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**Jewish Children:  
Between Protectors and Murderers**

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

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The Third Reich aimed at the total annihilation of European Jewry. With the goal of Jewish annihilation came a range of brutal assaults aimed at degrading and debasing the victims before their murder. How did Jewish children fit into the German policies of destruction? How did these children and their families cope with the barrage of life-threatening assaults? These seemingly simple questions have no ready answers. This paper explores the nature of children's experiences and how these fit into the political, social, and familial contexts of the Holocaust. Faced with an array of humiliating attacks, Jewish families devised coping strategies to protect and save their children, offering glimmers of hope under inhumane circumstances.

The Germans did not apply the actual measures of destruction to all Jews at once. Rather, they assaulted parts of the Jewish population at different times and places, with different degrees of ruthlessness. Under German occupation, then, the Jewish population traveled on different roads toward the same destination. A mixture of political, economic, and biological ideologies determined these variations.

The Nazi regime saw humanity through racial lenses. The so-called Aryan race received the highest ranking with Germans at the top, followed by the Scandinavians. Racial evaluations were also attached to less pure races. Defined as subhuman, the Jews were considered apart from the rest of humanity and did not fit into the Nazi racial ranking system.

Accordingly, in Nazi Germany, policies on procreation and motherhood intended for the Aryan Germans were radically different from those for the Jews, and

were aimed at diametrically opposed “racial” goals. For Aryan German women, childbearing and child care were highly valued and encouraged by concrete rewards. In sharp contrast, Jewish procreation and motherhood were officially defined as political threats that would interfere with the basic goal of creating a racially pure Aryan world. The very presence of Jews in an Aryan society was interpreted as a racial pollutant. Consequently, by giving birth to children and by caring for them, Jewish women were obstructing the creation of the idealized future Aryan world.<sup>1</sup>

In line with the Third Reich’s racial policies, all Jewish children were slated for murder. However, the destruction of Jewish children younger than ten was often postponed or given a low priority by the Germans, who were probably guided by several factors that made the destruction of some Jewish children less urgent. One reason for postponement related in part to the children’s ages. Children aged ten and under, for instance, were unlikely to join a resistance movement and therefore posed no imminent political “danger” to the Third Reich. Similarly, very young children would be unlikely to avenge the murder of their parents and family. Further, young children were unable to give birth and therefore did not immediately threaten the Nazis’ desire to limit Jewish population growth. On the other hand, the fact that young children could make no economic contribution to the war effort might have tipped the scale toward their earlier elimination. Moreover, depending on how concerned the Germans were with the future, they would act or not act on the idea that the presence of Jewish children, regardless of age, promised a Jewish future.

Comparisons of Jewish child-survival estimates to overall Jewish survival are respectively 11 percent to 33 percent.<sup>2</sup> Although exact figures are elusive, more specific and scattered evidence from several countries under German occupation shows that the survival rate of Jewish children was consistently lower than the survival rate of Jews in general. For example, according to the 1931 census, of the 3.3 million Jews in prewar Poland, an estimated one million were children. Of these, from infancy to age fourteen, an estimated 5,000, or half of a percent, survived until the end of the war.<sup>3</sup> In Holland, of the 140,000 Jews, about 25 percent eluded death. Among those 35,000 survivors, only 10 percent were children.<sup>4</sup> Of the 65,000 Belgian Jews, about 40 percent were alive at the end of the war. In this group there were 3,000 children, a little over 10 percent of those who survived.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, out of 350,000 French Jews, an estimated 75 percent survived. Among them, the estimated number of child survivors ranges from 5,000 to 15,000, or about 2–4 percent.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, none of the preceding figures are based on representative

samples of Jewish children; no such samples exist. Furthermore, figures from these different countries are based on different age categories.

Roughly they are based on ages from infancy to seventeen. At times, even the eighteen-year-olds are referred to as children.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, when does a child turn into an adult? No one would deny that behaviors and experiences of an eighteen-year-old differ from those aged two, five, or nine. Similarly, we would concur that there is more to age than the number of years a person lived. In addition to biological age, people do differ in terms of intellectual and emotional ages. During World War II, some Jewish children had to grow up fast. The premature maturity of such children is reflected in their sophisticated wartime diaries and accounts. After the war, the idea of a lost childhood appeared in wartime memoirs and as book titles.<sup>8</sup>

The scattered figures thus far presented suggest that proportionately and regardless of age, Germans murdered more Jewish children than Jews in general. Without offering special insights into age differences of children, these rather consistent findings suggest that, on balance, Germans were more eager to murder Jewish children. However, the actual destruction of Jewish children seems to have been related to a range of wartime developments. The rest of this paper identifies some of these features.

After the middle of 1942, the Germans seemed more determined to do away with “useless” ghetto Jews—the old, the sick, and children. Deportations from and liquidation of wartime ghettos became more frequent. Because time no longer favored them, the Germans seemed eager to speed the destruction of the Jews. After the initially spectacular advances on the Eastern front, the Soviets stiffened their opposition and Hitler’s army began to incur losses. Then, the year 1943 brought the defeat at Stalingrad. A turning point in the conduct of the war, this defeat made German victory less certain. As the prospect of military conquests continued to dwindle, the Third Reich began to concentrate on winning a different war: the war against the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

The need to win this war heightened awareness of women’s role in perpetuation of the Jewish “race.” For the Germans, the real or anticipated familial roles relating marriage and motherhood stood at the core of a woman’s identity. In the early stages of the persecution, Germans saw Jewish children as merely superfluous. But with time, they attacked Jewish women through their born and unborn children.

