we do not know if and how private enterprises, local communities, or the state were involved in financing and furnishing *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten*. That issues of central supervision, equipping, and financing these facilities remained a problem can be seen by the fact that no less than twenty-three Reich decrees issued between summer 1941 and the end of 1944 dealt with the regulation of *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten*: establishing and financing them, supplying them with food and equipment, and—above all—with the question of authority.<sup>7</sup>

Due to the reluctance of local and regional entities, a number of temporary solutions were put in place. Initially special units for pregnant forced laborers were established in German hospitals, usually in separate barracks outside the hospital buildings. There were also “pregnant women camps” in camps such as Rehren, near Schaumburg, a collection site for those forced laborers who were allowed to return home because they were either too old for forced labor or incurably ill. The Rehren camp for pregnant women was part of the camp for workers suffering from tuberculosis. The first institutions exclusively dedicated to delivery and abortion were established soon afterward, but since they were not prepared to take care of the babies, the logical next step was to establish the *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten* where babies would be born and kept.

Although no records are available to tell us how many of these facilities definitely existed, we know that there must have been many more than the twenty to thirty identified to date. According to a source from 1943, there were twelve in Saxony, fourteen in the Rhein-Main-Gau, and fifty-eight in Lower Saxony (with thirty-one more in the planning stage).<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly there was a clear correlation between the number of foreign laborers and the number of *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten* in a specific area.

#### **OPERATING AUSLÄNDERKINDER-PFLEGESTÄTTEN: THE EXAMPLES OF WALTROP-HOLTHUSEN AND VELPKE**

German historian Gisela Schwarze has researched the history of the *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätte* in Waltrop-Holthusen.<sup>9</sup> Waltrop-Holthusen, erected in early 1943 for women from the Ukraine, Russia, and Poland, was probably the largest of its kind in the German Reich. It was run by the Association of Vegetable Growers of Waltrop and Surroundings (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Gemüseerzeuger Waltrop und Umgebung*) and supervised by the Recklinghausen Labor Office. Between 500 and 600 women could be accommodated at a time. The camp consisted of nine barracks including a penal barracks, an administrative building, and a gallows. Russian physicians (women prisoners of war) comprised the medical staff and the midwife was a Polish woman. There was at least one female SS guard and camp police who wore green uniforms but whose tasks are still unknown. There was only one delivery unit in the whole camp; women in labor lay on the floor. Between deliveries the staff performed forced abortions between deliveries up to the eighth month of pregnancy. Schwarze quotes a Russian woman who gave birth in the Waltrop-Holthusen camp.

When I had given birth to the child, the nurse took it wrapped in scraps of cloth to the next room, to the other new-born babies, I had to get up immediately and move closer to the other women who had given birth already. We didn't get anything, no cotton wool, no medication, nothing. I was bleeding terribly, I was lying in my blood. A German woman made compresses for me, with cold water and a rubber bottle. This stopped the bleeding. They didn't change the mattresses. I wasn't able to walk. I wasn't able to breastfeed my baby. I didn't have any milk.<sup>10</sup>

After delivery the women were usually returned to their employers and had to leave their infants behind. Many of the babies died from neglect and/or malnutrition or were killed during the selections that tended to occur on the rare occasions when the camp was overcrowded.

As we know from Schwarze's research, the numbers recorded for the camp are incomplete and incorrect. She established that at least 1,273 children were born in the camp in 1943–44 and that the number of women undergoing abortions was probably even higher. After investigating local records and talking to witnesses, Schwarze concluded that at least half of the children born in the Waltrop camp died.<sup>11</sup> In general, the numbers are scarce and unreliable. Based on burials in the local cemetery, at least sixteen children died in the small camp of Uttenhofen (Bavaria) during the six months of its existence between fall 1944 and spring 1945. We have no records indicating the total number of babies born in this camp, however, or how many could have died and been buried on the campgrounds (as witness statements indicate) without being mentioned in any records.<sup>12</sup> In the Pfaffenbach Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätte in Hessen, 758 children were born and only fifty-three officially died during their first year of life. This means that 705 should have survived, but research has not been able to locate the slightest trace of them.<sup>13</sup> Herbert concluded that the mortality among babies was 80–90 percent in some Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten, especially in the larger ones.<sup>14</sup>

The Velpke "children's home" (as it was called by the local population) was established in May 1944<sup>15</sup> to care for the infants of the Polish female forced laborers who worked on the farms near Wolfsburg and Helmstedt. Unlike the Waltrop birthing facility, women did not deliver their babies at Velpke, but were forced by the farmers or German authorities to take the babies there shortly after birth so that infant care would not interfere with the women's work assignments. Usually mothers had permission to visit their babies every two to six weeks, but most of the babies did not survive that long. The babies brought to the Velpke institution were between ten days

and several months old. The camp consisted of three interconnected corrugated iron sheds in a field near an unpaved country road. A Russian-German woman who had no medical experience was in charge and was supported by three (later four) “nurses”—Russian women without medical experience who were also forced laborers. The children were improperly fed, there was no running water or electricity, and most windows in the sheds were broken. The sheds had no cooling mechanism in the summer and only one centrally located stove for heat in the winter. The mothers were expected to pay one Reichsmark per day for accommodations and food for their children and fifteen Reichsmarks for burial, which took place in a mass grave outside the local cemetery.<sup>16</sup>

Polish forced laborer Stefanie Zelezny described how she lost her daughter Natalia.

I was allowed by the farmer to keep my baby 4½ months, during which time I fed her and looked after her myself. About 25 June, 1944, I took Natalia to the home on the order of the farmer Wagenführ, but when I saw the condition of the other children there I did not want to leave my baby; but there was a policeman there and he forced me to leave her, and took my child from me. At this time she was in good health. After four days I went to see my child; she was well but appeared to be very hungry and was sucking her hands. I held her for a short time and in the wooden cupboard was a bottle of sour milk. About ten days later I went to the home again with the father and we were told by a nurse that the baby was dead. We saw Natalia and she was black and blue all over her body. A nurse told us that she had been dead for three days. As we had to return to work on the farm, it was not possible to make arrangements for her burial and until to-day I do not know where she is buried.<sup>17</sup>

In at least two cases, Polish mothers asked local German women to take babies into their homes instead of sending them to the Velpke institution, but these attempts were quickly stopped by local and party authorities.<sup>18</sup> Ninety-six infant children died in Velpke between May and December 1944, when the site was closed down. Fourteen surviving children were taken to the Rühren camp about fifteen kilometers away, where 300–450 children died between April 1943 and April 1945.<sup>19</sup>

The terrible conditions in camps such as Waltrop-Holthausen and Velpke were no secret. As early as August 1943, SS officer Ernst Hilgenfeldt—head of the National Socialist People’s Welfare—reported to Himmler after visiting an *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätte*:

During an inspection I established that all infants in the facility are underfed. As I was told . . . , due to a decision of the provincial food supply authority [*Landesernährungsamt*] the facility is assigned only one-half liter of milk and one-half of a piece of sugar per child per day. Based on this food ration, the infants will perish of malnutrition within months. I was told that there are different opinions regarding the upbringing of the infants. Some think the children of female Eastern workers are to die, others think they are to be brought up. Since there is no clear statement yet and—as I was told—one wants to keep up appearances towards the Eastern workers, the infants are given insufficient food from which, as I mentioned already, they will die within months. . . . From my point of view, the way we handle this problem is impossible. . . . Either we don't want the children to live—then we shouldn't let them perish slowly and by this method withdraw many liters of milk from the general nourishment; there are ways then to do this without causing torment and pain. Or we intend to bring the children up to use them later as a labor force. In this case we have to feed them in a way that they later will be of full use when deployed as labor.<sup>20</sup>

Schwarze was able to find one company that did not participate in the killing of its employees. The management of the company Gebrüder Laurenz in Ochtrup sent its pregnant women to the Waltrop camp for delivery, but—after learning about the conditions there—it set up a company-owned nursery, hired a pediatric nurse, and fought enormous administrative battles to reclaim their employees' babies from the Waltrop facility. Here mothers were allowed to spend time with their children, and photographs prove that conditions in the nursery were as normal as they could be during those times. Nevertheless, children died at Gebrüder Laurenz as well, either from malnutrition as a result of their time in Waltrop or from epidemics such as typhoid fever, which was spreading all over Germany at that time. Schwarze reports that a nurse who was crying about the death of one of the infants was comforted by a foreign mother who had lost her child in the Waltrop camp, “Ach, Sister, don't be sad. In Waltrop, there die not one child, there die two, three, ten children [at a time], then in cellar, where cats and mice get at them. . . . Then made a pit and all children go into it.”<sup>21</sup>



**CONCLUSION: RESEARCHING AUSLÄNDERKINDER-PFLEGESTÄTTEN**

Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten were an integral component of the Third Reich policy toward foreigners. As in other areas, the conflict between the two main principles of the Third Reich—racial cleansing versus the exploitation of forced labor—continued throughout the existence of these camps, especially as the economic issue gained prominence toward the end of the war. There is also an important third aspect, however: Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten were the clearest, most rational expression of the cynical character of National Socialist supremacy policy. Here the “unworthy” life was purposely exterminated when it had only just begun—even before it had a chance to begin.

The Nazi regime was quite aware of the emotional impact of these facilities. The treatment of mothers and their infants did not take place in isolated, fenced, distant concentration camps. Many Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten were located in houses in the middle of idyllic German towns and villages. German propaganda devoted considerable effort to explaining the necessity of Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten by arguing that they cared for needy mothers and babies, since individual employers would otherwise expend too much manpower for maternal/child care and nursing.

In the larger context of restitution for forced labor and the exploitation of women and children, Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten slowly became a subject of historical research, and in recent years several good local-level studies have been conducted. However, research is not only hampered by emotional denials—clear proof that many witnesses and bystanders were well aware of their guilt—but other factors as well, which might help to explain why Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten remained one of the best-kept “secrets” of the forced labor system. The factors that have inhibited research include:

- Missing records at the central level (due to the absence of a supervising institution for Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten) and incomplete, false, missing, or destroyed records at the local level have kept the dimensions of the topic secret—not only during the Third Reich, but especially for research conducted after 1945.
- The large variety of institutions and authorities managing these facilities, and the different types of Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten developed, contributed to the confusion and secrecy surrounding them.

- Research on the Holocaust has been conducted along well-established lines that marginally included the fate of women and children. Only recently have we begun to realize the true dimensions of the network of institutional exploitation and suppression of laborers built by the Third Reich.

There is no doubt that thousands of mothers and children passed through *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten* and that many of the mothers and most of the babies did not survive. Herbert describes the killing of the children of Eastern workers in the last phase of the war as “a systematic mass murder, perpetrated in all parts of the Reich.”<sup>22</sup>

The Allied forces considered crimes against babies whose parents had been brought by force to Germany as war crimes and dealt with them in war crime trials, accusing the heads of the facilities of willful neglect of infants. The staff of at least two *Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten* was put on trial by the British military authorities in Brunswick, Germany, in 1946. In the Velpke trial, two defendants were sentenced to death, and three others were sentenced to 10–15 years in prison. In the Rühren case, the chief physician and one nurse of the Volkswagen Company were sentenced to death (the nurse’s sentence was later reduced to life in prison); a second nurse was sentenced to five years in prison.<sup>23</sup>

In 1965 German Secretary of State Paul Luecke noted that “the graves of children whose parents were kept against their will on the territory of the German Reich are to be included into the public care for these sites and are to be kept in a dignified condition.” Thus the graves of the infants killed in German facilities that were never meant to take care of them are entitled to the same permanency as the graves of soldiers (*Kriegsgräber mit dauerndem Ruherecht*).<sup>24</sup> We are obligated to find these graves, reconstruct the history of the short lives that are buried there, and ensure that their suffering will never be forgotten.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

1. Notburga Gmeiner, German witness to the Uttenhofen AKP; quotation in Frank Stern, "Am Anfang haben sie noch geschrien," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, September 20, 2002.
2. For instance, "Slave Baby Death Farms in Germany Bared; British Say 462 Died of 'Willful Neglect,'" *New York Times*, January 16, 1946, p. 8.
3. Ulrich Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter: Politik und Praxis des "Ausländer-Einsatzes" in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches* (Bonn: Verlag J. H. W. Dietz, 1999), p. 316.
4. Ibid.
5. See, among others, Matthias Hamann, "Die Morde an polnischen und sowjetischen Zwangsarbeiterin in deutschen Anstalten," in *Aussonderung und Tod: Die klinische Hinrichtung der Unbrauchbaren*, ed. Götz Aly (Berlin: Rotbuch-Verlag Berlin, 1987), pp. 129 ff.; Gisela Schwarze, *Kinder, die nicht zählten: Ostarbeiterinnen und ihre Kinder im zweiten Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 1997), p. 150
6. Schwarze, *Kinder*, p. 151.
7. Ibid., p. 155.
8. Ibid., p. 159.
9. See *ibid.* (pp. 158ff.) for a detailed overview on the fate of female Eastern forced laborers and especially the camp in Waltrop-Holthusen.
10. Quotation in *ibid.*, p. 173.
11. Ibid., p. 180.
12. Stern, "Am Anfang haben sie noch geschrien."
13. Hamann, "Die Morde," pp. 130, 134.
14. Raimond Reiter, *Tötungsstätten für ausländische Kinder im zweiten Weltkrieg: Zum Spannungsverhältnis von kriegswirtschaftlichem Arbeitseinsatz und Nationalsozialistischer Rassenpolitik in Niedersachsen*, Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission für Niedersachsen und Bremen 34, Niedersachsen 1933–1945, vol. 3 (Hanover: Hahn, 1993); quotation in Schwarze, *Kinder*, p. 159.

15. For a detailed description of the Velpke Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätte and the minutes of the the Velpke Baby Home Trial, see *Trial of Heinrich Gerike, Georg Hessling, Werner Noth, Hermann Müller, Gustav Claus, Richard Demmerich, Fritz Flint, Valentina Bilien (The Velpke Baby Home Trial)*, ed. George Brand (London: William Hodge, 1950), War Crime Trials, vol. 7, which also discusses legal aspects of the case. Also see see the Velpke Childrens Home Case, British Public Record Office, WO-235/156-161, Judge Advocate General's Office: War Crimes Case Files, Second World War.
16. See, among others, the statement of Hugo Voges and Waclaw Maziarz in *Trial of Heinrich Gerike*, pp. 46ff.
17. Affidavit by Stefanie Zelezny, *ibid.*, pp. 54-55.
18. See, among others, the statement of Frau Emma Hoppe and Frau Martha Golatta, *ibid.*, p. 32.
19. These figures are according to the Rügen Baby Farm Case, British Public Record Office, WO 235/263-277 and WO 235/674, Judge Advocate General's Office: War Crime Case Files, Second World War; *Trial of Heinrich Gerike*.
20. SS-Obergruppenführer Ernst Hilgenfeldt to Heinrich Himmler, August 11, 1943; quotation in Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter*, p. 290.
21. Quotation in Schwarze, *Kinder*, pp. 173 ff.
22. Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter*, p. 423.
23. See the Rügen Baby Farm Case, British Public Record Office, WO 235/263-277 and WO 235/674, Judge Advocate General's Office: War Crime Case Files, Second World War.
24. Gerd E. Haida, Michael S. Koziol, Alfred Schmidt, "Gantenwald: Eine 'Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätte,'" in *Faschismus in Deutschland*, ed. I. G. Druck und Papier (Cologne: Bund-Verlag, 1985), p. 229.
25. Those who have any information on Ausländerkinder-Pflegestätten or who want to know more about the Encyclopedia Project should contact the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Encyclopedia Project (<http://www.ushmm.org>).

