

# Organized Persecution of Children by Nazis\*

## Summary of the Study's\*\* Results Preliminary findings

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Since we began this study, we have met a great many child survivors in gatherings, interviews, and meetings: Those who could speak and those who were silent; those who remembered, and those who forgot; all individuals with their own stories, each different but all adults now who had been persecuted in their childhood.

We collected literature and archives in several languages. We read stories, poems, and looked at pictures created by child survivors

and their biographies. We translated childrens' depositions to the Jewish Historical Commission right after the war. We talked to survivors in the U.S., Canada, Israel, Poland, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Sweden, all the while trying to understand the ununderstandable.

In giving this brief report of our preliminary findings, we are well aware that we have just begun and have a long road ahead of us. We are very grateful for the partici-

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\*\* The International Study of Organized Persecution is dedicated to the systematic accumulation of information regarding the legalized torture and annihilation of children by Nazis during the Holocaust. Through search of archives, literature, and about deliberate child persecution by a government.

pation of many devoted mental health professionals in several countries, who interview in several languages and contribute to our posing questions and thinking of answers. Our undertaking is not a labor of few but of many who want to prevent another onslaught against children, especially Jewish children. Foremost, we want to thank all those who have been interviewed, sometimes coming from far away and spending many hours in their attempt to help us find out what happened to them and their families. The volunteers who help us in many ways, and translate tapes from several languages, deserve our gratitude as well. We hope that, with united efforts, we will know what happened in every little village and large city and how the children fared in them, how they fought, resisted, got sick, died, or survived. We hope to be able to describe how they adapted to difficult circumstances, studied, formed families, and brought up children.

What we are about to tell about our study is familiar to you. You told us what happened and you told us how you felt. We are trying to reproduce as faithfully as possible what should become your heritage for future generations. If it rings a chord of truth for you then that is all we can hope for. To speak for all of you, we must, by necessity, gen-

eralize but must beware not to generalize to the point of stereotypes. We must repeat that each story is different and must also keep in mind that singling out one issue for discussion must not obscure other issues. Many intertwine with one another and form a network impinging on the individual and the group from all sides. However, certain common themes stand out and a few will be discussed briefly.

Perhaps the most important issue we encountered is that of the "*Loss of the Sense of Belonging.*" Being excluded, losing one's place in the community hit adults and children during the Nazis' reign. For children, however, it was a much more severe blow than it was for adults who had already developed a secure sense of belonging that is independent of location, time, and the views of others. Most children automatically expect to participate in children's activities.

A little Jewish girl in hiding looked out of the window and saw Christian children playing outside, day after day. She envied them. Surely, she missed the outdoors and the mobility of outdoors play, but foremost, she missed the children. She asked her mother what was wrong with her, why wasn't she allowed to play with them? Had she done something wrong?

Other children, in other circumstances, were told by playmates that they, the Christians, no longer play with Jews; teachers asked them to leave school. Before this removal from school, they were often told that Jews were inferior and vile. Exclusion would be preceded or followed by derision and verbal as well as physical abuse. The excluded were stamped as guilty by such phrases as "You killed Jesus Christ" or "you will be punished for killing the German personage in Paris." This would enhance a sense of horrible mystery of a guilt unknown to the accused. They had done something of which they had no awareness. They could no longer turn to adults for explanation. Parents shooed and admonished them not to make waves. Teachers and policemen, who used to be children's advocates, turned into their enemies who kept them from movies, parks, and swimming pools.

Small children usually invoke monsters and witches to replace adults whom they fear and those whom they do not want to lose as good models. Now the real world became populated by dangerous people of flesh and blood who wanted to kill children, starve them, and take them away from their parents.

Expecting help from an adult, as a matter of fact, a little boy in

Buchenwald asked an SS man: "Uncle, why must I stay here so long? I am so cold." He assumed that the "uncle" would be interested in his well being but soon he realized that the "uncle" was after his life and wanted to torture him before he killed him.

All fantasies about witches and devils who frightened children came through. Not even parents could protect children; they were reduced to the status of helpless children themselves. Quite a few children assumed the role of their parents' protectors and grew up prematurely caring for themselves and others.

Frequently, even before the persecuted child achieved some independence, he felt abandoned not only by his friends and teachers, but also by his parents who told him to run away or stay with strangers. Many children felt that they would rather die with their parents than survive alone. The younger the child, the easier it was for him to transfer his feelings of love and dependency from parents to new caretakers, whether Christian families or nuns in orphanages and convents. However, when parents or relatives did come back after the war, the child again felt abandoned by his new caretakers and the new Christian God who had safeguarded him from harm.