Among the weapons directed against Jewish women were discriminatory laws designed to undermine motherhood, pregnancy, birth, and child care. Disobeying any of these laws resulted in punishment, usually death. Wartime ghettos in Eastern Europe



were closed communities in which brutality and cruelty took unprecedented forms. Severe measures that debased and starved ghetto inmates reduced chances for pregnancy and successful birth. When pregnancies did happen, to avert punishment, many Jews relied on abortions.

Dobka Freund-Waldhorn was one of those women caught in a web of conflicting orders and wishes; between prohibitions against Jewish motherhood and a desire to give birth. Dobka came from a wealthy, Orthodox family of nine children. Her religious father saw his daughter's 1939 marriage to Julek Frohlich as defiance. Although handsome, intelligent, and from a respectable family, Julek was deemed unsuitable because he was an assimilated Jew. The war and the opposition to Dobka's marriage pushed the young couple to Vilna, and from there into the Vilna ghetto.

In Israel, in 1995, in Dobka's comfortable home, at the end of a long interview, she invited me to come back because she wanted to share a secret she had never divulged: a wartime pregnancy. Since I was leaving Israel the next day, the interview took place a year later. Dobka told me that when she was transferred from the Vilna ghetto to a nearby estate, she realized that she was pregnant. Because Jewish women were prohibited from having babies, Dobka's husband and a Polish doctor at the estate pleaded with her to discontinue the pregnancy. She refused. In love with Julek, she wanted his child.

When she was seven months pregnant, as a concession to her husband, Dobka went to the ghetto hospital to learn firsthand about her options. Although sympathetic, the doctor in the ghetto hospital urged her to give birth and "to dispose" of the baby. Unless she followed his advice, both she and the baby would be murdered. The doctor accepted Dobka into the ghetto hospital and tried to induce delivery.

In a restrained, almost artificial voice, Dobka continued:

I stayed in the hospital, for a long time, maybe a month. They gave me medication to have the water move, but there was no birth. They increased the dosage. They did all kinds of things, but the child refused to be born. Eventually, I got a fever. High fever. I think that it was already the eighth month. Only then it happened. She was alive. They showed me the little girl. She was so beautiful. She looked just like my husband, and we were so much in love! Then, they took her away.... The doctor tried to console me, that I was young, that I will have other children, that this had to be....

My husband came to the hospital. He knelt next to my bed.... He took my hands into his, and he cried...terribly, terribly. "You will see, we will have children, there will be children."

With Julek Frohlich, there were no more children. He died in the concentration camp Klooga. After the war, Dobka remarried and gave birth to two sons.

In the same constrained voice, Dobka continued,

After the birth of my second son with my second husband, I dreamt that my first husband, Julek, came to me. He looked very neglected, not shaved. "Where were you?" I asked, "so many years? I have a husband and children." He answered, "Yes, but you will come back to me." In the dream I thought how could I go back to him? But to him I said: "I will come back to you." I woke up and found my pillow soaking wet from my tears.

I remember the day, I think about it. I think about my first husband, I dream that I went back to him. I did not forget and I do not want to. I love even the suffering because it is a part of me.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to trying to limit pregnancies, the Germans punished mothers through the children they already had. In the ghettos, from the start and more so with time, children too young to work had to become invisible. Whether a young child had one or both parents, he or she still had to forgo adult supervision. Adults had to work. As a rule, little children were unwelcome in workplaces. During work hours, extraordinary efforts were made by parents to keep their children in safe areas, away from prying eyes. Some of these children devised elaborate ways to keep themselves alert. One of these cooped-up youngsters, aged seven, became a self-taught chess champion.<sup>11</sup> All separations were painful. Anxieties about discoveries of "illegal" children were pervasive and well-justified.

For example, when the Germans occupied Minsk, Rachel Bilerman was married and the mother of two boys. By August 1941, she had lost her husband. Rachel and one of her sisters, also a war widow, pooled their resources. Each had two children; together they found employment outside the ghetto, which created an opportunity to earn money by smuggling. The children were locked inside their ghetto room. One day, when the sisters returned, the children were gone. They had been taken away during an *Aktion*. Desperate efforts to learn something about their fates were futile. Now their reason to stay in the ghetto was gone. The sisters planned an escape and invited their outside coworkers to join them. By bribing a guard at an appropriate moment, Rachel and her sister, in a group of eleven women, slipped away. Roaming the countryside, they eventually entered the surrounding woods. The sisters belong to the small minority of women who were protected by partisans till the end of the war.<sup>12</sup>

Different, yet similar, is Ania Rubinger's story. Ania's father perished in Dachau. In 1942 Ania, her younger brother Theo, and mother were deported from Germany to the Riga ghetto. In this ghetto, Theo, not yet eleven, had been eluding the Germans by hiding in their room. One day, when his mother and sister were at work, Theo was caught and put into a group scheduled for a deportation. The mother ran to him and volunteered to join him. At the last minute, she succeeded in persuading a policeman that Theo was fourteen years old and fit for work. Both were freed. Still, this failed to assure Theo's survival.<sup>13</sup>