## **The Destruction and Rescue of Jewish Children in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria (1941–1944)\***

**Radu Ioanid**

Approximately one-half of Romania's prewar Jewish population of 756,000 survived World War II. As a consequence of wartime border changes, 150,000 of the original Jewish population ended up under Hungarian sovereignty in northern Transylvania. In 1944 these Jews were deported to concentration camps and extermination centers in the Greater Reich and nearly all of them—130,000—perished before the end of the war.

In Romania proper more than 45,000 Jews—probably closer to 60,000—were killed in Bessarabia and Bukovina by Romanian and German troops during summer and fall 1941. The remaining Jews from Bessarabia and almost all remaining Jews from Bukovina were then deported to Transnistria, where at least 75,000 died. During the postwar trial of Romanian war criminals, Wilhelm Filderman—president of the Federation of Romanian Jewish Communities—declared that at least 150,000 Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jews (those killed in these regions and those deported to Transnistria and killed there) died under the Antonescu regime. In Transnistria at least 130,000 indigenous Jews were liquidated, especially in Odessa and the districts of Golta and Berezovka.

In all at least 250,000 Jews under Romanian jurisdiction died, either on the explicit orders of Romanian officials or as a result of their criminal barbarity.<sup>1</sup> However, Romanian Zionist leader Misu Benvenisti estimated 270,000,<sup>2</sup> the same figure calculated by Raul Hilberg.<sup>3</sup> During the Holocaust in Romania, Jews were executed, deported, or killed by forced labor or typhus. Their children also were not spared.

### **MASSACRES OF JEWS IN MILCORENI AND DOROHOI**

The massacre of Jews in Romania started before it allied itself with Nazi Germany and declared war on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Massacres of Jews occurred during the Romanian withdrawal from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina in early July 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied both provinces for one year. Although typically the killings were carried out by soldiers, occasionally they were conducted by Romanian or Ukrainian mobs. The ugliest massacres accompanied the withdrawal from Bukovina;

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\* This article contains material previously published in Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000). Reprinted with permission.

the first occurred in Milcoreni (department of Dorohoi). Following orders by an officer named Goilav, soldiers seized and abused the family of Sloime Weiner, including his son User and his daughters Roza Weiner and Fani Zekler who was carrying an infant. Leading this group to the Tureatca Forest, the soldiers also caught the lame shoemaker Moscovici, his wife, and their two children, as well as the wife of Isac Moscovici (who was apparently unrelated to the shoemaker and his two young daughters). The mob lined them up in front of a ditch and shot them. Isac Moscovici fell into the soldiers' hands shortly thereafter and was beaten so badly that he died on the way to the hospital.<sup>4</sup>

During the same period, a massive pogrom took place in Dorohoi, Moldova, in which over 100 Jews were killed. Children were among the victims: Freida Rudik (aged seven), Tomy Rudik (aged six), Moise Rudik (aged two), and Simion Cohn (aged two), all of whom lived on Regina Maria Street and were shot in the head, chest, or abdomen.<sup>5</sup> One hundred twenty Jews were killed in January 1941 when a huge pogrom that was organized and carried out by the Iron Guards engulfed Bucharest. Many Jews died in their own homes. For example, several members of the Fringhieri family—including four children—were murdered in their house at 15 Intrarea Colentina. Two children (Aron and Haia) who were in bed at the time miraculously survived even though several bullets were fired at them.<sup>6</sup> The bullet aimed to kill little Rodriques Honores Brickman of 9 Mihai Voda Street, however, did not go astray.<sup>7</sup>

### **THE IASI POGROM**

It is difficult to determine the total number of victims of the Iasi pogrom of June 28–July 2, 1941, but sources vary in estimating between 3,200 and 13,000 victims. Hilberg cites German diplomats in Bucharest who estimated 4,000 dead.<sup>8</sup> Curzio Malaparte, a fascist Italian war correspondent who initially justified the pogrom but later condemned it, reported 7,000 victims.<sup>9</sup> Communist historian Gheorghe Zaharia cites documents from the archives of the Ministry of the Interior of the Romanian People's Republic indicating more than 8,000 victims.<sup>10</sup> The indictment of the Antonescu trial accused the pogrom organizers of responsibility for 10,000 deaths, yet a July 23, 1943, Serviciul Special de Informatii report—based on lists of the dead prepared by the Jewish congregations of Iasi—indicated that 13,266 (including forty women and 180 children) died. Cited recently by scholars working in Romania, this figure does not seem exaggerated.<sup>11</sup>

When the Jews of Iasi were rounded up by Romanian soldiers and civilians and escorted in columns through the town to Central Police Headquarters, men constituted the majority but the victims also included women and children. Beaten and bruised, they were forced to march in step with arms raised above their heads. Their Romanian and German captors and the mobs lining their path spat on the victims, pelted them with rocks and bottles, and struck them with sticks, bars, and rifle butts. Those who could not walk because of injuries or ailments were shot, causing the streets to be strewn with corpses.<sup>12</sup> Survivors of the march later recorded the visions that accompanied their passage.

Those who left the 5th Police Precinct at 5:00 p.m. were greeted by the corpse of an old man on Apeduct Street. A few paces beyond was that of a child of the plumber Suchär. In front of the Chamber of Commerce and the Ghemul Verde Store on Cuza-Vodă Street were two heaps of dead people in which they discerned the bodies of women and children.<sup>13</sup> Men in military uniforms assembled eighteen or twenty Jews in Sfântu Spiridon Square, forced them to lie on the ground, and then murdered them with a tank's machine gun.<sup>14</sup> Some of the victims are known to us: Kunovici, owner of a hat store on Stefan cel Mare Street; Filip Simionovici, a baker from I. C. Brătianu Street; the engineer Nacht; and the tavern keeper Mille. A rare surviving photograph captures the body of a four- or five-year-old child, a girl, lying among a half-dozen older victims with blood running from her head.<sup>15</sup>

Thousands of survivors from the Iasi massacre were then loaded onto two "death trains," so named because more than two thousand people died due to the lack of air and water resulting from the overcrowded conditions. The first train, which left Iasi on the morning of June 30 with 2,530 Jews, arrived at Călărăsi on July 6 with 1,011. The captives had covered approximately 500 kilometers during six and one-half days of tropical heat, for most of that time without water. The train had yielded ten corpses at Mărăseti, 654 at Tîrgu-Frumos, 327 at Mircesti, 300 at Săbăoani, 53 at Roman, 40 at Inotesti, and 25 at Călărăsi.<sup>16</sup> The total deaths on the first death train thus amounted to at least 1,519 victims. Nathan Goldstein describes the scene that he witnessed from his cattle car in Tîrgu-Frumos.

Being so close to water and thirsty for so long, most could not resist: they would jump out through the small opening of the car to go drink the water. Most were murdered by the soldiers: . . . an eleven-year-old child jumped out the window to get a drink of water, but the [deputy of the train's military commander] felled him with a shot aimed at his legs. The child screamed: water, water! Then the adjutant took him by his feet, shouting "you want

water? Well, drink all you want!” and lowered him head first into the water of the Bahlui River until the child drowned, and then threw him in.<sup>17</sup>

One of the survivors of the first death train, Israel Schleier, testified later that only eight children and three old men disembarked from one of the cars in Tîrgu-Frumos. The corpses of the victims remained, however, stiffened in the positions in which they died; “intertwined and immobile, they seemed to form a single . . . uninterrupted mass.” The stench, Schleier recalled, was unbearable, “a horrible blend of blood, corpses, and feces.”<sup>18</sup>

The second death train had a briefer history. On June 30 at 6:00 a.m., 1,902 Jews boarded eighteen cars. The last car contained eighty corpses removed at the station in Iasi that showed evidence of killing by gunfire, disemboweling with bayonets, or bludgeoning with sledgehammers. The transport took eight hours to reach its destination at Podul Iloaiei, twenty kilometers from Iasi; it moved so slowly that the guard was sometimes able to follow it on foot. Some cars arrived with as many as 100 dead and as few as three or four half-dead survivors. A prisoner had died (on average) every two or three minutes in some of the wagons. On arrival in Podul Iloaiei, the 708 surviving passengers were locked in synagogues or assigned to Jewish residences in the community. The 1,194 dead were buried in the local cemetery.<sup>19</sup> The late Radu Florian—who was fourteen years old at that time—survived the journey, but his brother and his father died in the same suffocating cattle car.

### **THE MASSACRE AT STÎNCA ROZNOVANU**

The massacres of Jews in Bessarabia and Bukovina, during which Romanian and German troops killed in unison as well as separately, included children. For example, on June 27, 1941, 311 Jews (both adults and children) from Sculeni, Bessarabia, were taken by a Romanian Army unit to a nearby locality called Stînca Roznovanu—west of the Prut River—and killed with machine guns, automatic weapons, or simply by having their skulls fractured. A witness, Lieutenant Andronic Prepelitã, remembered, “The Jews were standing in front of them in a triangular formation: men, women, children. The three . . . fired at them. I saw it with my own eyes.”<sup>20</sup>

The 311 corpses that were buried at Stînca Roznovanu were exhumed from three mass graves during the second half of September 1945 in the presence of a delegation from the Jewish community of Iasi, the coroner of the Iasi Court, and the new gendarme station chief of the community of Holboca. It is likely, however, that the number of



victims exceeded this figure. Eyewitness Alexandru Zaharia testified that another mass grave had been dug near a road that had since been relocated.<sup>21</sup>

German prisoners of war performed the excavation under Soviet guard. They found the remains of thirty-three children between the ages of one and twelve in the mass graves, including seven who were under one year old and fourteen who were under six. Some corpses were clothed in two or three shirts, suits, and shawls—indicating that the victims had anticipated deportation—while other corpses still wore pajamas or nightgowns, especially the women in the second mass grave. Most men in the first mass grave were barefoot, scantily dressed, and had their sleeves rolled up; their pockets contained everyday objects such as keys, combs, handkerchiefs, and cologne flasks. Some corpses still bore identification papers or jewelry.<sup>22</sup> The corpses generally displayed signs of gunshot wounds to the chest, but some also exhibited cranial fractures. One child between two and four years old, whose body showed no sign of wounds, had probably been buried alive.<sup>23</sup> The third mass grave produced a large number of infants, women, and the elderly. Only six middle-aged men were found; their clothing was usually simple. Many women were wearing pajamas or houseclothes, and many of both sexes were barefoot.<sup>24</sup>

### THE FATE OF ROMANIAN JEWRY

What was the percentage of children in the deportation areas under Romanian control? On August 19, 1941, there were between 9,984 and 10,578 residents in the Kishinev ghetto, 2,200–2,300 of whom were children and 5,200–6,200 of whom were women.<sup>25</sup> During the same period at the Vertujeni transit camp, 8,182 out of 22,969 Jewish inmates were women, 8,540 were men, and 6,247 were children. As the following table shows, 9,289 of the 31,930 inmates interned in five transit camps in Bessarabia (i.e., approximately one-third) were children.

<b>Camp</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Total</b>
Limbenii Noi	877	908	869	2,654
Rascani	795	1,164	1,113	3,072
Rautel	706	1,469	1,060	3,235
Vartujeni	8,182	8,540	6,247	22,969
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,560</b>	<b>12,081</b>	<b>9,289</b>	<b>31,930</b>

The conditions in these camps were atrocious. For example, eighty-five percent of the children perished in October 1941 in the Edineti camp alone (not listed above).<sup>26</sup> Ella Garinstein, soon to be orphaned in Transnistria and interned in the Marculesti transit camp, later told how Ion Mihaiescu—the Romanian National Bank inspector in charge of looting the inmates at the Marculesti transit camp in Bessarabia—took the coats that her family had been wearing and brutally hit her mother on the ears with a stick to force her to hand over her earrings. When Ella's 15-year-old brother refused to give him his boots, Mihaiescu beat him so savagely that he died an hour later.<sup>27</sup> In Marculesti, Mihaiescu and his men “confiscated” everything down to baby cribs “for the benefit of the state.”<sup>28</sup>

The “land cleansing” (a Romanian gendarmerie term for the elimination of all Jews through shootings or deportation) in Bessarabia and Bukovina was virtually total during fall 1941. Almost all Jews from these two provinces were deported to Transnistria. Colonel Dumitrescu, the military commander of Kishinev, reported, “I am honored to inform you that the last transport of Jews left on October 31. We also need to evacuate the Children's Orphanage with thirty-eight children, including four newborns and the rest between one and six years of age, as well as the nurses and support staff.”<sup>29</sup> Between the two waves of deportations, the hunt for Jews in Bessarabia continued everywhere including the orphanages and hospitals. On June 13, 1942, the Kishinev police reported finding two small abandoned children (Grigore Levsin and Mihail Port) who were circumcised, spoke good Romanian, and even crossed themselves well.<sup>30</sup> The archival records do not tell us if these two boys were deported, however. On June 30, 1942, the last 224 Jews, including twenty children, were deported from the Kishinev ghetto to Transnistria; among them were Slioma Svart (aged one and one-half) and Florica Pepi Vainstein (aged three months).<sup>31</sup> Six very sick Jewish children were allowed to remain in Kishinev.

When tens of thousands of Jews were executed in Transnistria in 1941–42 by Romanian and German troops from Odessa, the children of Golta and Berezovka were not spared. Alexe Neascu, a reserve second lieutenant from the 23rd Infantry Regiment who was involved in the shooting of thousands of Jews in Dalic near Odessa (at least 20,000 Jews were executed by Romanian troops in Odessa at the end of October 1941), offered a deposition after the war.

They proceeded to machine-gun those inside the four sheds. . . . The sheds were handled one at a time, and the operation lasted until nightfall. On the following day the sheds where these operations had not been finished were

blown sky-high, symbolically and as an example; this operation took place, I believe, at the same time [of day] as the command blew up. After having machine-gunned those sheds for several hours . . . they resorted to oil and gas and then sprayed and set the sheds ablaze.