### **How Did the Children of the Persecutors Feel?**

Their parents taught them to hate Jewish children, to hate and discriminate against the weak. The Hitler boys were allowed to use Jewish children as targets; a four year old son of Amnon Goeth helped his father in Plaszow play clay pigeons with Jewish babies. These Aryan children were taught to discriminate and persecute. They acquired the right to enslave others and kill them. They even acquired jurisdiction over parents and teachers of their own, an omnipotent fantasy whose realization was fostered by Nazi doctrines. What was once a community of children who had to obey parents and teachers, became a criminal gang ready to denounce their elders and deliver them to their new overseers, the SS leaders. They had become the overlords at the expense of "inferior subhumans," who belonged to no one and were prey to the hunters. Even the fellow travelers who did not share the enthusiasm for Nazis, did not seem to notice when their Jewish friends or teachers suddenly disappeared. The most charitable idea occurred to them when they thought that Jews were emigrating and just did not say goodbye.

The German child was trained to feel superior to others and look

down on the weak, whether a cripple or a non-Aryan. In actuality, they had to be subservient to their leaders and obey them unconditionally. They were cheated by these superior "Fuehrers," especially their ideal Adolf Hitler, who admonished them incessantly that they must be hard as steel, ruthless, and must go fearlessly to die in the battle for Holy Germany. One young German was nobody, he had to serve his country. These youngsters sang with enthusiasm that they were marching with dead heroes in front of them, to join them with tremendous elation and feelings of omnipotence ("Today Germany belongs to us, tomorrow the whole world"), these were followed by poetry in which death was adulated. Marching to conquer, they were forewarned that they have a rendezvous with death. Indeed, a great many 16 year olds, even 14 year olds died on the battlefield trying to halt the march of the Russians or the Allied Army.

It is our belief that the most powerful and deepest wish of the Nazis was to annihilate their own children on the battlefield. In this, they emulated the Germanic tribes who exposed their newborn in ice cold water to test them. To prevent their rebellion, they cheated the children and incited them to hate and kill those whom they envied,

because they were loved by their parents and presumably preferred by God. If the truth were known, German children would have realized that belonging to the master race led them inexorably to defeat, shame, and death. Literally abandoned by their leaders, they had to fend for themselves amidst ruins or live in hunger and desolation. A refugee from the Russian army in East Germany told us that the German people ostracized the refugees, tried to avoid giving them food and shelter, and looked down on them. They had learned to be contemptuous of their own, when the latter was weakened. Today, quite a few Germans are ashamed of what their parents did. Many envy Jews; they would rather be victims than the descendants of the victimizers. Yet there are some who are still subject to Nazi propaganda, who maintain the deception that the world belongs to them and still think back with nostalgia to the good old Hitler days, when the roads were perfect and the imperfect people were killed. It is amazing how much of an image can still persist when Dutch and Belgian people spit at German tourists.

#### **Was Liberation a Triumph?**

Hoping that they would be welcomed and rewarded, the liberated

children, who had dreamt of the triumph for Jews and punishment for Nazis after victory, were deeply disappointed. They wanted food, sleep, health, and reunion with their families. The triumph of liberation was short-lived. The victorious armies were not properly prepared to care for the half-dead or the sick survivors. Children could not find their parents, parents could not find their children, and the homes they did find were frequently non-existent or plundered and occupied by Gentiles. When children met their parents, they could not recognize them. These adults looked like skeletons, were now white-haired and emaciated. Few countries would let them in without long waiting. In some native countries, they were no longer welcome. The door to Palestine was not open to them. They had to struggle to find a place in a society, perhaps, no longer hostile, but by no means friendly. Rarely were the children given the opportunity to tell their stories and get help.

Still today, more than forty years later, many child survivors feel that they do not belong anywhere. Many are afraid to speak for fear of reviving the deadly anxiety that beset them when they lived in fear of death, day after day, night after night. Some feel guilty that they did not die with the others. They feel obligated to justify their

survival. Quite a few do not really allow themselves to enjoy the simplest pleasures of life to the full. They sometimes still feel numb and sometimes still suffer from nightmares. They have mustered all their strength to build new lives and raise new families, undoing Hitler's genocide. Now the children are leaving them or have left them recently, and they enter a new period of life where the feelings of not belonging and being abandoned are revived. When their children leave, survivor parents sometimes think that they are abandoned by their parents and siblings once more. Old parents' death or illness revive the horror of having lost them or nearly seen them die. Meeting each other, forming groups, and thus recouping a missing extended family is moving. New families are created from the remnants. The kinship of today recalls the help received from others during the time of persecution and danger. They tell us that they wish they had had similar groups right after the war when they needed it most.