Concerns about the safety of children included the pain of watching them starve. I heard about such circumstances from daughters who were teenagers at the time; they were thankful that they were not one of those helpless parents. One of these young teenagers was Chava Grinberg-Brown, who with her family was transferred to the Warsaw ghetto from Wiskitki, a small town near Zyrardow. Before the war, her father, often unemployed, worked as a porter and occasionally as a coachman. The mother tried to help the family by cleaning other people's houses and by doing their laundry. The move to the Warsaw ghetto only worsened the Grinberg's circumstances. Immediately upon their arrival in the ghetto, the father was caught and sent to a work camp. His pleas for help could not be answered by his powerless family.

Chava's images of the ghetto are colored by her personal experiences, an absent father, and chronic hunger. She thinks that in the ghetto "most men were taken away and the rest would usually be in hiding.... I was moving around in the streets of the ghetto all day long. I would see people die of hunger. I saw women, children, and also men die of hunger. I felt that I, too, was on the way to death. I was swollen and starving."

Chava's mother had spent most of her energy searching for work, any work. Only occasionally was she able to find domestic jobs. From time to time she would sell a part of the family's personal belongings, a pot, a pillow, a cherished mirror. There was little to sell. To supplement their income the three children would join street singers and sing for a few coins or bread. Significantly, too, once a day each received a bowl of soup from the public kitchen.

Asked how her mother reacted to the situation, Chava said, "I remember when someone gave her food, any food, she would divide it, she gave it to us. No matter how poor we were, when a person came in mother shared the little soup we had."<sup>14</sup> Chava carries an image of a sad, very sad mother, who never stopped worrying about her children. She is convinced that for her mother "it would have been easier if she were dead.

To see your children starve without being able to help was terrible. Death was better than life, under these circumstances.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1942, eleven-year-old Chava told her mother that she had decided to run away from the ghetto. Mrs. Grinberg wanted her to take her younger brother or sister. Chava refused, explaining,

with a child to take care of, I would not make it either. “Look,” I said, “my stomach is swollen from hunger, I am about to die, too. I cannot lose much. I must run away.”

So my poor mother took the last pillow, she sold it and she gave me a few zlotys.... It was very hard.... I could never talk about it.... [she cries] ...as I was leaving I told her that maybe we will meet. To this she said, “A mountain does not meet with another mountain but a forest meets with a forest. If we survive the war we will meet.”

This departure is ingrained in Chava’s memory:

My mother cried terribly. They came with me for part of the way. Mother spoke about my birthmark. “This is your sign that you belong to us. If we meet later, show it.” ...The will to live was so strong.

I loved my family, but my life I was not willing to sacrifice for them. I was very independent. I refused to give in, to die. I heard about all kinds of people running away.... I wanted to live. I was not afraid. I did not dwell on the difficulties.

After she left her family she had to actually escape from the ghetto:

I heard that one can pass through the wall at one particular place. One boy said that he is smuggling children out for money. I showed him the money I had, told him that I would give him only some of it because I would need money to go by train or to buy food. He took it and brought me to a special place where people went out to work. He only showed me the way. I passed once but a policeman sent me back into the ghetto. I was not discouraged. I went a second time and was not caught.

When I came out I saw a coffee shop and young smugglers were sitting there. One of them said, pointing at me, “Look, this is a Jewish girl. She will survive, she is not afraid, what guts she has in the middle of the day to leave!”

This gave me a good feeling. Then I asked for directions to Zyrardow. I did not go by train.<sup>16</sup>

She went toward the familiar world, the place of her birth. Only occasionally would she meet a peasant with a horse-drawn wagon who agreed to convey her closer to her destination. She survived by working very hard for the farmers. Chava never saw her family again.<sup>17</sup>

To degrade Jews, the Germans forced some Judenrat members to become involved in the process of destruction. The head of the Lodz Judenrat, Chaim Rumkowski, was known for his special affection for children. Among his previous jobs was a directorship of a Jewish orphanage. This man who felt particularly close to children was compelled to ask his fellow Jews to sacrifice the very young and the old so that the majority would continue to live.<sup>18</sup> His “Give Me Your Children” speech, delivered on September 4, 1942, included the following excerpts:

A broken Jew stands before you. Do not envy me. This is the most difficult of all the orders I have ever had to carry out at any time.... I reach out to you with my broken, trembling hands, and I beg you: give into my hands the victims, so that we can avoid having further victims.... a population of 100,000 can be preserved.... the part that can be saved is much larger than the part that must be given away.<sup>19</sup>

Targeted for these deportations were the very young, the old, and the sick. No one volunteered to give up the children, nor did the hospitalized sick and elderly submit passively. Of the hospital patients who could walk, many escaped. Jewish policemen, joined by Germans and their collaborators, were running, searching for patients, for the very young and the old. The entire ghetto population was in a state of desperate agitation. Chaos reigned. Relying on brutal force, the Germans reached their required quota of victims.<sup>20</sup>

In Warsaw, too, deportations in 1942 lasted from July to September. As in Lodz, the aim was to collect the “unproductive elements”: the old, the sick, and the children. Because Jewish children were one of these specially targeted groups, all ghetto deportations created acute anxieties for parents. Children were collected from families, orphanages, and hospitals.<sup>21</sup> Most mothers and fathers found ingenious ways to attempt to protect their children. Descriptions of deportations from ghettos all over occupied Europe are filled with vivid images of resistance, with mothers and fathers who defied orders, of parents who begged to be killed instead of their children because they could not bear the loss.