When the fire broke out, those inside who had escaped the bullets or who had been lightly wounded tried to escape through the windows or by the roof. The soldiers were given the general order to shoot anyone who managed to get out. Some of those who had been inside appeared at the windows and, in order to escape the flames, begged with hand signals to be shot and pointed at their head or their heart. . . . The people appearing in the windows were naked, because their clothes had caught on fire. Some women threw their children through the window. I remember one particular scene: a four- or five-year-old child was thrown out of a window, and wandered around for about five or ten minutes, his hands above his head, among corpses, because the Romanian soldiers refused to gun him down.<sup>32</sup>

## DEPORTATIONS TO TRANSNISTRIA

What was the percentage of Jewish children deported to Transnistria? An April 1, 1942, report signed by Governor Gheorghe Alexianu provided a count of 88,187 deported Romanian Jews in Transnistria. He also issued a report on May 23, by which time the figure had decreased to 83,699 Jews in thirteen districts.

District	Men	Women	Children	Total
Tiraspol	6	18	3	27
Berezovka	N/A	N/A	N/A	1,554
Dubosari	62	99	67	228
Odessa	172	220	195	587
Moghilev	20,846	22,673	10,985	54,504
Tulcin	50	89	104	243
Râbnita	254	548	569	1,371
Balta	6,288	6,474	3,741	16,503
Oceakov	3	2	6	11
Ovidopol	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jugastru	2,598	2,749	2,450	7,797
Golta	169	503	202	874
Ananiev	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>30,448</b>	<b>33,375</b>	<b>18,322</b>	<b>83,699</b> <sup>33</sup>

About twenty-two percent of the Romanian Jews deported to Transnistria in 1942 were children who shared the fate of their adult relatives. Israel Parikman of Secureni, who was deported by way of Vertujeni and Iampol, described his stay in Transnistria.

Here [in Obodovca] they divided us among stables and pigsties. . . . What saved us was the hay which we found in almost every enclosure. We built fires with the hay in order to get a little heat and [boil water]. The water problem at that point was partially resolved because we had a lot of snow. I was sent several days later to Torkanovka [near Obodovca] with 550 other Jews. Only 117–118 came back from that lot. We also slept in pigsties there. When we had to bury our dead we first built a fire, because the ground was so frozen that it was almost impossible to dig. . . . That is where my mother died. I slept for seven days next to my mother's corpse, because the undertakers refused to bury her unless I gave them some clothing. After my mother's death I was sent back with my father and younger brother (seven years old then) to Obodovca. I remember that three days before the latter died, he implored me to give him something to eat. I did not have anything and that is how this child died, tortured by hunger.<sup>34</sup>

Fred Saraga from Centrala Evreilor describes the following scene, which he witnessed in 1943 during his visit to Transnistria.

During my visit I discovered in the town of Konotkauti, near Shargorod, a long and dark stable standing alone in a field. Seventy people were lying all over the place: men, women, and children; half-naked and destitute. It was horrible to look at them. They all lived on begging. Their head was Mendel Aronevici, a former banker in Darabani, Dorohoi area. He too lived in abject misery.<sup>35</sup>

Typhus was by far the deadliest enemy of the deported Jews, however. In Shargorod during winter 1942, Ruth Glasberg Gold from Czernovitz witnessed the death first of her father, then of her only brother, and finally of her mother. “Silently, without commotion, without a cry, one by one, those around us died,” wrote the young girl. “For days, those bodies would stay in the same room with us until they were picked up by undertakers.”<sup>36</sup> Because the room in which the Glasberg family was staying was in the back of the house, it was used as a morgue. “Thus the hideous corpses from the other rooms were brought into ours and piled up against the wall next

to the door opening.”<sup>37</sup> Ruth’s mother was left unburied for two weeks and Ruth would visit her mother’s body every day and beg the gravediggers to bury her.

Occasionally the Jewish inmates of Transnistria’s ghettos were successful in saving their children from the slaughter that continued in the German-controlled area. At the request of the German military authorities beyond the Bug River, on August 2, 1943, district Prefect Poiană Volbură of Tulcin ordered the transfer of 200 Jews to the other side of the river. Knowing what awaited them, the Jews managed to organize—for a sum of money—the safeguarding of fifty-two children who were left in the Romanian-controlled area.<sup>38</sup>

Executions, typhus, and typhoid fever caused the number of orphans to increase. In Moghilev alone 450 orphaned Jewish children inhabited a town orphanage during summer 1942. On August 20 a second orphanage was established to house 200 additional children. As of November 28, three orphanages sheltered 300 children in the same city. From April 1942 to May 1943, 356 children died in these orphanages, with mortality increasing especially during the last three months of 1942. Dr. Emanuel Faendrich depicted an apocalyptic situation on November 28, 1942.

The children live in large rooms that are not heated and that are badly ventilated, with fetid smells in some instances; during the day the children remain in dirty beds; they have no underwear, no bedding, nor the necessary clothing to leave their bed and walk around. . . . I found in one room 109 children. . . . I saw many children who suffered from boils, scabies, and other skin diseases.<sup>39</sup>

In Bucharest the underground leadership and the Romanian Jewish Council (*Judenrat*), Centrala Evreilor, tried valiantly to save the orphans of Transnistria. On the evening of January 6, an inspection committee of the Centrala Evreilor reached Moghilev, where it discovered 900 children in three orphanages (at a time when twelve thousand Jewish deportees and three thousand original resident Jews lived in Moghilev). Most of the children were naked, four to six of them shivering in a single bed. Major Oresanu struck the director of Orphanage Number 1 with a horsewhip for suggesting that they visit the upper level of the building. The reason became apparent when they discovered an overcrowded room housing fifty or sixty children. The windows were broken and the children lay in makeshift beds freezing in the Siberian-like cold. “The children had not left their room for a month,” the visitors learned; “their food was served almost frozen, and they relieved themselves there as well.”<sup>40</sup> On the

evening of January 10, the delegation reached Balta, where they found 300 orphaned children; another 100 lived in the farms around the city. Their sanitary conditions were good, according to the report drafted by Saraga on his return to Bucharest, although the Jews of Balta were crowded “40–50 per room.”<sup>41</sup>

### **THE ROMANIANS SHIFT DIRECTION**

As the course of the war changed, however, Romanian authorities started to consider the Jews as a bargaining chip in their attempts to buy the goodwill of the Western powers, and in late 1943 they began selective repatriation of the Jews who were deported to Transnistria. The governors of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria received a secret note from the Office of the President of the Council of Ministers on May 22, 1942, specifying which Jews could be released from the ghettos. However, they would have to remain in Transnistria pending consent by the concerned administrators and the interior and justice ministers. Ten categories of Jews were released from the ghettos.

- War invalids, their parents, and their children
- War widows and orphans
- Parents of those killed in battle
- Veterans of Romania’s wars who were wounded or decorated for acts of bravery
- Former military personnel previously on active duty in the Romanian Army
- Retired civil servants who had contributed actively to the state
- Jews married to Christian women or men
- Jews baptized before 1920
- Senior citizens older than seventy who were unable to care for themselves and had relatives in Romania
- Special cases of meritorious men not included in any of the above categories, to be determined by the governors<sup>42</sup>

This initial step led to discussions about whether Jews should be repatriated from Transnistria, which would have especially affected some five thousand orphaned children who were living in Transnistria. On January 2, 1943, Filderman, head of the disbanded Union of Romanian Jews, asked Ion and Mihai Antonescu to allow these orphans (along with widows, invalids, and war heroes) to repatriate from Transnistria; Filderman also asked that deportees from Dorohoi be repatriated, as well as those who had applied in 1940 to go to the USSR.<sup>43</sup> On January 6 and 9, Filderman and Commissar of Jewish Affairs Radu Lecca held a series of meetings in the Budapest home of Dr. A. Tester (a

German agent, according to historian Matatias Carp); the main topic discussed was permission for the orphans to emigrate to Palestine by way of Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Tester, a friend of German Ambassador Manfred von Killinger, promised support if large “Jewish contributions” could be extorted.<sup>44</sup>

However, the Jewish community proved unable to finance the orphans’ emigration, forcing Filderman to appeal to the British and American governments by way of the Swiss Jewish community. Attorney Constantin Bursan was sent to Istanbul to secure the approval of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, which was headquartered in Jerusalem.<sup>45</sup> In the meantime the talks between Tester and Filderman about repatriating the orphans continued, focusing on how much to pay in taxes per child.<sup>46</sup> During a meeting with Filderman on April 7, Mihai Antonescu, vice-president and minister of foreign affairs, declared that the Romanian government would support the emigration of the Transnistrian orphans. He confirmed this in a statement to Vice-President Chapuissant of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), on May 19.<sup>47</sup>

On September 23, 1943, in a report to Mihai Antonescu, Lecca requested the repatriation of Jews born in Walachia or Moldavia and those deported in September 1942. Mihai Antonescu subsequently approved the repatriation of orphans, widows, invalids, medal recipients, and retired or former state employees. He also demanded statistics pertaining to the Jews who had been deported in fall 1942 and decided that the Transnistria orphans should be taken to an orphanage in Odessa, from which they would emigrate with help from the ICRC.<sup>48</sup> Two weeks earlier the orphan category had been expanded to include all children under eighteen and specific crossing points had also been established.<sup>49</sup>

On February 6, 1944, however, Romanian leader (*Conducator*) Ion Antonescu resuscitated his previous policy of refusing to repatriate the Jews of Transnistria.<sup>50</sup> The following day C. Z. Vasiliu limited the repatriation of orphans to those under the age of fifteen. Despite Filderman's repeated requests to the Ministry of Interior, children who had lost only one parent were not repatriated. On March 6, 1,846 orphaned children were repatriated.<sup>51</sup> On March 14 Antonescu reversed his decision to deny a general repatriation.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, on that same day, Mihai Antonescu sent a long telegram to Alexandru Cretzianu, the Romanian minister in Ankara and the best contact for talking to the Americans. While asserting that he had always supported emigration, Mihai Antonescu stressed that the Romanian government “stands against any physical solution

or measure that implies severe individual constraints” and that “the Romanian people are tolerant and do not approve of crime as a political method.”<sup>53</sup>

In early March 1944, Ira Hirschmann (President Roosevelt’s special representative and a member of the War Refugee Board) urged Cretzianu to persuade the Romanian government to return Jewish deportees from Transnistria and permit Jewish orphans to emigrate to Palestine. Noting that the Romanian leaders might soon be killed by the Russians, Hirschmann underscored that the American government should not have to reward Romanian leaders to stop killing their own citizens, but he did promise American passports to Cretzianu and three members of his family if he could obtain a positive answer from Bucharest.<sup>54</sup> Cretzianu secured the desired response from Ion and Mihai Antonescu, and soon five ships were carrying Jewish orphans to Palestine.

### **CONCLUSION: REPATRIATION**

Romanian officials repatriated a total of 10,744 Romanian Jews from Transnistria (including 1,960 orphaned children), approximately one-fifth of those surviving in fall 1943. Amid the chaos following the German-Romanian retreat and the advance of the Red Army, some deportees managed to reach Romania on their own.

The orphans originated from five regions of Transnistria: Mogilev (1,349); Balta (435); Tulcin (100); Iampol (65); and Golta (11). They crossed into Romania through Moghilev/Atachi and Tiraspol/Tighina after obtaining individual passes and being deloused. Their food was provided by Centrala Evreilor. They were placed with Jewish families in nine localities in Moldova while waiting to continue their journey.

Some of these orphans reached Palestine on ships that sailed from Constanta during spring and summer 1944. For example, the ship *Bellacita* (commissioned by the Center for Illegal Immigration [*Mosad le-Aliya Bet*] and flying the ICRC flag) sailed in April 1944 from Costanta to Haifa via Istanbul and arrived in Palestine on May 3 carrying 273 passengers, some of whom were orphans from Transnistria. Other orphans were repatriated to the Soviet Union, which viewed the Jews from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina as Soviet citizens; 100 of these children were sent to orphanages in Odessa—only to be rescued again in 1946 by Rabbi Zissu Portugal of the Orthodox Union (*Agudath Israel*), who succeeded in moving them back to Bucharest via Cernauti and then on to Palestine.<sup>55</sup> Others emigrated to Palestine (or later to Israel) or, in a few cases, chose to stay in Romania.



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**“Unknown Children”:  
The Last Train from Westerbork  
Daphne L. Meijer**

American and Canadian soldiers liberated Eindhoven, a city in the southern part of the Netherlands, in autumn 1944. While the rest of the country was still under German occupation, this city—the largest in the south and the hometown of industrial giant Philips—functioned as the capital of the liberated area of the country.

By June 1945 Dutch refugees had started returning home from concentration camps throughout Europe. Eindhoven became the national center for their repatriation and rehabilitation; there they were officially registered by the British Army, checked by doctors, and given shelter. Large buildings on the Philips industrial site were appropriated by the British and Dutch Red Cross organizations to house the returning survivors. Because bridges connecting the south to the rest of the country had been blown up, most returnees—assuming that they even had the energy—could not go home yet anyway.

Sometime in late June 1945, a contingent of about 1,200 Dutch Jewish survivors arrived in Eindhoven from the camp of Theresienstadt. They came in small groups. Since the Dutch government had not made preparations to repatriate them, the former detainees of Theresienstadt had found their own way home.

**A STORY OF SURVIVAL: THE CHILDREN OF THERESIENSTADT**

By itself this is not an unusual story, but what makes it special is that some Dutch Theresienstadt survivors in Eindhoven were traveling with one or more babies, toddlers, and kindergarten-age children. The adults accompanying the children had a strange story to tell.

“Is this your child?” the officials may have asked.

“No,” the Theresienstadt refugees may have answered.

“So, if it is not your child, whose is it?”

“We don’t know.”

“What’s the child’s name?”

Here the answers may very well have varied.

“The kid has papers saying it is called Rudi,” they could have said, or “We don’t know her last name, but she calls herself Carla.”

“Where did you find this child?” the Red Cross employee might have asked.

Following is the answer that they would have received.

On November 20, 1944 a train arrived in Theresienstadt from Bergen-Belsen carrying fifty-one Dutch Jewish prisoners: forty-eight young children and three women. The Dutch, who were living in the Hamburg Barracks near the train platform, were appalled. They recognized the children from the orphanage at Camp Westerbork when they were still living in Holland.

The children were sick and were placed under medical quarantine. After six weeks they were considered well enough to be transferred. The young children were taken to a makeshift crèche on the ground floor of the Hamburg Barracks; the older children were moved into an empty house. They stayed there until the end of the war. Dutch Jewish women were ordered to care for them, and in their care the children lived to see the Soviet Army liberate the camp.