#### **Did Grouping Aid Survival?**

There are some few people who survived in isolation, but they are a rarity. In the midst of being ostracized, expelled, and humiliated, children would sometimes find ways to

quasi belong somewhere, to Gentile families, to orphanages, to friends, to priests, and nuns as well as to an all-merciful God. Finding friends in camp was the most important strategy for survival. Stealing bread and sharing it, warming each other in freezing weather, holding each other up when one was sick or on a march, were all life-saving. Talking to others about the good old days, such as mother's kitchen and her cooking, combated depression and giving up. Exchanging recipes, reading poetry, and telling stories from books, once read, brought back a world which seemed lost forever. Affection, physical and emotional sustenance went a long way in making children endure separation from their family. Many tell us that during persecution and hunger, they primarily thought of surviving and helping their friends to survive with them. Only after liberation, when many had to separate from their new friends or "families," did the absence of parents become extremely painful. Liberation meant seeing them again, even when a child witnessed a parent's death. The hope of miraculously finding them stayed with many for years. Not being able to go to the grave and mourn made the pain unbearable. Not having a space for the dead creates a void, loneliness, and the inability to finish mourning.

Placed in orphanages or children's homes, the surviving children would eventually become part of the place and identified with the other surviving children. Adults in charge allowed them to become children again. At first, they often tested their new caretakers to see whether, with sufficient provocation, they would behave like Nazis. Judith Hemmendinger, who as a very young adult headed an Orthodox home for child survivors from Buchenwald in Taverny, described how she won over the children's trust by allowing them free access to the kitchen and letting them choose their roommates according to nationalities and places of origin. Such an allegiance enhanced a feeling of identity, but it also incited Jewish children against each other. It was uncanny how the SS men knew that they could get their victims to hurt each other. The Polish children despised the Hungarians and vice versa. It was to be expected that children who had suffered from not belonging would act out and discriminate among themselves. Every kind of stranger became suspect.

In many instances, children who wanted to remain with their friends were wilfully separated to "help forget" their past. Social workers and adoptive and foster mothers insisted that the children

must think only of the present and the future. It was disloyal to think of one's dead mother while calling the adoptive mother "mama." Some wise parents encouraged the children to refer to their caretaker during the war as mother or father. As a result, some people had Jewish and Dutch or Polish parents, and they loved them both. However, when the children settled in school, they suffered from a new kind of discrimination. Discrimination against refugees would be encountered anywhere. Native children made fun of them because they did not know the new language and had different customs. Families struggled economically and children had to go to school in clothes which earmarked them as strangers. No matter how much they wanted to be the same as all the other children, they kept being different and not belonging. Discouraging their belonging to the parents' past and to facilitate forgetting, parents frequently insisted that children could not suffer the way older people did and could not remember what happened. Some parents behaved paradoxically, living in an Irish neighborhood as if they were still hiding, yet insisting that their children must attend yeshivas. Conflicts arose between parents and children not only because of normal adolescent upheav-

als and rebellions, but also because the Holocaust acted as a barrier to intergenerational communication. In many instances, neither knew what the other had done during their forced separation. Parents were hoping that children had not understood and still did not understand what happened in the Holocaust. They could not tolerate the idea that their children had been hurt and traumatized. The children felt misunderstood and could not get their questions answered. One blamed the other for not opening up. Many adults became irritable. As an aftermath of trauma, some fathers especially became ill tempered. Children and parents became afraid of each other and some step-parents contributed to the miscommunication. For many, the question still remains: *Is it better to remember or to forget?*

We think that the difficulty in communication is intrinsically interwoven with problems of memory. Many child survivors told us that they remember nothing of the Holocaust and only their parents or older relatives know. In this manner, they relegate the capacity to remember to the older generation. On the other hand, many people who lost their parents bemoan the fact that they have complete amnesia for their early childhood.