When their efforts proved ineffective, the majority of mothers and some fathers went with their children. During most ghetto deportations, the Germans insisted on keeping mothers and young children together to assure orderly procedures. Mothers deported with young children typically were killed with their offspring immediately upon arrival in the camps. Nevertheless, while exact figures are elusive, historians tend to agree that only a small minority of women abandoned their children during deportations.

The final liquidation of the Vilna ghetto began on September 23, 1943. What happened on that day followed an established pattern. First, the assembled population was divided by age and sex. Dobka Freund-Waldhorn, with the rest of the women and children, was separated from the men. Then the SS began to divide Dobka's group into two. One consisted of mothers with children and older women; the other group included only young and healthy-looking women. Waiting for the segregation to end, Dobka caught sight of her friend, Mira Salomon, and her two children. Dobka remembers:

I still see how the two little girls clung to her.... I stopped next to them. From her pocket Mira took out rouge and gently put some on my cheeks. She wanted me to look healthy, so I would have a better chance. With my eyes on her beautiful girls, I asked, "Mira, and you?" She said, "I go with my children." Standing there, she only wanted to part from friends. She was young, bright, courageous.... Mira would not leave her children. She knew that her decision meant death. With a child a woman had no chance, none.

A few mothers had left their children. Later they were with me in the camps. I heard them cry at night.... On that last day some of us were made to stand on the right side.... We saw the tragedy and how some tried to switch sides, for life.

Then, I see a beautiful little girl walking with an SS man, and she is looking among us for her mother. But her mother is hiding behind us so that the child should not find her. I witnessed this. These are not things from books; they don't write about it. This woman succeeded. I hear the German say, "The cow; she hid herself!" He was outraged. And he took the child to the left side, to her death.

Now I am a mother of two sons and a grandmother of five grandchildren, and when someone tells me, "I would not have done this," I don't want to hear it. At that point I was not a mother of a child, and so, I don't know. It's good that God did not test me. I don't know what I would have done. I don't know....

Why do I tell you this? Because I want people to understand what it meant to have a drive for life. How strong the need for self-preservation was for some of the mothers. Only a few.

In a group of 200 young, healthy women, Dobka was transferred to the Kaiserwald camp in Riga, Latvia. Most men ended up in the camp Klooga, in Estonia. One of them was Dobka's husband. This was the last time they saw each other.<sup>22</sup>

Wartime ghettos were a prelude to the final stage of Jewish annihilation. For Jews, the concentration camps were the final stage. More so than any other wartime setting, the German concentration camp came closest to a system of total domination. And yet, even in this coercive context some Jewish prisoners refused to cave in.<sup>23</sup>

In 1944 on a sunny day, a transport of Hungarian Jews reached the concentration camp at Auschwitz. The new arrivals were confronted by men in striped pajamas, who moved rapidly, shouting, "Heraus, schnell [Out, fast]!"

Of that day, Judith Rubinstein says,

My father called me to the side and said, "My child, wherever they will take you now, be very careful and listen to me carefully. They will separate the old and the children from the young and the healthy ones. They will send you to work. I am asking you two things: when they call you to work you should be the first one to go, and eat everything they give you, you will need energy to survive," and he blessed me. And that was the last time I saw him.<sup>24</sup>

Around her, people were being sorted out into groups; women with children, women away from the men, the young separated from the old. Judith remained with her mother and a younger brother. The boy stood between them, holding on to both with each hand. In front of them were four young women with whom they had shared a ghetto apartment. With these four sisters were three little children who belonged to another sister who hid in Budapest.

Judith remembers:

The men in the striped pajamas yelled, "Five to each row, five to a row, fast, fast!" I see my mother looking around, maybe trying to take it all in? Then I see her pull these three little children next to her. Now, my mother, the three children, and my brother make five. She pushes me toward the four girls who were right in front of us. I become the fifth one in their row. As she does this, Mother says: "I will take care of the little ones, and you take care of Judith." ... So that is how I survived. She took the children, and before I had a chance

to turn back, she wasn't there any more. And that, "Schnell, schnell" sent us to the left or right—I can't remember...to the bath house.<sup>25</sup>

Male prisoners assigned to "processing" the incoming people were prohibited from communicating with them. Despite these prohibitions, to save the young mothers, some of these men urged them to hand over small children to older women. Some mothers consented. Others refused to part with their children. Those who witnessed incoming transports feel that many of the arrivals did not know what awaited them. Women who knew or suspected the truth were more likely to come from East European ghettos. There are only isolated reports about mothers who denied their connection to a small child. More frequent are stories about mothers who knew what was to happen and stayed with their children. Thus, "of the concentration camp arrivals, mothers with small children were first to reach the gas chambers."<sup>26</sup>