That the children did not die of typhoid fever is a miracle. During the last months of the war all kinds of infectious diseases broke out. As the Soviets entered Theresienstadt, the army immediately put a heavy quarantine on the camp. One month later everybody could leave. The Dutch prisoners divided the young children among them and planned to meet later in Holland.

I learned about the “unknown children” (*Unbekannte Kinder* [*Onbekende Kinderen* in Dutch]) in 1991 when a coworker at a magazine asked me to do research on a peculiar list of names that he had found in an exhibition on the history of the Dutch Jewish presence, an exhibit then on display in the Dutch pavilion in Auschwitz. The list to which my coworker referred was a transport list<sup>1</sup> from a Nazi administrative office; it contained the “names” of fifty Jewish children grouped together under the heading “Unbekannte Kinder.” (I shall later explain how children “names” came to be designated “unknown.”) The message was that the children whose names were on the list had died at Auschwitz. Because my coworker recognized one of the names and had spoken to both the girl and her mother a few days before he left on his trip, he knew that something was wrong with the list and that he had uncovered a story.

I started my research and subsequently found that the list was connected to Camp Westerbork, the “thoroughfare camp” (*Durchgangslager*) situated on the moors in the northeastern part of the Netherlands. The *Unbekannte Kinder* belonged to the last transport to leave this camp for Bergen-Belsen. Apparently the fifty children had lived

together in the Westerbork orphanage. For some reason they were kept alive and survived the war.

Since then I have learned much.<sup>2</sup> What makes this story special is the fact that the children were so young. And what is most extraordinary, many of them did not have an inkling of what had happened to them. They were not aware of their own life history.

### **THE FATE OF THE JEWS IN NAZI-OCCUPIED HOLLAND**

Let us backtrack into Dutch Jewish history. When World War II began in September 1939, 140,000 Jews were living in the country. Dutch Jews had enjoyed full civic rights for 150 years. Antisemitism was uncommon in Dutch society; instead, Jews were assimilating into the Dutch populace.

In September 1939 most people in the Netherlands thought that the international conflict had nothing to do with them and would pass them by, as had been the case with World War I. In hindsight, of course, the Dutch were ill prepared for the German invasion that occurred the following May. They had no recent experience with foreign occupation. What is true of the Dutch in general also applies to Dutch Jewry: Dutch Jews were not prepared for Nazism's anti-Jewish actions.

The Dutch government did not protect its Jewish citizens and most individual Jews had little opportunity to protect themselves. As a result, most Dutch Jews—and foreign Jews living in the Netherlands—died. Of the approximately 140,000 Jews in Holland, more than 110,000 perished, predominantly at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibor.

In Holland the Holocaust was organized with the help of laws, careful planning, and meticulous paperwork. The German occupying forces developed a strategy of gradual progress unique to the Dutch situation. In the two-year period from 1941 until the end of 1943, Dutch Jews were slowly pushed toward their destruction and murder. First, they lost their jobs; then many were forced to live in a ghetto in Amsterdam; and finally they were moved to Camp Westerbork, the transit camp, from where they were deported in weekly trains.

Every step required an avalanche of paperwork. Every move of every individual was meticulously recorded. The Nazis' neurotic obsession for paperwork brings us back to the Unbekannte Kinder since they were saved because of it.

Not all Jews perished, as we know. Most survivors had the opportunity to go into hiding. Dutch historians assume that between 1941 and 1945, over 30,000 Jews—including many children—were hidden in Dutch homes. Some children went into hiding together with their parents; others left their parents and were taken to foster homes on their own, or with their brothers and sisters. Figures suggest that about 5,000 Jewish children hid—of whom about 2,000 survived.<sup>3</sup>

The Unbekannte Kinder also went into hiding, all of them without their parents. For example, in Amsterdam Joop Reens lived with his wife and their three-year-old son Hans across the street from his bicycle shop. In 1943 he received a summons to report for forced labor in Eastern Europe. Acquaintances knew of a childless couple in Hilversum, Frans and Annie van Vlijmen, who were willing to take a Jewish child into their home. The two young couples met at the Muiderpoort train station in Amsterdam and liked each other. Joop and Suze Reens died in the gas chamber shortly afterward, but their son Hans found shelter with the van Vlijmens.<sup>4</sup>

Hans could very well have stayed with his foster family until the end of the war, but unfortunately that was not to be. In June 1944 his foster parents rented a cottage in the woods near Arnhem. One night the Arnhem chapter of the *Landelijke Knokploegen* (National Fight Squads) raided the Arnhem jail and freed many political prisoners. German police searched the area in ever increasing circles. At some point during the next few days they reached the cottage where little Hans lived. The boy had already gone to bed; when he heard voices, however, he climbed out of bed to say hello to the visitors and was discovered. The German soldiers, who were on the lookout for political escapees, were not inclined to take a four-year-old child into custody. Unfortunately for Hans, however, a Dutch collaborator searching with the Germans noticed Hans and called out, “Don’t you see they are harboring a child of Abraham?” He prodded the soldiers into placing the child under arrest.

#### **FROM WESTERBORK TO BERGEN-BELSEN AND THERESIENSTADT**

During spring and summer 1944, one did not encounter Jews on Dutch streets; most Jews were already dead, and those who had managed to survive were either abroad or in hiding. Search parties constantly looked for their hiding places. Sometimes the police captured a young child without his or her parents, in which case the foster parents were thrown in jail and the Jewish child was sent to Camp Westerbork.



Hans Reens arrived in Camp Westerbork sometime in late June 1944, where he was placed in the orphanage. It was here that the Unbekannte Kinder came into existence during spring and summer 1944. These children were not orphans in a technical sense since no one knew whether their parents were dead or alive but, without their families to care for them, they presented the practical and logistical problems of orphans.

These children were referred to as “unknown” because in most cases they were seized without proper identification. From the standpoint of a clerk who wanted his or her paperwork to be in order, this situation presented a problem. In some cases the child was registered with his or her first name only. Sometimes he or she was registered under the name of the foster parents, and sometimes under a name the child had made up. Children without a known surname were given the surname “Israel.” Just to be sure, the clerks added “Unbekannt” to their notes because they could not be completely sure that the information was correct.

By summer 1944 the Westerbork camp authorities had this group of predominantly very young children on their hands, children born between 1936 and 1943. By that time the weekly transports to Auschwitz had stopped, so the authorities kept the children at the orphanage. On September 1 one more train left for Auschwitz, but these unknown children were not on it. Only at the very end, on the last train to leave Camp Westerbork on September 13, were they sent to Bergen-Belsen and subsequently Theresienstadt.

It is almost inconceivable that fifty Jewish children (including babies and toddlers), at a time when they could easily have been put on the next train to Auschwitz, were not sent to Auschwitz but somewhere else. Likewise, it is extraordinary for young children to survive a concentration camp. The chances of a young child surviving these concentration camps without the support of parents or relatives, and therefore dependent on the kindness of strangers, are incredibly small. Yet all but one of the children survived. How is it possible?

### **WHY DID THESE CHILDREN SURVIVE?**

The mere fact of their survival is miraculous. The people involved realize this too; at times it torments them. Why were they not taken to Auschwitz to be murdered? I do not have an answer to this question, but I have a hypothesis about what may have happened.

This story unfolds during the last year of World War II. I see a group of German and Dutch Nazi officials who have gone about their business of administering, organizing, and coordinating the murder of the Jewish population. They have set up machinery to work toward this end, machinery that depends heavily on the accuracy of the data fed into it. The Nazis in Holland were especially passionate about paperwork documenting proof of Jewish identity and Jewish family ties. If one could prove that one was not completely Jewish—that is, according to the Nuremberg race laws—one was relatively safe in this system.

This paperwork extravaganza began in early 1942. My hypothesis is that by 1944 some of the Nazis’ adversaries had obtained a profound understanding of how the system worked and began to outmaneuver the administrators. By “adversaries” I mean the Jewish inmates of Westerbork, those who had managed to remain, and the resistance workers who helped hide Jewish adults and children. The little orphans who were being held in Westerbork were not sent to Auschwitz because all sorts of people—at all levels—were manufacturing documents, stories, rumors, and other proof that would shed doubt on their racial identity as Jews as seen within the framework of Nazi ideology.

For example, foster parents of some children told the police—when they came to take the children—that the officers were mistaken, that in fact the child was not Jewish. A young woman in Utrecht who ran a private orphanage forged the papers of many Jewish children in her care, stating that a child either had a Jewish mother and a Gentile father or vice-versa.

There is the testimony of Sonni Birnbaum, the Westerbork inmate who together with her husband took care of the camp orphanage. The Birnbaums had a visa for Palestine, and for awhile it protected them from deportation. When Birnbaum and her husband and family were sent to Bergen-Belsen in February 1944, she pleaded with Westerbork commander Konrad Gemmeker for the lives of the orphans in her care. She said that they were not all Jews; some were of mixed descent. Could the commander not save them and keep them at Westerbork? There is no proof that he listened to her, but apparently some children were allowed to stay behind.<sup>5</sup>

Then there is the story of Geertruida (Truus) Wijsmuller, the woman who helped hundreds of German Jewish children escape from prewar Germany to Great Britain. During the war she was a member of a resistance group, one of whose projects was to send food packages to Westerbork orphanage. In July 1944 she received a

message not to bother anymore: the orphanage would be closed and the children sent to Auschwitz. Wijsmuller went to Otto Kempin, commander of the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*) in Amsterdam, to ask him if he had gone out of his mind. Did he not know, she is supposed to have said according to her autobiography, that those orphans were not Jewish at all, but the babies of Dutch girls and German soldiers taken into custody by resistance organizations? Would he risk sending “Aryan” [*Arischer*] children to a death camp?<sup>6</sup>

Wijsmuller knew very well that this story was total nonsense and that she could have been killed. Apparently, however, Kempin may have believed her or given her the benefit of some doubt<sup>7</sup> because the children were in fact sent to Bergen-Belsen, the camp where Jews were taken in order for them to be exchanged with other people in some sort of prisoner exchange program.<sup>8</sup>

Archival evidence also supports my hypothesis. The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation in Amsterdam has a letter written by Willy Zöpf, in 1944 the regional director of Department (*Referat*) IVB4 and as such the Dutch representative of Adolf Eichmann’s Berlin office. On August 14 Zöpf wrote to the Dutch Central Office for Jewish Emigration (*Amsterdam Zentralstelle für Jüdische Auswanderung*) demanding a timely solution to the “lineage fraud” that evidently was still bothering the Nazi authorities in Holland. He cited five distinct groups that were the object of fraudulent dealings: the Jewish children in Westerbork, Jewish children who were still being taken to Westerbork, all cases that were still under discussion at the Central Office of Jewish Emigration, individuals of mixed race (*Mischlinge*), and all Jews who had not registered as Jews.

The Jewish children in Westerbork to whom this letter refers are none other than the *Unbekannte Kinder*; clearly their Jewishness was a matter of great concern. Being “unbekannt,” both in the sense of not possessing correct identity papers and in the sense of having a doubtful Jewish identity, saved the children from deportation and certain death at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is a strange hypothesis, but in the absence of any other I am bound to it.

The remaining question is why this group was henceforth sent from Bergen-Belsen to Theresienstadt. It could be that the commander of Bergen-Belsen, Adolf Haas, simply needed the space that the children were occupying. It could also be that he had heard rumors about the children not being completely Jewish, in fact perhaps being Aryan, and he wanted to spare their lives by sending them to a better camp. Perhaps the

train that they were boarding in Bergen-Belsen was supposed to take them to Auschwitz after all, and maybe it is a matter of coincidence and luck that the train never reached Poland and instead stopped in Bohemia. No one knows for sure; no one can know. Commandant Haas was replaced in late 1944, sent to the Balkans on active duty, and never heard of again. And the Bergen-Belsen archives are lost.<sup>9</sup> This is the real issue for the people involved. That they were not sent to Auschwitz seems to be a matter of the odds being in their favor—a frustrating thought.

### **CONCLUSION**

Back to Eindhoven where the first part of the story of the Unbekannte Kinder concludes. The children had returned safely but trouble arose a few days after their arrival. Who were they? Who should take care of them?

Dutch newspapers printed names of survivors in lists that were posted throughout the country. Whenever a family member or a foster parent recognized a name, he or she came forward. On one occasion both a biological father and foster mother claimed the same child. Most children were taken by parents, foster parents, friends, or relatives.

One boy named Freddie had no one to fetch him. For him being one of the Unbekannte Kinder had profound consequences. The four-year-old was taken to a Jewish foster family while Jewish authorities searched local archives and records of the Nazi administration for clues to his identity. It took them more than a year to establish who he was; he himself is not sure. To this day he worries that the query into his past has provided him with a false identity—in other words, that he is not the person who the Jewish authorities concluded him to be. His postwar years were difficult. He ended up in a third (non-Jewish) foster home with a girl who was believed by the authorities to be his sister. It pains him to think that his life might have been different had the conclusions drawn about him been different.

## NOTES

1. Transport am 6.9.1944, *Gruppe Unbekannte Kinder*. Netherlands Institute for War Documentation Niod, Amsterdam, Archive Reichsicherheitsdienst, inventory 191e.
2. Daphne Meijer, *Onbekende Kinderen: De laatste trein uit Westerbork* [Unknown children: The last train from Westerbork] (Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt, 2001).
3. Bert Jan Flim, *Omdat hun hart sprak: Geschiedenis van de georganiseerde hulp aan joodse kinderen in Nederland* [Because their heart spoke: History of the organized aid to Jewish children in the Netherlands] 1942–1945 (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok, 1996).
4. Personal interview, Hans Reens, 1993.
5. Personal interview with her daughter Sonni Schey-Birnbaum, Israel, 1993. See also Willy Lindwer, *Kamp van Hoop en Wanhoop: Getuigen van Westerbork* [Camp of hope and despair: Witnesses of Westerbork] 1939–1945 (Amsterdam: Balans, 1990).
6. Lo Vrooland, *Geen tijd voor tranen* [No time for tears: The wartime memories of Truus Wijsmuller] (Amsterdam: Van Kampen, 1961). Interview with Geertruida (Truus) Wijsmuller-Meijer, 1951, Netherlands Institute for War Documentation NIOD, Amsterdam, Archive Geertruida Wijsmuller-Meijer.
7. Unfortunately Kempin does not mention this meeting and the grounds for his decision in his extensive postwar trial testimony. Netherlands National Archives, The Hague, Archive Special Judiciary.
8. Eberhard Kolb, *Bergen-Belsen: Geschichte des "Aufenthaltslager"* [Bergen-Belsen: History of the "keepingcamp"] 1943-1945 (Hanover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschichte GmbH, 1962).
9. As discussed in my correspondence and subsequent meeting with Thomas Rahe, manager and scientific director of the Bergen-Belsen Gedenkstätte, Museum and Documentation Center in Bergen, Niedersachsen.