All too often, remembering is unconsciously equated with reviving the past. On the one hand, there is fear of bringing back the days of persecution; on the other hand, there is an intense wish to bring the parents back yet there is a great dread of having to love them again. Another confusion regarding remembering comes from the misunderstanding that memory consists of accurate visualizations like a photograph and a continuity like motion picture. Childhood memories actually come in flashes and use a great variety of sensory modalities, not necessarily visual and not necessarily continuous. How can a mother live in one's memory if one cannot see her face, known to each of us since infancy? In helping people get in touch with memories of one's babyhood, we focus on concrete objects that play an important role in the baby's life. Toys, blankets, the view from the crib, the crib itself, the color of the wall or floor are all items that people can imagine and accept as things that belonged to them. Bringing back the atmosphere of the nursery, the feeling tone of being held or rocked, and all the kinesthetic memories of being cared for bodily, can recreate the early environment in which trust develops. Not everyone we interview trusts his imagination, but

those who can often recover memories which seemed to have been forgotten. A feeling of continuity and a sense of having belonged to a mother, a father, a house could be recovered in this way. Interviews altogether help reestablish a feeling of self-sameness through time of a sequence of events and a chronology in one's life. Even forgotten languages come back at times.

Not only fears and lowered self-trust interfere with remembering, but also certain principles, which arose from the traumatic experiences. The wonderful feelings stemming from one's childhood may be barred from consciousness because they arose in a place and in connection with people who betrayed one's confidence in them. There appears to be an Eleventh Commandment that nothing good must be associated with a country in which a child was persecuted or a family was killed by the natives. German or Polish is forgotten because it is the language of the Jew Haters. One must not be attracted or pine after anything connected with them. As a result, we can get a hole in our past, which may interfere with our freedom to learn. It was remarkable to hear that we were enjoined not to interview German or Poles or learn anything about them. It did not help much to

say that we can never try to prevent another Holocaust if we do not get to know the mind of the persecutor. Furthermore, to condemn learning is very much unlike the usual stance of the child survivor. The majority of them were hungry for schooling and did amazingly well in their studies, but there were some who could not concentrate or found it difficult to appreciate connections that might have led to the understanding of the past. Art, poetry, and writing stories are very beneficial and could be tolerated better than outright remembering because of the symbols, which are removed from recounting actual experiences. On the other hand, remembering gives sorrow to parents and to children; it's kinder to forget and spare everybody pain.

**Is Wanting to Help, Spare Pain, and Act Altruistically a Characteristic of Child Survivors?**

One would expect that people who lost trust in others and expect a renewal of persecution would have become egoistic and self-centered. In reality, most child survivors are very altruistic, ready to help others, and community-oriented. They identify with the rescuers. No child could survive without help from

others. A place to hide, a piece of bread, and a drop of water were some of the many ways Jews and non-Jews, children and adults helped children. It is easy for the child survivor to identify with the sufferer and say: "she/he is just like me, suffering, I feel for her/him and will help like people helped me." In contrast, revenge, which was sought before liberation, has been transformed into a very pronounced sense of justice, rather than personal revenge. On seeing a Nazi today, most child survivors, but not all, would turn him over to the authorities rather than attack him. Helpfulness and seeking of justice constitute a victory over the attempts of Nazis to dehumanize our children and reduce them to the kind of murderers and sadists they were. By elevating themselves morally over Nazi-like demoralization, survivors, and especially child survivors, raise a new generation of helpful and just people.

Although some, especially the youngest, survivors complain of feeling joyless, most do have the capacity to find "naches" in life. Some say that all are scarred; we would rather say that their lives, no matter how rich and rewarding, continue to dwell under the shadow of the losses incurred during the Holocaust. These losses must be mourned, perhaps, through many

generations before they can be worked through. The past is with us as we strive to master its impact upon our lives and build a better future. Something should be said about *the differences in which we master the past when we live in a country where persecution and prejudices still prevail.*

Until very recently, people in Poland and Hungary were afraid to admit that they were Jews. To live in one of these communist countries, one was better off forgetting that one was born Jewish. At first, one could have lost one's life that way, later one's job or career. One of the Jewish professionals in such a country was asked why she did not leave despite her disappointment and her feeling abandoned. She replied: All Jews hate and love the Poles, and the Poles love and hate the Jews. Lately, Poland's Jews had become unknown and the young Poles are curious and interested in them. As a result, many younger Jews have discovered that they were not Christian. One 16-year-old boy, upon hearing that his mother was Jewish, became exhilarated. He quickly went to school to brag about his Jewish origin.

The question where one can belong was very acute in iron curtain countries. Hopefully, it is on the way to a resolution, as Jews are becoming valuable members of the

community from which they had been excluded so long. Regardless where they are at present, all child survivors are influenced in their common concern by their past and the attitude to their past of the people with whom they and their children live.