The pervasive filth, lack of food, overcrowding, and absence of privacy, as well as the rigid prohibitions against childcare in the camps, all conspired against any prolonged hiding of infants. Some prisoners witnessed the birth of babies; some helped to deliver them. Prisoner physicians helped pregnant women abort but were helpless when it came to keeping newborn babies in the barracks. Only mothers who gave up their infants had a chance to escape the death that was officially to follow illegal births.<sup>27</sup> Some mothers, although told about the consequences, refused to have an abortion, convinced that they would overcome all barriers.<sup>28</sup>

Time was on the side of women prisoners who reached the camps late in the summer of 1944 and who were in the early stages of pregnancy. Most of them were Hungarian: the last victims. Among them was Dvora Rosenbaum-Fogel. When she came to Auschwitz, Dvora was given a strange, ugly, old lady's dress. The only redeeming feature of this horrid garment was its size, which hid Dvora's pregnancy. She is convinced that this raglike dress shielded her from evil eyes. Depending on the time of arrival, some prisoners received clothes brought into the lager by incoming transports. Clothes deemed in good condition were shipped to Germany. The discarded garments were redistributed to the inmates.

The camp authorities never found out about Dvora's pregnancy. After the war, on May 12, 1945, a Soviet physician delivered her baby and announced that she had never seen such a beautiful boy.<sup>29</sup>

Young teenagers who looked fit for work would pass the initial camp selections. If accompanied by a parent, they could count on his or her attention and care. For



mothers, camp arrivals with young teenage children often translated into an uneven struggle to save them. Born in Vienna, Lucy remembers, “I was lucky that I was not a mother with children.... I would not have made it...even with older children like we were, I was eighteen and my sister was fourteen, it was hard for my mother. My mother had all the worries. She forgot about herself.... she worried so much about us, mostly about my younger sister who was weak and sickly.”<sup>30</sup> In 1944 the camp authorities separated Lucy from her mother and little sister. Both mother and sister perished at an unknown time and place.<sup>31</sup>

Occasionally a battle for a child took on a miraculous twist. Karla, a nurse who worked in the hospital block in Birkenau, never spoke about her children. Rumor had it that her son and daughter were being cared for by a Christian friend. One day, a woman rushed into the hospital block and announced that Karla’s children, Krysia and Zbyszek, were in Auschwitz. Their mother pleaded with the German physician on duty, Dr. Koenig, to help her. The doctor intervened and the thirteen-year-old daughter was registered as sixteen. She received a choice job as a courier (*Laufer*). The five-year-old Zbyszek was brought to the hospital block. There he stayed illegally, hiding under the mattress at the slightest sign of danger. Although many prisoners knew about him, no one betrayed him to the Germans.<sup>32</sup>

Because in the vast majority of concentration camps there was a separation of sexes, child-parent contacts that lasted beyond camp entry involved mothers and daughters or fathers and sons. Miriam Rubyn, a teenager at the time, cherishes her mother’s help: “She would give me some of her food. When I was sick, Mother washed me and fed me. During the selection, she would let me rest and then warn me: ‘He’s coming; stand up,’...because I had no strength at all.”<sup>33</sup> Other daughters echo these statements. Rather consistently their memories are filled with moving stories about mutual support of mothers and daughters and their readiness to sacrifice. Some felt that their mothers kept them alive.<sup>34</sup>

Fathers also devoted themselves to saving their sons. After his wife was shot by Ukrainians on July 26, 1941, one such man, Dr. Aptowicz, protected his son for three years in the Krakow ghetto. When the boy was nine, they were sent to the concentration camp at Buchenwald, in Germany. This is when their survival depended on organized help. The underground in Buchenwald had set aside space in two blocks for the protection of Jewish children. One block housed boys ages sixteen to eighteen, while another block included boys from twelve to sixteen, as well as two boys aged eight and

nine. These two youngest boys worked in the kitchen, a place that offered extra food. In charge of the second block was Emil Carlebach, a Jew, a Communist, a prisoner since 1939. He devoted himself to the rescue of children and accepted Dr. Aptowicz's son. By then, the boy was twelve years old.<sup>35</sup>

Former teenage camp prisoners often spoke about their many bonding activities and how these touched on their survival. For example, when I casually asked Roma Benatar what helped her overcome the concentration camp horrors, she said, "My mother." Intrigued, I wanted to know how and in what way. I knew that Roma admired her mother's intelligence and courage. I also knew that in the summer of 1942, her parents were deported and after that she never saw them. During the interview, Roma mentioned that she had to live up to, in particular, her mother's expectations. She saw her struggle to live as a tribute to her mother. Roma explained:

First of all, what helped me survive was in part an instinct of every human being that wants to live. Self-preservation. But in my particular case, I made an extra effort because I felt that my parents wanted me to live and that I owed it to them to follow their wishes. My mother was so very important for me!