## **The Role of Children in the Rehabilitation Process of Survivors: The Case of Bergen-Belsen**

**Hagit Lavsky**

Following the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, the Allies divided Germany into four zones of occupation. The British zone in the northwest included the largest concentration camp in the country, Bergen-Belsen.

Among the 2–3 million survivors of the concentration camps in Germany and Austria, the Allies also found a small number of Jews who had been transferred from camps in Poland shortly before the Nazis' defeat.<sup>1</sup> Estimates for these camp survivors range from 60,000 to 80,000.<sup>2</sup> It is commonly assumed that more men survived than women, that the bulk of the survivors were young adults, and that the percentage of children and the elderly was negligible.<sup>3</sup> Of the 1.35 million Jewish children in the central and Eastern European countries conquered by the Nazis, only 150,000 survived the war.<sup>4</sup>

### **DISPLACED PERSONS IN GERMANY**

A major problem confronting the Allied occupying authorities was that of postwar migration. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), founded in 1943, was intended to help repatriate these displaced persons (DPs), defined as those who were uprooted by the war and expected to return to their homelands. However, many DPs—including the Jews of Eastern Europe—refused to return to their homelands. Moreover, the Jewish remnant in Germany was soon joined by an influx of Jewish refugees fleeing from Eastern Europe to escape violent antisemitism. This migration (*Brichah*) began as a trickle in 1944 but developed into a mass migration that included the Polish repatriates from the Soviet Union and refugees from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania.<sup>5</sup> These refugees went to the DP camps as a transitional stop on their way to freedom, but the road into most countries—mainly Palestine and the United States—was virtually blocked by immigration laws. DP camps thus became their last resort and the population of these camps grew very rapidly,<sup>6</sup> reaching its peak in spring 1947 with about 190,000 DPs in western Germany, most of whom were in the American zone in the southern part.<sup>7</sup> Some 300,000 Jewish DPs and refugees are believed to have passed through Austria and/or Germany between 1945 and 1950.

The Jewish DPs lived behind barbed-wire fences and were not allowed to reside outside the camps or the “assembly centers” designated for them. Together with non-Jewish DPs, they found themselves packed into dozens of severely overcrowded former labor or concentration camps. Nutrition, sanitation, and living conditions improved slowly. The number of DPs and the length of time that they remained in Germany far exceeded expectations. UNRRA did not have enough qualified personnel, and assembly centers designed to hold between 2,000 and 3,000 people were forced to absorb more than 10,000.<sup>8</sup>

In summer 1945, in the wake of harsh criticism from many members of the American public, President Truman sent special envoy Earl G. Harrison to inspect living conditions in the DP camps in the American zone. Conditions improved considerably after he submitted his report, although much slower in the British than in the American zone.<sup>9</sup> The British also tried to close their borders to additional incoming refugees. As a result, the proportion of Jews in the American zone rose dramatically compared to the relative stability of the British zone.<sup>10</sup> By early 1946 there were roughly 16,000 Jews in the British zone, 9,000 of whom were in Bergen-Belsen.<sup>11</sup>

In certain ways Bergen-Belsen was unique due to its size, sociodemographic composition, and centrality within the British zone of occupation. Still, the processes generated in this camp exemplify the unique situation of the Jewish survivors among the DPs. While living detached from any host society, their personal rehabilitation processes were inseparably combined with the formation of a new society—struggling both for its collective identity and for its members’ rehabilitation.

It is important to distinguish between three categories of youngsters: Holocaust survivors, child refugees, and children born in the DP camp. Each of these groups had its own role vis-à-vis the adults and reflects a different aspect of the process of rehabilitation.

### **CHILD SURVIVORS**

When Bergen-Belsen was liberated, approximately 500 children—an unusually large number, and most of whom were either orphans or had been separated from their parents—were among the survivors. Ranging in age from eight months to fifteen years, they survived the last months prior to liberation thanks both to the motherly care of the female prisoners and supplies smuggled into the women’s block by male prisoners. The children came from a variety of backgrounds but shared the experience of the inferno of

the Holocaust, had witnessed death and suffering, and carried a burden of despair and horror. They had had to fight for their survival and to adopt the twisted norms of evil; they had no trust or confidence in humanity and had become cynical and suspicious toward the surrounding world. Children, young though they were, had become old due to their experience. Six years of war had deprived them of childhood and any form of education and learning except the knowledge of brutality and evil. With the loss of their parents, they faced their present and future alone in the world.

The initial responses by adult survivors to the child survivors were evident even before liberation. On the arrival of the children to Bergen-Belsen, many adults saw it as their obligation to care for them both individually and socially. When the British liberated the camp, they too placed special emphasis on the children, who were the first to be treated. They arranged for the children to be housed in children's homes and provided them with clothing, medical care, and even toys, which were confiscated from the neighboring German population.<sup>12</sup>

A scheme to send Jewish orphans from the concentration camps to England in summer 1945 was fiercely opposed by the British zone's Central Committee, which claimed responsibility for "its" children. British Jewish leaders (including Zionist leaders) tried to persuade the heads of Bergen-Belsen to allow the children's transfer to England on the grounds that the immediate removal of children from the poor conditions of the camps was essential for their rehabilitation, and that this was an emergency step and hence only a temporary solution. The DP leaders, however, were not convinced, arguing that these children would receive the best care under their auspices as Holocaust survivors. Thus most children remained behind until spring 1946, when a first group of some 100 children went to Palestine escorted by Dr. Hadassah (Ada) Bimko, who was in charge of their recovery and well-being.<sup>13</sup>

## **FORMING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

A large number of surviving children would present a serious challenge for any rehabilitation project. On the one hand, here was a mission to treat children with understanding, compassion, and the tools to develop normally. On the other hand, however, adult survivors had to cope with their own terrible losses and had their own burdens to carry, requiring them to mobilize their strength to struggle for their own rehabilitation. In addition to these internal problems, furthermore, there were also external difficulties. The camps in Germany were seen as a temporary arrangement and



there were few outside incentives and only slight resources available to invest in an educational program. There were virtually no books, equipment, or trained teachers. Poor health and living conditions created a situation that placed other needs before that of schooling and education. However, the huge challenges served as an incentive for immediate, coordinated activity on behalf of the children. Ignoring difficulties, many adults acted as if “their” children represented their own future as Jewish survivors.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after liberation a handful of teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals began to organize schools for the children, most of which were established and operated by survivors. A kindergarten and primary school were first established in nearby Celle in June 1945 and a Hebrew high school was established six months later. The initiator of the high school, Dr. Helen Wrubel, was an experienced teacher and geographer in her native Poland and served as the headmistress until the closing of Bergen-Belsen and her immigration to Israel. Most of the teachers were survivors: fourteen out of nineteen during the first year and later all of them but one.<sup>15</sup>

### **CHILD IMMIGRANTS**

The number of children in Bergen-Belsen increased in 1946 due to an influx of Jewish refugees from Poland and Hungary. By the end of 1946, approximately 900 children between the ages of three and eighteen lived in Bergen-Belsen. Many of the newcomers were accompanied by their families. Although their childhood had also been shattered through wandering, hunger, and the lack of normal home lives, social atmosphere, and systematic education, they were better adjusted than the Holocaust survivors and more prepared for systematic learning.<sup>16</sup>

By that time the camp’s educational system had expanded enormously. Soldiers of the Jewish Brigade and rabbis and emissaries of the Jewish welfare organizations and of the Jewish Agency helped develop the educational system initiated by the survivors.<sup>17</sup> By March 1946 the network of educational institutions in Bergen-Belsen included kindergarten and primary schools, two Beth Jacob Talmud Torah schools, a girls’ school and teachers’ seminar, a yeshiva “She’erit Israel,” an orphanage, a Hebrew high school, a vocational school, and a popular university.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the formal institutions, a great variety of informal educational mechanisms operated through the various youth movements and kibbutzim.

## RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

Although the first initiative was independent, emissaries soon joined in and played a central role in running the schools.<sup>19</sup> Religious education was also a combined initiative: emissaries from Britain and the United States helped primarily with materials, while rabbis from abroad and emissaries from Palestine<sup>20</sup> were occupied with education proper.<sup>21</sup>

Operating a school system posed a huge challenge. Despite goodwill and devotion, many of those who volunteered to start the school system were not trained professional educators. Moreover, those who had been teachers during the war had no connection with any academic environment. Furthermore, some of them were largely unfamiliar with Jewish culture while others had nothing to teach but Jewish tradition. Teaching also required appropriate facilities; furniture; essential materials such as notebooks, pens, and pencils; tools for vocational training; and—above all—books for both teachers and students. In this respect the limitations were crucial.

The psychological burden was even more severe. Many children were haunted by trauma, deprived of any moral sociopsychological upbringing or normal family atmosphere, and thus unable to adjust to their present situation. Teachers, suffering similar problems, had to combat the vast psychological challenge with practically no professional assistance. Welfare agencies were able to provide only a few expert psychologists, who were mainly occupied with mapping the problems and thus unable to provide individual assistance, but compassion and intuition did not replace professional treatment.<sup>22</sup> There were two additional obstacles to educational programming: the problem of forming classes in accordance with age<sup>23</sup> and the lack of a common language. As in the tale of the Tower of Babel, a mixture of many languages prevailed and many children lacked proper knowledge of any language at all. Teachers mainly spoke Yiddish and a few of them also knew Hebrew.

Struggling with these problems helped the adult survivors not only to ignore their own troubles, but also to form an attitude—a *weltanschauung*—about the shaping of Jewish culture and guidance for the youngsters. The issue of language, particularly how to select which of the two languages to use and how to acquire the basics of that language as quickly as possible as a precondition of teaching, was paramount. Since most of the teachers were more familiar with Yiddish, Yiddish soon became the main teaching language (and the common language in the camps in general) regardless of Zionist aspirations that favored Hebrew. The choice of a language was not only a

matter of practicality, however. David Rosenthal, editor of *Undzer Shtimme* (the Yiddish central organ of Bergen-Belsen), believed that both Hebrew and Yiddish should be taught as the basis for Jewish culture.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, however, Yiddish gradually gave way to Hebrew through the help of Palestinian teachers and the growing supply of textbooks from Palestine. In the second half of 1946, teaching in Hebrew became the norm in the three secular Zionist institutions in Bergen-Belsen, and the teaching of Hebrew in the other schools soon bore fruit as well.<sup>25</sup> Thus struggling with the language problem within the educational framework helped solidify and develop the cultural identity of those involved.

Moreover, the schools became the backbone of social and cultural activities in the camp, mainly through the extracurricular activities that played a central role in the schools and fulfilled the desire to link the Diaspora (*Galuth*) with the Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*). Preparations for events such as the 15th of Shevat occupied teachers and students well beyond class hours and created a sociocultural atmosphere that made the school a “Palestinian oasis” in the midst of the Galuth.<sup>26</sup> Eventually the extracurricular activity in the school was usurped by the camp leaders to serve their needs in public events. The schools’ celebrations of Jewish religious and national holidays became relevant for the entire camp population, were attended by large audiences, and received enthusiastic coverage in *Undzer Shtimme*. The schools’ exhibitions of students’ work were also a matter of general public interest, with the whole camp sharing the joy and satisfaction of the students’ achievements.<sup>27</sup>

## **FORMING FAMILIES**

The most significant factor in establishing a feeling of normality in the camps was the formation of new families. Many survivors were young men and women who found themselves alone. Their entire families—parents, spouses, children, and siblings—had been murdered by the Nazis; only a few were lucky to find some survivors.<sup>28</sup> The desire to find relatives was stronger than any fear of disillusionment. Moreover, the drive to regain a sense of living quickly overcame obstacles such as poor health, uncertainty concerning the fate of relatives, and loneliness. The natural way to fight despair, to make the grim present appear somewhat brighter and face an unclear future, was to find love and friendship.

New couples quickly married in an effort to rehabilitate and normalize within that abnormal environment. There were numerous weddings in Bergen-Belsen during

the first year after liberation, sometimes up to six in a single day and even fifty in a week. There were 1,070 weddings in 1946 alone.<sup>29</sup>

New families were formed and babies were born. With the increasing number of people fleeing from Eastern Europe to the British zone, the number of families—many of them with young children—also grew, and they contributed to the growing rate of pregnancies and births as well. By the end of 1946, the composition of Bergen-Belsen's population had already changed: almost two percent were infants up to two years old. The one thousandth Jewish baby was born in Bergen-Belsen in 1948.<sup>30</sup>

The growing number of pregnant women and babies posed another huge challenge. Most women survivors had become pregnant before regaining their full strength and health, and the task of rehabilitation was compounded by a lack of proper nutrition. For pregnant women this sometimes meant deterioration of their well-being. The healthy development of babies born to undernourished mothers was jeopardized: undernourished mothers found it difficult to breast-feed their babies, a situation that was aggravated by shortages in baby food substitutes. Combined with the problems of health and nutrition was the difficulty of baby care in general. Most new mothers did not have guidance from mothers, grandmothers, or experienced sisters or aunts who in former times surrounded the young mother before and after birth; they also lacked training in the basic rules of hygiene and cooking.

Thus child care became a major concern for everyone, but growing families and improving health seemed to contradict each other. Despite the efforts invested in improving health, nutrition, and conditions for mothers and children, camp life itself prevented complete normalization.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, family life proved to be a vital asset for mental and social rehabilitation. Indeed, it was not a one-track process. Psychological breakdowns and mental illness tortured many, even those who outwardly appeared to have overcome the nightmares of the past, and were compounded by the lack of immediate professional psychological and mental therapy.<sup>32</sup> We must also take into account the prevailing norms regarding psychological treatment. It was then generally believed that the best way to overcome this unbearable burden was to ignore it and concentrate on building a better future. Showing sympathy and offering compassion typically were not considered the correct path to rehabilitation. The very fact of immediately establishing families without deeply considering mutual compatibility reflected the will to overcome the burden of the past by simply ignoring it. Although mental problems were thus

repressed, unfortunately they did not disappear. Many have manifested themselves in later years, affecting even second and third generations. This unfortunate development has placed a burden on current psychological research and treatment.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the establishment of families was an indispensable framework for the creation of a seminormal sociocultural life. The most important incentive to emerge from the despair and deep depression and loss was establishing new families—compensation for the loss of relatives and families in the Holocaust. Family life became a vital basis for physical and mental rehabilitation, opening a new page in life.

## **CONCLUSION**

By the beginning of 1948, mainly due to the high birth rate, the total number of Jewish children in the British zone was about 3,000, of whom 1,300 were under three years old. In Belsen alone the number of children grew to some 2,300, with approximately 1,000 under the age of three. Eventually the number of children, in particular the older ones, began to decline gradually due to the Grand National Junior program for the emigration of children to Palestine and later Israel.<sup>34</sup>

The centrality of children in the process of post-Holocaust rehabilitation is obvious. Children were not only a source of personal joy for their parents, but they also became the center of the camp's social and public life. Raising children reflected the combination of individual and collective aspects of rehabilitation in the camp; around them the whole social and cultural system was built. Children came as modest consolation—a replacement for the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust—and formed one of the bases for building a new future.

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**NOTES**

1. Yehuda Bauer, “The Death Marches: January–May 1945,” *Yahadut Zemanenu: Contemporary Jewry* 1 (1983 [Hebrew]), pp. 199–221.

2. Malcolm Proudfoot (*European Refugees 1939–52: A Study in Forced Population Movement* [London: Faber and Faber, 1957], p. 306) estimates 75,000. Yehuda Bauer (“The Jewish Displaced Persons from the Concentration Camps and the Problems of the She’erit Hapletah,” in *The Nazi Concentration Camps: Structure and Aims, the Image of the Prisoner, the Jews in the Camps*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf [Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984 [Hebrew]], pp. 385–95) sets the figure at 70,000. Jacques Vernant (*The Refugee in the Post-War World* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1953], p. 62) goes even higher—80,000 in Germany and Austria—but he deals with only the second half of 1945.

3. The first survey appears in Zorah Warhaftig, *Uprooted: Jewish Refugees and Displaced Persons after Liberation* (New York: Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1946), p. 53. The second appears in Leo Srole, “Why the DP’s Can’t Wait,” *Commentary* (January 1947), pp. 13–24.

4. According to the Jewish Organization for Child Care, Children’s Aid Society, *Jewish Chronicle*, July 13, 1945, p. 1.

5. Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (New York: Random House, 1970). Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews in Poland after the Second World War* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1985 [Hebrew]). David Engel, *Between Liberation and Flight: Holocaust Survivors in Poland and the Struggle for Leadership, 1944–1946* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996 [Hebrew]). Yisrael Gutman and Adina Drechsler (eds.), *She’erit Hapletah, 1944–1948: Rehabilitation and Political Struggle* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990 [Hebrew]), especially the articles by Nathaniel Katzburg, “Between Liberation and Revolution: The Jews of Hungary Confronting a Changing Regime, 1945–1949,” pp. 103–26; and Jean Ancel, “The Remnants in Romania during the Time of Transition to the Communist Regime, August 1944–December 1947,” pp. 127–48. See also Yehuda Bauer, *Out of the Ashes: The Impact of American Jews on Post-Holocaust European Jewry* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1989), pp. 57–58, 71–82, 133–58.

6. Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

7. Estimates for the DP population in central Europe vary widely. These estimates are based on the following sources: Proudfoot, *European Refugees*; *American Jewish Year Books*, 1949, 1950; Warhaftig, *Uprooted*; Srole, “Why the DPs Can’t Wait”; and various reports issued by the World Jewish Congress, the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Germany, and UNRRA. See also Bauer, *Out of the Ashes*; Wolfgang

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8. Bauer, *Out of the Ashes*.

9. Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors*. Bauer, *Out of the Ashes*, especially pp. 39–61. Haim Genizi, *The Adviser on Jewish Affairs to the American Army and the Displaced Persons 1945–1949* (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1987 [Hebrew]).

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24. David Rosenthal, *Undzer Shtimme*, August 20, 1947, pp. 11–13 (quotation in the protocol of the Second Congress of She'erit Hapletah in Bergen-Belsen, July 20–23, 1947).

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26. Elazari, "Hebrew Gymnasium," pp. 95–96, 102.

27. Program for performance of the elementary school children, October 1945, YVA, JM/10/374/1579. *Undzer Shtimme*, February 20, 1946, p. 26. Weingreen's report, December 18, 1946, WLL, Henriques/Weingreen Reports. Elazari, "Hebrew Gymnasium," p. 57.

28. For a discussion of some of these fortunate events, see Zvi Asaria (Helfgott), *We Are Witnesses* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1970 [Hebrew]).

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**Bergen-Belsen:  
The End and the Beginning**  
**Menachem Z. Rosensaft**

More than one million Jewish children—perhaps as many as 1.5 million—were murdered during the Holocaust. This chilling, mind-numbing statistic must be the starting point of any discussion about children and the Holocaust. In her memoirs my mother Hadassah Rosensaft (née Ada Bimko) described her arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau on August 4, 1943.

The doors of the railroad cars were opened; and we faced SS men holding machine guns and clubs, shouting and beating us. . . . My husband was holding our little boy. We stood together, behind my parents and my sister. One SS man . . . started the selection. . . . Suddenly there was terrible chaos and screaming. Men were separated from women. People with children were sent to one side, and young people were separated from older-looking ones. No one was allowed to go from one group to another. My parents were holding onto each other. Our five-and-a-half-year old son, my little sunshine, went with his father. Something that will haunt me to the end of my days occurred during those first moments. As we were separated, our son turned to me and asked, “Mommy, are we going to live or die?” I didn’t answer this question. I didn’t know how. First, we didn’t know what would happen, and second, how do you answer a child in Birkenau?<sup>1</sup>

This scene—and others like it—was repeated again and again, thousands and thousands of times. There is no consolation and no words in any language that can lessen the horror or the anguish.

Still, we cannot focus only on the agony and the suffering. While the Germans were able to torture, murder, and destroy, they did not succeed in dehumanizing their victims. The ultimate victory of European Jews over the Nazis and their multinational accomplices was firmly rooted in their ethical values. This can be seen in my birthplace, Bergen-Belsen (frequently referred to as Belsen), where life came to an end and began anew.

In the daily Jewish morning prayers, the *Shaharit* service, God is addressed several times as “the First and the Last.” The reference is meant to describe God as an infinite, timeless presence. Strangely, almost surrealistically, Bergen-Belsen and its

significance in the history of the Holocaust can best be understood as the inverse of this description, “the Last and the First”—the end and the beginning.

Long before Auschwitz became the defining term of the *Shoah*, newsreel images of the liberation of Belsen in April 1945 brought the horrors of the Holocaust to London, New York, and the rest of the free world. In a very real sense, Belsen truly epitomized the concluding chapter of the Holocaust. Most of its victims perished during the closing months of the Second World War, and thousands of Jews died in Belsen following liberation—many of them after V-E Day.

### **LIBERATION**

When British troops entered Belsen (near the German city of Hanover) on April 15, 1945, they encountered a devastation of human misery for which they were utterly unprepared. More than 10,000 bodies lay scattered about the camp and the 58,000 surviving inmates—the overwhelming majority of whom were Jews—suffered from a combination of typhus, tuberculosis, dysentery, extreme malnutrition, and countless other virulent diseases. Most were too weak even to walk. In the main camp, more than 40,000 prisoners were crammed into barracks that should have held no more than 8,000, and between 15,000 and 25,000 more who had arrived in early April from the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp complex were in the barracks of a nearby Panzer training school. According to one British officer, there were

at least 20,000 sick, suffering from the most virulent diseases known to man, all of whom required urgent hospital treatment; and 30,000 men and women who might die if they were not treated but who certainly would die if they were not fed and removed from the horror camp. What we had not got was nurses, doctors, beds, bedding, clothes, drugs, dressings, thermometers, bedpans, or any of the essentials of medical treatment and worst of all no common language.<sup>2</sup>

My mother, a thirty-two-year-old Jewish dentist from Sosnowiec, Poland, who had studied medicine at the University of Nancy in France, was among the liberated inmates at Belsen. Her parents, first husband, young son, and sister had been gassed at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she herself had spent more than fifteen months before being sent to Belsen in November 1944. A few days following liberation, Brigadier H. L. Glyn-Hughes—the deputy director of medical services of the British Army of the Rhine—appointed my mother (who spoke fluent French and was thus able to

communicate with the British officers) to organize and head a group of doctors and nurses among the survivors to help care for the camp's thousands of critically ill inmates.

My mother and her team of twenty-eight doctors and 620 female and male volunteers, only a few of whom were trained nurses, worked around the clock with the military doctors to try to save as many of the survivors as possible. Despite their desperate efforts—it was not until May 11 that the daily death rate fell below 100—the Holocaust claimed 13,944 additional victims during the two months after liberation. Those who lived had to face a grim reality. “For the great part of the liberated Jews of Bergen-Belsen,” my mother later recalled, “there was no ecstasy, no joy at our liberation. We had lost our families, our homes. We had no place to go, nobody to hug, nobody who was waiting for us, anywhere. We had been liberated from death and from the fear of death, but we were not free from the fear of life.”<sup>3</sup>

In order to contain the different epidemics rampaging through Belsen, the British evacuated the survivors to the military barracks of a Panzer training school about a mile away. This place, where more than 15,000 new arrivals from the Dora-Mittelbau complex had been placed in early April when the main camp had become too overcrowded even for the Germans, subsequently became the Belsen displaced persons (DP) camp. On completion of the relocation on May 21, 1945, the British set fire to the concentration camp's wooden barracks.

### **CHILDREN AT BELSEN BEFORE LIBERATION**

Even before liberation, however, Belsen represented a beginning whose light glowed during the devastation that epitomized the final months of the war. For five months prior to the arrival of British troops, my mother and several women inmates had managed to keep alive 150 Jewish children, most of them orphans ranging in age from eight months to fifteen years. Beginning with forty-nine Dutch children in December 1944, my mother organized what became known as a “children's home” (*Kinderheim*) within the concentration camp. Among the youngsters were children from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere; some had been brought to Belsen from Buchenwald and others from Theresienstadt. As one of the women, Hela Los Jafe, later recalled, “At that time Bergen-Belsen started to be like Oswiecim. Transports came from all over, bringing thousands of people. Ada walked from block to block, found the children, took them in, lived with them, and took care of them.”<sup>4</sup>

In my mother's words, she and the other women in her group

had been given the opportunity to take care of these abandoned Jewish children, and we gave them all our love and whatever strength was left within us. . . . We talked to them, played with them, tried to make them laugh, listened to them, comforted them when they cried and had nightmares. When they were sick with typhus, we sat beside them, telling stories and fairy tales. I sang songs to them in Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew, whatever I remembered, just to calm them until they fell asleep.

We sent word of the children to the Jewish men who worked in the SS food depot, and they risked their lives daily to steal food and pass it to us under the barbed wire. We received the same help from the Jews who were working in the SS pharmacies. They gave us all the medication we needed, and not one of the children succumbed to the raging typhus and other epidemics, although they all went through them. Without these Jewish men and women, the children would not have survived.<sup>5</sup>

### **THE JEWISH DISPLACED PERSONS**

More than ten million uprooted and homeless non-Germans from all over Europe found themselves in Germany at the end of the war. The vast majority—including Jewish survivors from Western Europe, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary—were successfully repatriated in a matter of months, but most Eastern European Jewish survivors (especially those from Poland) were unwilling to return to their prewar homes. Having been subjected to widespread antisemitism both before and during the Holocaust, and having lost most or all of their families, they wanted to begin new lives in countries that were not haunted by bitter memories. Classified as DPs, they were placed in camps under the control of the respective American, British, and French military authorities.

Initially Jews were forced to live alongside non-Jewish refugees from the Baltic states, the Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, and elsewhere, some of whom had willingly assisted the Germans and did not want to return to their countries of origin for fear of retribution. The Jewish survivors, however, refused to remain in the midst of Nazi collaborators and other antisemitic DPs. The American and British military authorities ultimately agreed to allow the Jewish survivors to live in separate DP camps.

Soon after the British arrival in Belsen, the camp's Jews took control of their lives and destiny by electing their own political leadership headed by my father, Josef Rosensaft. They were grateful to the British for ending their captivity but unwilling to blindly obey British (or anyone else's) orders. They had had a national Jewish

consciousness before the war; now they insisted on transforming that consciousness into—and having it recognized as—a national identity.

The population of the DP camps was in constant flux. Tens of thousands of Jews, often fleeing renewed antisemitic persecution, arrived from all across Eastern Europe. Many Jewish Holocaust survivors who had returned to Poland in search of family members and friends were greeted with intense hostility that frequently escalated into violence. In July 1946 a pogrom in the city of Kielce persuaded large numbers of Polish Jews to seek refuge in the DP camps of Germany, where they waited. Prevented from settling in Palestine, the United States, and other Western countries, the Jewish DPs were left in limbo. The number of Jewish DPs increased from 55,000 in summer 1945 to approximately 175,000 by the end of 1946.

Bergen-Belsen, located in the British zone of Germany, was the largest DP camp. Belsen's Jewish population numbered approximately 12,000 within a few weeks of liberation. It became an autonomous, self-governed, and largely self-contained Jewish community. There were also Landsberg, Feldafing, Bad Reichenhall, Eschwege, Zeilsheim, Wetzlar, Pocking, and Föhrenwald, to name only eight such camps in the American zone. In short order they all had their own political administrations, schools, and cultural institutions as well.

The years that the survivors spent in the DP camps were a period of critical transition and resuscitation. As Allied soldiers began to return home in 1945, most Americans, British, Canadians, and French wanted only to get on with their lives; they did not want to have to think about anything that would distract them from their immediate personal concerns. Jewish military chaplains and a handful of Jewish organizations—principally the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (known popularly as the JDC or, more simply, the “Joint”) and the World Jewish Congress—provided extraordinary assistance and promoted the cause of the Jewish DPs. In the opinion of many survivors, however, the human condition of homeless European Jews was a matter of relative indifference for most of the Western world, including the vast majority of the international Jewish community.

The survivors coped by creating life in every meaning of the term. In the aftermath of destruction, the process of both national and individual rebirth took on an almost mystical quality. Left to their own devices, the Jewish DPs tried to replicate the life that they had known before the Holocaust. Most important, they supported one another physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And so faith and love were able to

blossom anew in the shadow of mass graves. Mourning soon gave way to thousands of marriages and new families emerged from the ashes.

### **THE BELSEN DP CAMP**

My father used to describe Belsen as the last shtetl in Europe. Twenty years later Elie Wiesel wrote in the *Jewish Daily Forward* on August 13, 1965, that “upon the ruins of Europe, on the scorched earth of Germany, yesterday’s candidates for death began to build a Jewish future. . . . The people of Belsen chose life.”