And so, in the most difficult times, I would review in my mind my grandmother's address in Palestine, not to forget, I wanted to go to her. And all the time I sort of tried to talk myself into the fact that my parents would be alive and that I would find them. This was despite the fact that I knew that they were dead. I just did not accept it.... For years after the war, I would walk the streets and think that I would see them, that I would find them. I was sure that my parents had to survive.... Both during the war and later I would daydream of how I would meet them. Even in Auschwitz, I would daydream about meeting them.<sup>36</sup>

Life in the ghettos and transfers to concentration camps left practically no room for the survival of Jewish children—among the few exceptions were teenagers who could pass for adults. But outside the ghettos and camps, despite German determination to destroy Jewish children, the chances for survival were greater. This situation suggests that most child survivors made it because they entered the forbidden Christian world.<sup>37</sup>

Still, the Germans made sure that surviving as a Jew on the so-called "Aryan side" was not easy. In Poland, on October 15, 1941, a new law made any unauthorized Jewish move outside the ghetto a crime punishable by death. The same punishment applied to Christians who helped Jews enter or live on the Aryan side. This law was widely publicized and discovered transgressions were promptly followed by executions

that were also well-publicized. In addition to their continuous antisemitic propaganda, the Germans added rewards for those who denounced Jews and their rescuers.<sup>38</sup>

Jewish children who did reach the Christian world had to have certain characteristics. They needed a certain look that identified them as non-Jewish, preferably being blonde and blue-eyed. Their language, if they spoke, had to be faultless, without traces of their Jewish identity. Significantly, too, they had to give up their identity, a process closely connected to religion. Some Jewish children were sheltered in religious institutions, monasteries, and nunneries. Some took their new religion seriously. After all, being Jewish was dangerous. It meant death. It also meant that their God, the Jewish God, could not protect them. After the war, some of these children who survived had problems over their religious beliefs, particularly if parents or relatives asked them to give up their Christian God. Suspended between two worlds, some of these children could not reconcile the two worlds, moving back and forth between them.<sup>39</sup>

On the Aryan side, as anywhere else, Jewish mothers devoted themselves to their children's welfare. While mothers wanted to stay with their children, they were ready to part if separation promised the child's survival. Often gentiles agreed to keep a child but not the mother.

Zwia Rechtman-Schwartz tells how she and her mother moved from one peasant to another begging for shelter. Rarely were they kept for more than a few days. Then one winter evening, when the two were resting in a cold attic, the peasant woman sheltering them asked them to leave. The daughter recalls, with pain, how her intelligent and proud mother begged the woman to let Zwia stay. In the end, this Polish peasant agreed to keep the half-starved and half-frozen girl. Zwia was not sure whether the reason was pity or money or both.

I asked Zwia how she had felt about staying.

I don't know if I wanted to stay or not. The situation was such that if she wanted to keep me, then I should have stayed. Of course, I didn't know that I would never see my mother again. I cannot say good-bye's [Zwia cries]. When my mother left, the Christian woman asked me to come into the house ... one small room. I don't even remember who else was there. I wasn't thinking whether she was nice or not. She was very, very poor.... But this arrangement did not last.<sup>40</sup>

Similar and yet different was Fela Sztern's experience. Fela and her mother escaped during a ghetto liquidation. On the way they met a Jewish youth who joined

them. From then on, together, they searched in vain for shelter. Eventually, they came to a hut close to railroad tracks, away from other dwellings. The Poles who lived there seemed more refined than the rest of the peasants. The three fugitives were received well. The man of the house, a carpenter, was, as it turned out later, involved in underground work. The two-room hut was clean and well furnished.

The couple, Jozia and Adolf, explained that since their place was exposed and Germans stopped there often, no Jews could stay safely for more than a night. Fela's mother tried telling them that she would give them the property she owned if only they would agree to shelter them. Appealing to the couple's conscience, she described their horrible predicament. Jozia interrupted her: "You and the boy I cannot keep, but your girl I can. She does not look Jewish." Mrs. Sztern thanked her for this kind offer. Fela angrily refused, insisting that under no circumstances would she be separated from her mother. Soon the three went to sleep on a pile of straw spread on the floor. Fela was depressed. Lying close to her mother, she did not say much. With arms wrapped tightly around her, she fell asleep. In the morning Fela woke up next to an empty space. She understood. Mrs. Sztern left a message with Jozia that Fela should not cry and that she would try to come back. This was the last time mother and daughter met. Later on, Fela heard that her mother, confronted by constant rejections, was on the verge of collapse. One day, when Mrs. Sztern looked out a window she saw a group of Jewish men being led by Germans. She simply walked out and joined them.<sup>41</sup>

Painful separations and permanent losses were common. For the one who survived, the mother or the child, the effects were shattering. For example, in the spring of 1943, Edzia Wilder, her mother, and a young girl together escaped during a liquidation of the Brody ghetto. Despite the loss of her husband and another daughter, this mother took charge of the two young girls. The three reached the countryside. Occasionally they came across kind peasants who fed them and warned them about bands searching for runaway Jews. The three shared whatever food they found. They usually stayed in the forest during the day and came out in the evening, asking for food.

With the cold weather came shortages of provisions. One peasant, a woman, directed them to an abandoned bunker in the forest. Even though this place turned out to be a hole in the ground, it gave them some protection from the cold and a place for starting a fire. One Sunday, in the late afternoon, as the three huddled in their bunker, warming themselves by the meager flames, they heard suspicious noises, followed by a rough "Heraus!"