Shortly after liberation the Dutch children who had been kept alive by my mother and the other women inmates were taken back to the Netherlands, but 101 of these orphaned Jewish children remained in Belsen. As early as June 1945, the first school was opened in Belsen with separate classes in Polish, Romanian, and Hungarian. Jewish children from different parts of Eastern Europe soon joined them. In due course Belsen had a kindergarten; an elementary, high, and vocational training school; and a full complement of Jewish religious education institutions. In addition, the camp had a rabbinate, its own Jewish police force, a library, two theater companies, an orchestra, and a host of youth and sports clubs.

From the outset a Jewish committee took charge of the political interests of the Jewish DPs of Belsen. This committee was enlarged by June 1945 to represent all Jewish DPs throughout the British zone of Germany. In September 1945 the first Congress of Liberated Jews met at Belsen and elected the Central Jewish Committee for the British Zone, representing both the Jewish DPs from Eastern Europe and the newly reconstituted German Jewish communities of cities such as Hamburg, Cologne, Bremen, Düsseldorf, and Hanover. My father served as its chairman and Norbert Wollheim, an Auschwitz survivor originally from Berlin, was vice-chairman. My father headed both the Central Committee and the Belsen Jewish Committee until the DP camp was closed in summer 1950.

Yiddish was the official language of the Belsen DP camp and Zionist politics became the order of the day. The first handwritten and mimeographed issue of the Belsen newspaper, *Undzer Shtimme (Our Voice)*, appeared on July 12, 1945. At first declared illegal by the British military authorities, it soon received official sanction and then appeared regularly. The first book published in Belsen (on September 7, 1945) was a listing, in English and German, of the camp’s Jewish survivors to facilitate the reunification of family members and friends. Some sixty other publications followed,



including a religious tract relating to the status of Jewish survivors whose spouses were presumed—but not known—to be dead.

Similar scenarios unfolded in other DP camps, resulting in the ultimate irony that the very land that Hitler had wanted to make *Judenrein* (“free of Jews”) became a vibrant, flourishing center of Jewish life. Of course there were tremendous hardships that must not be overlooked or underestimated, but the Jewish DPs overcame them—primarily on their own and thanks to their tremendous collective inner strength.

The survivors’ extended stay in the DP camps was dictated primarily by their inability to settle elsewhere. Virtually all doors, except to their countries of origin—to which they refused to return—were slammed shut. The British only allowed a trickle of immigrants into Palestine. Beginning in March 1947, for instance, each month Belsen was allocated 400–500 legal certificates to Palestine, which the Central Committee shared with other Jewish communities and DP centers in Germany. Those survivors looking to go to the United States, meanwhile, were faced with restrictive immigration laws.

Nevertheless, it is estimated that approximately 65,000 survivors entered Palestine illegally between 1945 and 1948. Beginning in May 1946, an increasing number of Jewish DPs were admitted into the United States under a special directive issued by President Truman on December 12, 1945. The situation improved dramatically with the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948. By the end of 1951, virtually all the Jewish DP camps were empty—Belsen was formally closed in summer 1950—as the DP era came to an end.

One remarkable aspect of the Jewish DP experience in Belsen is the survivors’ resilience, their determination to reclaim their own destiny, and their political independence, sophistication, and maturity. From the moment of their liberation, they refused to allow themselves to be pushed around or ignored.

### **EARLY POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

On April 19, 1945, an international committee was formed in Belsen that included three Jews: Madame Wandowska from France; Max Levy from Holland; and Dr. Gottlieb, a Hungarian physician. This committee had a relatively short life since Western European camp inmates—including Jews from countries such as France, the Netherlands, and Czechoslovakia—were being repatriated as rapidly as possible. Moreover, the large contingent of Polish Jews was not represented on this committee.

Simultaneously, on April 18 the survivors in Block 88—including a sizable number of Jews from the town of Bedzin in southwestern Poland—elected their own committee headed by my father, who was from Bedzin. Two other blocks, 83 and 86, did likewise. These three blocks were in the “new” camp, which was the military barracks (rather than the actual concentration camp) and where approximately 15,000 inmates—who had come from Dora-Mittelbau some ten days before liberation—had been housed. These latecomers to Belsen were also among the healthier inmates.

The initial effort to establish a coordinating committee of the three block committees occurred on April 25. The first chairman of this committee was a Dr. Neumann, a Dutch Jew. Rafael Olewski wrote of him in the second issue of *Undzer Shtimme* (dated August 15, 1945) “Unfortunately, he did not meet our expectations as a politician.” After his departure for the Netherlands, a Czech Jew named Reinfeld was elected chairman. Presumably both he and Neumann spoke English, since the main initial purpose of the committee was to interact with and serve as liaison to the British military authorities. However, again according to Olewski, Reinfeld “carried out his role as a ‘silent judge.’ A Jew without heart or Jewish spirit [*Yiddishkeit*], he took care of himself first and returned home at the first opportunity.” The next chairman was my father, who was thirty-four years old and spoke no English but who—again according to Olewski’s contemporaneous account—“devoted himself to his task with the burning fanaticism of a Messenger.”

The exact chronology is somewhat unclear, however, since the early weeks after liberation were chaotic. The repatriation of liberated Belsen inmates from Western European countries began as early as April 19 and was completed within two weeks. The repatriation of Jews to Czechoslovakia began on May 8. Thus it would appear that my father was elected head of the combined coordinating committee representing the Jews of Belsen no later than the end of the first week of May. In the meantime, as head of the Block 88 committee and a member of the coordinating committee, he was already becoming a central political figure in the camp.

Born into a prominent Hasidic family in Bedzin in 1911, my father had studied at a yeshiva in Warsaw before becoming active in the Zionist labor movement. After managing to escape from German captivity on two occasions, he was imprisoned and tortured at Auschwitz in the notorious Block 11 (the “Death Block”) for seven months. From there he was deported first to the concentration camp of Langensalza in

Thüringen and then to Dora-Mittelbau. He arrived in Belsen in early April 1945 on one of the death marches. Historian Hagit Lavsky captured his charismatic personality.

Full of vigor and fiercely dedicated to his goal, Rosensaft had a special talent for identifying problems and improvising solutions. He was not a member of the elite or intelligentsia but was a genuine representative of the Polish Jewish masses. He spoke their language and understood their needs and wishes. Rosensaft was endowed with natural wisdom and a keen sense of justice. He was generous, spontaneous, and open with people and possessed a fine sense of humor. On the other hand, he was a determined man who wanted things done his way and would take vigorous action to ensure that they were.<sup>6</sup>

Another historian of postwar German Jewry, Michael Brenner, commented in a similar vein that “he ruled the Jews in the British Occupation Zone with almost dictatorial powers but was repeatedly reelected democratically and did everything to improve the condition of ‘his’ Jews.”<sup>7</sup> Writing in 1953, Leo W. Schwarz—a former JDC official in Germany—observed that by April–May 1945, my father had become recognized as the undisputed leader of the Jewish DPs of Belsen,

leaving nothing undone to assist his people. When the British military were selecting a limited number of the sick for convalescence in Sweden, he interceded for members of families who were again being separated. With an unflinching nose for German and Hungarian collaborationists, he hunted down dozens who had concealed themselves among the liberated. He spurred British soldiers to collect clothing for the thousands being discharged from the temporary hospital in the former Panzer Training School. He possessed an uncanny ability to locate danger spots and to hammer at the highest authorities for action.<sup>8</sup>

The goals of the Belsen DP Camp’s Jewish Committee were ambitious. Twelve years later my father recalled, “We concentrated on four main tasks: the physical rehabilitation of the survivors; the search for relatives, if any; the political fight for our rights; and spiritual rehabilitation.”<sup>9</sup>

## **REUNIFICATION OF FAMILIES**

One of the committee’s first tasks was to help survivors locate members of their families. Remember that we are talking about 1945: there were no computers, Internet, fax machines, or international television networks. Everything had to be done

manually. In his 1946 book *Belsen Uncovered*, Derrick Sington—the first British officer to enter Belsen on April 15—wrote:

A British Red Cross official, Mr. Whitehead, traveled to Mauthausen, the former extermination camp on the Danube, and brought back lists of all the surviving inmates of twenty camps, including Ebensee, Eggerfelder, and Salzwedel. One hundred copies of these lists were then printed at Celle [a town near Belsen], circulated in Belsen, and sent to other camps.

At the same time the newly formed Jewish Committee in Belsen became active in this work of uniting sundered families. The Committee consisted of some of the ablest and most energetic of the Polish, Hungarian, and Rumanian Jews. At first they used a small room in L11 [*Leutnantsbaracke*] in Camp 4 as their headquarters; later they were given half the ground floor of L5. The little room in Camp 4 quickly became an information center. A card index of Jewish inmates of Camps 3 and 4, who numbered about 8000, was stacked in this room, and all day long the room was filled with enquirers. Jewish men and women hitch-hiked from Dachau and Lübeck, Hanover and Hamburg, to contact the Belsen Jewish Committee, bringing news or lists with them.

One evening two representatives from Munich arrived at Block L5 bringing with them printed lists of several thousand names of deported Jews in the Munich area.<sup>10</sup>

## **POLITICAL CONFLICTS**

In the classic 1957 book *Belsen*, my father recalled:

It became clear to us from the very beginning that the political struggle took precedence over other tasks, even though people were still dying all around us. For we soon had our first arguments with the British. We had requested discharge permits for the German Jews among us and for the allocation of a couple of special blocks for Jewish inmates. We were told it could not be done. But, when we insisted, we had our way. The first political victory in the new world.<sup>11</sup>

My father's and the Belsen Jewish Committee's first serious confrontation with the British occurred in late May 1945 and involved the unsuccessful attempted transfer of several thousand Jewish DPs from Belsen to DP camps in northern Germany. Refusing to recognize the Jewish DPs as a separate national group, the British authorities were intent on repatriating them as soon as possible to their countries of origin. To do so effectively, the survivors had to be separated according to their prewar nationalities. The first move in this particular chess game was the decision in May 1945

to transfer about 2,800 Polish Jewish DPs to the town of Celle, approximately twenty-seven kilometers from Belsen. The Jewish Committee insisted on inspecting the new accommodations and, finding them to be satisfactory, raised no objection of consequence. In a transparent effort to curtail the effectiveness of the committee, a substantial number of its original members—not including my father—were in this group.

Next the British announced that over 1,000 Jews were to be transferred to a camp named Lingen, near the Dutch border, which would have the status of a Red Cross camp. The survivors were assured that they would have better opportunities to emigrate from there and that the conditions were satisfactory. Despite the fact that several Jewish military chaplains supported the military authorities on this point, the members of the Jewish Committee were suspicious.

Their solution: the 1,117 Jewish DPs who left Belsen on May 24 did so under false names, leaving their original identities as registered Belsen DPs. When the group arrived at Lingen, they discovered to their horror that the camp already housed 2,336 Russian, 2,086 Polish, and some 100 other non-Jewish DPs, and that the accommodations offered to the Jewish DPs were horrendous—without electricity or running water.<sup>12</sup> My father and several members of the Jewish Committee visited Lingen and confirmed for themselves that conditions there were far worse than in Belsen. My father thereupon demanded that the Jewish DPs be allowed to return to Belsen. When the British refused, my father simply told his DPs to return “home” to Belsen, which many of them did, and he prevented a second transport from leaving Belsen. Furious at my father for defying both their orders and their authority, the British put him on trial before a military tribunal. My mother recalled that he told the court, “You liberated us from slavery and we became free people again, so we have the rights of free people to decide about our lives and future. I am representing my people, my fellow Jews in Belsen, and I will not accept orders against them.”<sup>13</sup> In due course my father was acquitted, but it was clear to both the British authorities and the Jewish DPs that he would have gone to jail rather than back down.

In a succession of British Foreign Office documents, my father is referred to as an “extreme Zionist,” a “dangerous troublemaker,” and “clearly the chief nigger in the woodpile.” “The difficulties our authorities have had in dealing with Jewish DPs in the British zone,” one senior British official complained, “are directly attributable to him.”<sup>14</sup> In August 1945 Maurice Eigen, the JDC director in Belsen, reported that

Rosensaft, a veritable Jewish Lincoln, is a national leader but is always incurring the wrath of the Army officials here. He is always threatened with arrest. Rosensaft had been a labor organizer in Poland and has a tremendous following here. He thinks nothing of flaunting military regulations repeatedly and has made my task of interpreting the committee to the military an exceedingly difficult one.<sup>15</sup>

On one occasion the British military commandant of Belsen, a Major Jones, refused to speak to my father—or to any other Jews for that matter—through an interpreter, insisting that only English be used. My father’s response to his face, “How about you learning Yiddish. It is easier for one to learn Yiddish than for 10,000 to learn English.”

When the military authorities refused to give permission for the first congress of liberated Jews in the British zone to take place in Belsen, my father convened it anyway in September 1945, sending formal invitations to prominent Jewish leaders from England. On that occasion the survivors formally adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and expressing their “sorrow and indignation that almost six months after liberation we still find ourselves in guarded camps on British soil soaked with the blood of our people. We proclaim that we will not be driven back into the lands which have become the graveyards of our people.”<sup>16</sup> Two months later my father infuriated the British by denouncing the living conditions of the Jewish DPs in Belsen in the pages of the *New York Times*. His accusations were specific and detailed.

In this camp, according to Dr. [*sic*] Joseph Rosensaft, chairman of the Jewish committee for the British zone, there is no provision for heating the buildings and many inmates still have only the one suit of threadbare clothes in which they entered the camp. Hundreds have no shoes or socks and almost all lack overcoats, he said. At night, in the cold, damp dormitories, half the inmates have only one blanket. There is a grave shortage of medicines. Although the camp’s inmates are freezing, they are not allowed to go out to chop wood, Dr. Rosensaft said. . . . Jewish nationalists and Zionist activities are discouraged, Dr. Rosensaft added, charging that the British exerted censorship over the inmates’ news sheets in that the Jews are not allowed to proclaim in print their desire to emigrate to Palestine.<sup>17</sup>

This was November 1945, a scant six months after the end of the war. The British zone was under military occupation; movement by the DPs was restricted; my

father spoke not one word of English. How on earth, the military authorities must have asked themselves, did he manage to make his case in the powerful American media? The resulting political pressure from the United States considerably strengthened the survivors' hand. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the British considered this "the last straw." While they considered my father's *New York Times* charges to be "grossly exaggerated," they begrudgingly acknowledged that they were losing the public relations battle. In a dispatch dated November 25, 1945, five days after the article appeared, they noted that "Jews seem to be using Belsen as a focal point for world agitation to emigrate to Palestine. If we move Jews from Belsen they will not be able to use the magic word Belsen in connection with this propaganda."<sup>18</sup>

By this time, however, it was already much too late. My father and his colleagues understood full well the dramatic news value of the Belsen name and were not about to surrender it. When the British formally changed the name of the camp to Hohne, the leadership of the Jewish DPs ignored the new designation. Official communications sent by the British military authorities to my father at "Hohne" were responded to on stationery that gave "Bergen-Belsen" as the Central Committee's address.