Edzia recalls:

Obediently we came out, knowing well that we were going to our deaths. Waiting outside were two German gendarmes, one Ukrainian man, and a young girl. These last two carried pails with mushrooms. They were probably spying on us. Both my mother and our companion cried, pleading with the Germans to let us go. I, in a split second, with all my strength, started to run. Without any thought, I came to a small forest we used to hide in. There, totally exhausted, I collapsed. I must have fainted. When I woke up, I was on the ground. The moon looked down on me. There I was, motionless, stone-like, I craved a peaceful death. Only the trees witnessed my despair.

Fourteen at the time, Edzia went back to the place where she had seen her mother last. On the way she asked those she met if they knew what had happened to her mother and her companion. She learned that the two had been murdered in a nearby village. She also heard that as the mother was being led away, she cried, pleading with peasants she met to help save her child. In this appeal, there was so much love mixed in with despair that the people were moved:

They showed me later some compassion by bringing me food. Some of them saw in me a martyr selected by God. I continued to stay in the forest, and during the night I made fires to warm by and during the day, when I was in the forest, I would cough when the peasants would bring me food. This was to show them where I was. They tried to keep up my spirits, and some of them gave me warm clothes, so I wouldn't be so cold. I was not afraid of animals, only of people. The trees were my friends.<sup>42</sup>

On snowy and stormy nights, Edzia would enter people's huts. Some took pity on her and kept her for several days; this is how she escaped freezing to death. Edzia was convinced that her mother watched over her, even after her death. With the 1944 arrival of the Red Army, this fugitive's wanderings stopped. Eventually she settled in Israel.<sup>43</sup>

Quite different is Cyla's story. Cyla looked like a Pole and spoke Polish fluently. She escaped during a deportation, with her baby in her arms. A Polish friend helped her buy false papers. For two weeks she stayed in the homes of two Polish friends. One of them located a young Polish woman who was unmarried and willing to adopt the six-month-old baby. This process required a birth certificate, which the local priest supplied.

At the moment of parting, the six-month-old baby clung to the mother, crying loudly. There was something so disheartening and sorrowful in the baby's cries that the Polish woman who came for her could not take her. The baby stayed with Cyla, who

soon found a job as a cook on an estate. She welcomed the work and the peace that came with it. In her free time she befriended a teacher who was out of work, and a Polish woman who was helping Jews from a nearby forest. To these new friends, Cyla gave food.

All seemed to run smoothly until a new law was passed requiring Poles to get special working papers. Because of this law, the manager of the estate discovered that Cyla's birth certificate was fake. He asked her to leave immediately.

For a while hungry and homeless, Cyla and the baby roamed the countryside. Things improved only when the teacher, Cyla's friend, found her a job with a German who needed a cook. There she worked until the 1944 takeover by the Red Army. In a 1944 diary entry, Cyla wrote, "My little daughter has been the sunshine of my life. 'Til this day she continues to bring me good luck. At dangerous times this child would distract a murderer's attention from me to herself. Occasionally, too, the compassion people felt for her made them invite us both into their homes during our horrible wanderings."<sup>44</sup> Such happy endings were extremely rare.

Relying on a variety of sources—publications, archival materials, and my own in depth interviews—this paper shows that efforts to protect the born and unborn children originated in the struggle between those who wanted to murder and those who wanted to save. It was an uneven struggle, a struggle that left many child victims and few child survivors. Sometimes real, sometimes imaginary, parent-child relationships lingered on and on, despite the brutal efforts to extinguish them. Perhaps, in more ways than we grasp, these primary relationships did endure, often reaching beyond unknown graves.

### Notes

1. Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 75.
2. These figures are discussed further in Nechama Tec, “Between Two Worlds,” *Journal of Literature and Belief* 18:1 (1998): 16–17.
3. Lucjan Dobroszycki, “Redemption of the Children,” in *An Inventory to the Rescue Children, Inc. Collection, 1946–1985*, eds. Alizah Zinberg and Barbara Martin (New York: Yeshiva University Archives, 1986), p. 6.
4. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Bantam, 1986), p. 403; Josef Michman, “The Problem of the Jewish War Orphans in Holland,” in *She’erit Hapletah, 1944–1948, Rehabilitation and Political Struggle* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990), p. 190.
5. Philip Friedman, *Their Brothers’ Keepers* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1978), p. 69.
6. David Weinberg, “The Reconstruction of the French Jewish Community after World War II,” in *She’erit Hapletah*, pp. 172–73.
7. Eugene Weinstock, *Beyond the Last Path* (New York: Boni & Gaer, 1947), pp. 127, 191–93.
8. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Pocket Books, 1955); Eva Heyman, *The Diary of Eva Heyman*, trans. Moshe M. Kohn (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974); Yitskhok Rudashevski, *The Diary of the Vilna Ghetto: June 1941–April 1943* (Israel: Bet Lohamei Haghetat, Hakibbutz Hameuhad Publishing House, 1973); Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Łódź Ghetto*, ed. Alan Adelson, trans. Kamil Turowski (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Joseph Ziemian, *The Cigarette Sellers of Three Crosses Square*, trans. Janina David (Minneapolis: Lerner, 1975).

9. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973), pp. 166–74.
10. Dobka Freund-Waldhorn, interview by author, Kvar Shmariahu, Israel, 1995–96; Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, pp. 66–69.
11. Michal Glowinski, *Czarne sezony* (Black seasons) (Warsaw: Open, 1999).
12. Rachel Bilerman, interview by author, Tel Aviv, 1995; Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, pp. 325–26.
13. Ania Rubinger, Yad Vashem, 03/6393.
14. Chava Grinberg-Brown, interview by author, Israel, 1992. She lives on a farm (moshav), Bnei Atarot, close to Tel Aviv.
15. Ibid. For other examples of the many women who also commented on how fortunate they were not to have had children and not to have been forced to watch them starve, see Janina Bauman, *Winter in the Morning: A Young Girl's Life in the Warsaw Ghetto and Beyond, 1939–1945* (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 85; and Alina Margolis-Edelman, *Ala z elementarza* (London: Aneks, 1994), who says that in the ghetto being a mother was the worst thing (pp. 80–81).
16. Grinberg-Brown, interview.
17. Ibid.; and Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, pp. 99–100.
18. Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides, eds., *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community under Siege* (New York: Viking, 1989), p. 352.
19. Ibid., pp. 328, 330–31.



20. Ibid., pp. 320–59. A particularly touching part of the preceding pages (pp. 348–49) is an anonymous, heart-wrenching lament of a father who had lost his little daughter. He blames himself for this loss. See Lucjan Dobroszycki, *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 248–55.

21. See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), p. xv; Philip Friedman, “The Extermination of the Polish Jews during the German Occupation, 1939–1945,” in *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*, ed. Ada June Friedman (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), pp. 211–43; Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1985), pp. 250–51; Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932–1945*, trans. Ina Friedman and Haya Galai (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 404–56.

22. Freund-Waldhorn, interview.

23. Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, p. 350.

24. Judith Rubinstein, Yad Vashem, 03/4483.

25. Ibid.

26. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, trans. William Templer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 15.

27. Ruth Hudes-Tatarko (interview by author, Ramath-Gan, Israel, 1995) in her barracks saw an SS man roughly remove a newborn infant; Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, ed. Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch, trans. Roslyn Hirsch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 68–71.

28. See Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz*, p. 71, for a description of Esther, a pregnant woman in Birkenau, who refused to discontinue her pregnancy. No matter how others tried to explain the situation to her, she blocked out reality and clung to the idea that

everyone, including Dr. Mengele, would be enchanted with her baby. Esther's infant was beautiful. But when her baby boy was only two days old, there was a selection in the hospital block. Every patient had to parade nude in front of Dr. Mengele and the assisting SS man. When Esther's turn came, the inevitable happened. "She left naked, in her arms she held the baby. She held it up high as though she wanted to show them what a beautiful and healthy son she had."

29. Dvora Rosenbaum-Fogel, interview by author, Tel Aviv, 1995.

30. Lucy Mandelshtam, Yad Vashem, 03/5591.

31. Ibid.

32. Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz*, pp. 85–88.

33. Miriam Rubyn, interview by author, Ramath-Gan, Israel, 1995.

34. Livia E. Bitton Jackson, *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust* (New York: Times Books, 1980), also supported each other in the same way (pp. 85, 87); see also Kitty Hart, *I Am Alive* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1961), p. 81.

35. Ryszard Aptowich, Yad Vashem, 03/2712; Weinstock, *Beyond the Last Path*, pp. 127, 191–93.

36. Roma Nutkiewicz-Benatar, interview by author, Kvar Shmarjahu, Israel, 1995.

37. I came across only one source that compares how Jewish children survived. It is based on 1,246 child survivors, age fourteen and younger, registered by the local Jewish committee. The majority, 60 percent, survived on the Aryan side; 20 percent made it in the camps; the rest in forests, the Lodz ghetto, and partisan units. This evidence is presented by Dobroszycki, "Redemption of the Children," p. 7.

38. See Lucy S. Davidowicz, ed., *A Holocaust Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1976), p. 67; Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, "Egzekucje publiczne w Warszawie w Latach,

1943–1945,” *Biuletyn glownej komisji badania zbrodni niemieckiej w Polsce* 6 (1946), pp. 221–24; Emanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Schocken, 1975), p. 236; Tatiana Berenstein et al., eds., *Exterminacja Zydow na ziemiach polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* (Warsaw: Zydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1957), pp. 121–22; Friedman, *Their Brothers’ Keepers*; Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki, *He Who Saves One Life* (New York: Crown, 1971); Szymon Datner, *Las sprawiedliwych* (Warsaw: Ksiazka i wiedza, 1968).

39. One of my earlier publications concentrates on this and related issues. See Tec, “Between Two Worlds,” pp. 15–26.

40. Zwia Rechtman-Schwartz, interview by author, Tel Aviv, 1995.

41. Fela Sztern, interview by author, Winnipeg, Canada, 1979, 1994.

42. Edzia Wilder, Yad Vashem, 033/645.

43. Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, p. 253.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 254–55; Cyla Menkes Fast, Yad Vashem, 033/634. This is my translation of her testimony from the Polish.

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