In December 1945, when he was invited by the JDC to address the first postwar conference of the United Jewish Appeal in Atlantic City, my father was notified by the military authorities that he was free to leave the British zone, but if he did so he would lose his DP status, be forced to give up the chairmanship of the Central Committee, and not be allowed to return. He traveled to the United States anyway without official permission. He reported to the assembled leadership of American Jewry in Atlantic City about the state of European Jewry, emphasizing (according to a report in the *New York Herald Tribune*) that their sole hope was emigration to Palestine, the only place in the world "willing, able, and ready to open its doors to the broken and shattered Jews of war-ravaged Europe."<sup>19</sup> The following week, speaking at an emergency conference on Palestine at the Manhattan Center in New York City, he declared, "We know that the English are prepared to stop us with machine guns. But machine guns cannot stop us."<sup>20</sup> In January 1946 he returned to Belsen, still without official permission, and resumed his leadership role.

He repeatedly and publicly criticized the British Government's anti-Zionist policies. Testifying before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine in early 1946, he told its members that if the survivors would not be allowed to go to

Palestine, “We shall go back to Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz, and you will bear the moral responsibility for it.”<sup>21</sup> In 1946, when the British sought to prevent thousands of additional Polish Jewish refugees from entering the British zone, my father and his committee openly defied the Military Government by giving them sanctuary in Belsen. Small wonder that the British were frustrated and kept trying, without success, to get rid of him. The local commanding officer wrote to the headquarters of the Prisoners of War and Displaced Persons Division on March 12, 1946, “It is felt that unless Mr. Rosensaft is removed from the British Zone and forbidden to return—under pain of imprisonment—it will not be possible to control his activities satisfactorily.”<sup>22</sup>

The relief agencies were also not treated with any greater deference. In order to increase the available supply of food and to be able to take in and feed the “illegal” Jewish DPs from the East, the names of Jews who had left Belsen or had died were kept on the camp rolls. In late 1945 a JDC director attempted to take a census of the camp but my father quickly put an end to this initiative. As Yehuda Bauer wrote, “Rosensaft was not going to allow a JDC worker with a penchant for exact reporting to deprive his people of food.”<sup>23</sup>

### **THE BELSEN TRIAL**

It is often forgotten that the September 1945 trial of the SS officers and guards whom the British had arrested on liberating Belsen had a powerful worldwide impact before the Nuremberg Trial of Göring, Ribbentrop, Frank, Streicher, and the other Third Reich leaders even began. It was from newspaper accounts of the Belsen Trial that the international community first learned details of the atrocities that had been committed at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Belsen. My mother was one of the principal witnesses for the prosecution at this first trial of Nazi war criminals. In her testimony she told the British military tribunal how countless Jews—including her family—had been sent to the gas chambers of Birkenau and she described in detail the Nazis’ brutality and sadism. She identified the SS doctors who had conducted the selections for the gas chambers at Birkenau, including the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele. Indeed, this may well have been the first time that Mengele’s name, and his role in implementing Hitler’s “Final Solution,” was publicly mentioned anywhere.

My mother’s testimony at Lüneburg had another significance as well. On her second day on the witness stand, one of the court-appointed defense attorneys



suggested—according to a report published in the *New York Times* on September 23, 1945—that my mother’s statement that she had seen Josef Kramer (the commandant at both Birkenau and Belsen) kick and beat the camp inmates was “pure fabrication.” “I would like to point out,” my mother replied, “I was present and not the defending counsel during those conditions that I have described.”<sup>24</sup>

This incident might be dismissed as one lawyer’s overzealous trial tactic were it not for another news item published on the same page as the report of my mother’s testimony. There General George Patton, head of the U.S. military government of Bavaria, is quoted as saying that “this Nazi thing is just like a Democratic and Republican election fight.”<sup>25</sup> The testimony of Belsen survivors and liberators at Lüneburg was of critical importance in setting forth for the historical record some of the earliest descriptions of the Holocaust.

### **TAKING THE CHILDREN FROM BELSEN TO PALESTINE**

In October 1945 the Jewish Refugees’ Committee in London, with the support of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, wanted to take them to England and place them with Jewish families for adoption. My mother recalled that “when we spoke about this to the oldest children, they cried. They did not want to go live with strangers or to be separated from their friends.”<sup>26</sup> The Belsen Jewish leadership responded unambiguously.

The Jewish Central Committee decided at a meeting at Belsen, on October 21, 1945, that: (a) it cannot agree to the removal of the children to England; (b) it cannot permit the children, who were with us in the Ghettos and concentration camps, to be moved from Galuth to Galuth [Diaspora to Diaspora]; they must stay where they are until their Aliyah [emigration to Palestine]; (c) it demands that the first available Aliyah certificates be allocated to the children so that they can leave the camps as soon as possible.<sup>27</sup>

Virtually all the Jewish and non-Jewish officials of the various relief agencies wanted to remove the children from Belsen and a number of Jewish organizations made efforts to accomplish this goal. There followed a period of negotiations, including a December 1945 visit to Belsen by Shlomo Adler Rudel, a member of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. Shortly after his return to London, Adler Rudel received the following letter.

The Central Committee reiterates its resolve not to permit the children to be taken to England but to send them to Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel] when the time comes.

We recognize that conditions in Belsen are not good for the children. Our Committee has taken up this point with the British and received an assurance that the mansion of the Warburg Family at Blankenese will be put at our disposal for a children's home. The children will be taken to Blankenese at once.

We realize our responsibility in caring for the children, and we believe that everything was being done to ensure their physical and mental comfort.

The establishment of the children's home at Blankenese will not, however, diminish our efforts to take the children to Eretz Israel at the earliest opportunity.<sup>28</sup>

Later that year the children received the treasured Aliyah certificates, and in April 1946—a year after liberation—my mother escorted them, together with approximately 1,000 other surviving Jewish children, to Palestine. There they were taken to the clearing center at Atlit and local functionaries representing the different Zionist political parties and movements again attempted to separate them. My mother recalled:

The day after our arrival, members of all political parties in Palestine came to see the children. On Sunday morning, without consulting with the teachers or me, they started to interview our children. I learned this accidentally when Brachah, a fifteen-year old girl from Hungary, came to me crying. She told me that she was asked questions about her parents: if her mother lit candles on Friday night, if their store was open on the Sabbath, and was told that they wanted to send her to a religious kibbutz. I became furious and opened the door of the barrack, where the interrogators were sitting. I introduced myself again, although they had met me a day earlier, and expressed my dismay and disappointment over their actions. I told them that the party key, as they called it, should be applied to material objects, not to our children. I reminded them that these children had spent their childhood in ghettos and concentration camps. They were orphans; they had nobody in the whole world except the friends with whom they were staying now; and they wanted to remain together. If there was no place for all of them in one kibbutz, they should be allowed to form groups of friends with whom they wanted to stay. Luckily, I succeeded. We ended up by dividing the children into three groups. Eighteen of the youngest went to Ben-Shemen, where the principal of the school was Arie Simon, a former member of the Jewish Brigade, who had taught the children in Blankenese and knew them well. I told the other

eighty, 'Look, you can't all remain together. But you are not all friends with one another. Friends should keep together. Divide yourselves into two groups, forty and forty, and group yourselves with your friends.' I told them, 'I am not going to influence you. You have to do this yourselves.' So they made their own decision. . . . Forty of them went to Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim outside of Jerusalem, and the other forty to Kibbutz Dorot.<sup>29</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

This episode further reflects the pride and fierce defiance with which the survivors of Belsen faced life after the Holocaust. The story of Belsen provides a prism through which the Shoah as a whole can be seen in its proper perspective. For the resolve and resilience the survivors demonstrated in Belsen and the other DP camps was the same physical and spiritual strength that had enabled them to emerge from the cataclysm with their values and humanity intact. Thus Belsen constitutes an essential link between the pre- and post-Holocaust worlds. It is in this context that Belsen takes its unique place as "the Last and the First," the end and the beginning.

**NOTES**

1. Hadassah Rosensaft, *Yesterday: My Story* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), p. 27.
2. Lieutenant Colonel M. W. Gonin, quotation in Paul Kemp, “The British Army and the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen, April 1945,” in *Belsen in History and Memory*, ed. Jo Reilly, David Cesarani, Tony Kushner, and Colin Richmond (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 137.
3. “Holocaust Survivor Hadassah Rosensaft Describes the Day She Was Liberated from a Nazi Extermination Camp,” in *In Our Own Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century*, ed. Senator Robert Torricelli and Andrew Carroll (New York: Kodansha, 1999), pp. 159–60.
4. Hela Los Jafe, “People Didn’t Go Willingly,” in *Sisters of Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust*, ed. Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), p. 181.
5. Rosensaft, *Yesterday*, pp. 43–45.
6. Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945–1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), pp. 66–67.
7. Michael Brenner, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 32.
8. Leo W. Schwarz, *The Redeemers: A Saga of the Years 1945–1952* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953), pp. 32–33.
9. Josef Rosensaft, “Our Belsen,” in *Belsen* (Tel Aviv: Irgun Sheerit Hapleita Me’Haezor Habriti, 1957), p. 27.
10. Derrick Sington, *Belsen Uncovered* (London: Duckworth, 1946), pp. 189–90.
11. Rosensaft, “Our Belsen,” p. 27.
12. Isaac Levy, *Witness to Evil: Bergen-Belsen, 1945* (London: Peter Halban, 1995), p. 49.
13. Quotation in Rosensaft, *Yesterday*, p. 82.

14. Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 100, 105.
15. Quotation in Henry Friedlander, “Darkness and Dawn in 1945: The Nazis, the Allies, and the Survivors,” in *1945: The Year of Liberation*, ed. Kevin Mahoney (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), p. 27.
16. Report on Jewish Congress at Hohne Camp, September 25–27, 1945, Public Records Office of the Foreign Office (hereafter cited as PRO FO), Appendix B, 1049/195. I am indebted to Rainer Schulze of the University of Essex for the references in this note, and in notes 18 and 22 below, which are set forward in his excellent paper “Die Briten und das DP-Camp Bergen-Belsen, 1945–1950,” delivered at the *Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen* in November 2002.
17. “Displaced Jews in Worse Plight,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1945, p. 6.
18. Incoming Secret Cyber Message from Concom to Bercomb, November 25, 1945, PRO FO, 1049/195.
19. *New York Herald Tribune*, December 16, 1945, p. 3.
20. *New York Journal American*, December 24, 1945.
21. Quotation in S. J. Goldsmith, “Yossl Rosensaft: The Art of Survival,” in *Twenty 20th Century Jews* (New York: Shengold, 1962), p. 90.
22. Comd 30 Corps District to PW&DP Div Main HQ CCG (BE), March 12, 1946, PRO FO, 1062/282.
23. Quotation in Yehuda Bauer, *Out of the Ashes: The Impact of American Jews on Post-Holocaust European Jewry* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1989), p. 99.
24. “Kicking of Doomed by Nazi Described,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1945, p. 26.
25. “Patton Belittles Denazification; Holds Rebuilding More Important,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1945, p. 26.
26. Rosensaft, *Yesterday*, p. 103.
27. Shlomo Adler Rudel, “The Surviving Children,” *Belsen* (Tel Aviv: Irgun Sheerit Hapleita Me’Haezor Habriti, 1957), p. 125.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 127–28.

29. Rosensaft, *Yesterday*, pp. 106–107.

## **Appendix: Biographies of Contributors**

BARBARA ENGELKING-BONI is Assistant Professor at the Polish Academy of Science's Institute of Philosophy and Sociology in Warsaw, Poland, where she leads the Polish Center for Holocaust Research. She is author of *Holocaust and Memory* (2001), and co-author of several books, including *Warsaw Ghetto: The Guide to the Non-Existing City* (Polish edition, 2001).

SUSANNE HEIM is Research Director for the Max Planck Society's Research Program "The History of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society in the National Socialist Era" in Berlin, Germany; and 2003 Charles H. Revson Foundation Fellow in the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. She is completing a manuscript provisionally entitled "International Immigration Policy and Forced Emigration from Germany, 1933–1941."

RADU IOANID is Director of the International Archival Program of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He is author of *The Sword of the Archangel: Fascist Ideology in Romania* (English-language edition, 1990) and *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944* (2000), published in association with the United States Holocaust Museum, with French, Romanian, and Hebrew editions.

SARA KADOSH is Director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives in Jerusalem and a former Research Affiliate of the Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research in Israel. She received her doctorate from Columbia University in 1995, with a dissertation entitled "Ideology versus Reality: Youth Aliyah and Rescue of Jewish Children During the Holocaust Era, 1933–1945."

HAGIT LAVSKY is Professor at The Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she is the Samuel L. and Perry Haber Chair of Post-Holocaust Studies, and Director of the Cherrick Center for the Study of Zionism, the Yishuv, and the State of Israel. She is author of numerous books, including *Before Catastrophe: The Distinctive Path of German Zionism* (1996) and *New Beginnings:*

*Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945–1950* (2002).

DAPHNE L. MEIJER is an author and journalist based in Amsterdam. Former Writer-in-Residence at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (1997), she has published numerous essays, short stories, novellas, and works of drama, fiction and non-fiction. She is author of *Onbekende kinderen: De laatste trein uit Westerbork* (Unknown Children: The Last Train out of Westerbork, 2001).

LISA ANNE PLANTE has served as Adjunct Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at California State University-San Marcos. She previously headed the research unit at the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in Los Angeles. She received her doctorate through the Cultural Studies Program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She received the 2001 Helen B. Watson Student/Faculty Outstanding Dissertation Award for “‘We Didn’t Miss a Day’: A History in Narratives of Schooling Efforts for Jewish Children and Youths in German-Occupied Europe.”

MENACHEM Z. ROSENSAFT, an attorney, is chairman of the editorial board of the Holocaust Survivors’ Memoirs Project of the World Jewish Congress, a joint publication endeavor with Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. He is the founding chairman of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, and president of Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City. A member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council from 1994 until 2004, he served on its Executive Committee and chaired its Collections and Acquisitions Committee, its Content Committee, and its Committee on Governance. Born in the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp in 1948, Mr. Rosensaft is the son of survivors of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

EVELYN ZEGENHAGEN has served as the Helen Bader Foundation Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where she contributed to a multi-volume encyclopedic history of detention, forced labor, and extermination sites run by Nazi Germany and its European allies and satellites. She received her M.A. in history from the University of Leipzig (Germany) in 1986, and is currently completing her doctoral dissertation at the University of the German Armed Forces in Munich. She has served as Research Assistant to University



of California-Berkeley Professor Gerald D. Feldman for his study of the Allianz Insurance Company in the Third Reich.

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