

# ‘And I was only a child’: Children’s Testimonies, Bergen-Belsen 1945

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My sweet parents, Dad, Mum and a sister died in the destruction of the Krakow ghetto. In all these camps I worked very hard, went without clothes and was beaten up severely, I was also ill with many ailments, *and all this when I was only a child.*<sup>1</sup>

Most of the personal recollections of the liberation of Bergen- Belsen were put down or recorded several decades after the end of the Second World War. They are thus affected both by distance from the event itself and the ‘processing’ of many years’ thought and retelling. The lack of earlier testimonies can be easily explained: survivors were trying to recover from their ordeals, to find a country that would take them in, and eventually to build new lives, families and careers. The liberators – soldiers, relief workers and medical students – were likewise busy forging their lives after the war. It took many years of digestion, and coming of age for the memories of Bergen-Belsen to be told to the world.

It appears though, that a set of survivor testimonies collected just after the camp’s liberation lay dormant in the archives for many years. These are the testimonies of children and teenagers, taken in the camp, in 1945 and 1946 set down on paper at the instigation of Helena Wrobel (later Wrobel-Kagan) in a high school she set up for young survivors in Belsen. The testimonies, titled ‘My Way from Home to Bergen-Belsen’, are unique therefore in their closeness to the events described.<sup>2</sup>

### Bergen-Belsen Child Survivors

Who were the children and teenagers in Bergen-Belsen? Where did they come from, and how did they survive? The bitter truth is that there was little chance of survival for Jewish children in Nazi-occupied Europe. This explains why there were so few children at the concentration camps at the time of liberation. In December 1945 there were only 1,800 children in the DP camps of the American zone. It is difficult to come up with exact numbers for Bergen-Belsen. Since early 1945, the camp, used for neutrals and other 'exchange Jews' did have a *Kinderbaracke* with 52 Dutch children of Jewish families from the diamond trade and some 30 children from Poland and Slovakia. Upon liberation, the Dutch children were repatriated and not many others remained. The nursery and primary school that was up and running in May 1945 initially had only 30 children. Most of the children and young people at the camp at the time of liberation, however, had arrived there with the massive influx of survivors of other camps in the last months of the war. They had experienced the Nazi hell as children in ghettos and in camps. Many had matured early and had seen much, and their testimonies enable us to see these experiences through children's eyes. They also demonstrate the unique and intense nature of the few weeks spent in Bergen-Belsen during those last weeks of the war. Although many of the children were veterans of Auschwitz and of the death marches, their encounter with Bergen-Belsen was highly traumatic and figures prominently in their testimonies:

'Only here we felt that five years of war were "nothing" compared with four weeks in Bergen Belsen', recounted Regina G. (46) in her testimony.<sup>3</sup> 'There was hunger, filth. Typhoid was rampant in the camp and "devoured" people who no longer wanted to live'.

Lea H. (35), 13 years old at the time of liberation, wrote: 'We slept on bare, wet and dirty floors fainting with hunger, and the lice were eating us. A horrible epidemic of typhus was taking its toll like a burning fire. I never believed I would survive this Gehenum [hell]'.

Edyta R. (11), 15 years old, arrived at Bergen-Belsen from Groß-Rosen:

This was the worst camp I was in during the war. There was terrible hunger and people died in droves ... all night you could hear people dying ... during work we were set upon by dogs

and were tortured cruelly – people were half dead. In the morning 10% of us were dead. Everyone wanted to die, no one believed it would ever end.

In contrast with the harrowing descriptions of the camp's horrors, the day when liberation finally came is hardly mentioned in the testimonies. Only 14 of the 46 testimonies discuss it. Some were ecstatic. 'There were no limits to our happiness' wrote Lea H. (35). 'We were running around the whole lager like madmen'. Others could only describe their pitiful condition: 'I was so ill I wasn't able to see', wrote 13-year old Gutka F. (17). Most children were too ill and numb to remember anything about the day.

Liberation brought a massive effort at rehabilitation. Doctors and medical students were brought into the camp. Their devoted work came too late for thousands, but many were nursed back to health. But what were the young survivors to do once their weight had returned to normal and they were free of lice and typhoid? How could they be prepared to rebuild their lives? The question bothered many of the survivor leaders in the camp and their response was to set up a nursery and primary school, both of which were in place by May 1945.<sup>4</sup> In July when the first soldiers of the Jewish Brigade arrived at the camp they were astounded to hear from one of the houses, 'a Hebrew song, the children are welcoming us with Hebrew singing ... who created this wonder?'<sup>5</sup>

#### **Environment for Testimony: The Hebrew Gymnasium**

But what was to be done with the older children and the teenagers who 'continued to roam around with their pots to the communal kitchen to receive their bread and soup, from there to the clothing warehouse. And so day after day aimlessly and purposelessly'.<sup>6</sup>

Dr Helena Wrobel had taught geography at the Gymnasium in Tarnow, Poland, before the war. She hid in the woods with the partisans and was later incarcerated in several work camps. She was liberated at Bergen-Belsen and became one of the teachers in the primary school. Seeing the plight of the teenagers she decided to open a high school.

She put up notices all over the camp: 'In a short time a

Gymnasium will be established in the camp. Interested pupils should contact Helena Wrobel.<sup>7</sup> Her friends laughed at her, but in the morning there were 31 teenagers outside, 30 girls and one boy. She asked the camp's Jewish administration to send a Jewish Brigade soldier to help her. By that time a number of soldiers from the Brigade were in the camp helping with education and community work. She was joined by David Littman of the 606th Field Artillery Regiment. Littman had grown up in Poland but had emigrated to Palestine with his family in 1934. By the time he joined the Jewish Brigade he was two years into his studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Running a school in a DP camp was no mean task. There were no books, paper or pencils and Wrobel and Littman used their cigarette rations to fund the school activities. Teachers had to teach 'from their heads' – with all the difficulties this involved. The testimonies themselves testify to the scarcity of paper. They are written on all sorts of stationery – often on pages torn from the former Camp administration's accounting books.<sup>8</sup> Books were scrounged in every possible way: Littman's letters home to his family in Tel Aviv abound with requests for books.<sup>9</sup> Books were also bought from German teachers in the locality and bookshops using cigarettes and food parcels allocated by the camp's committee.

The school was named the Hebrew Gymnasium 'The Jewish Brigade Bergen-Belsen' and grew rapidly.<sup>10</sup> In February 1946 there were 104 students in the Gymnasium, and 19 teachers. By the end of 1946 the total number of pupils in the camp's educational system had grown to 880 – largely due to the arrival in the camp of Jewish refugees from the Soviet Zone. The teaching at the school had strong ideological underpinnings that are echoed in the testimonies. Bergen-Belsen DPs, led by Josef Rosensaft, were combative and vocal on Zionist issues, especially on policy decisions concerning children, and the school was, in the eyes of its teachers, 'the hotbed for the nurturing of a national Jewish spirit'.<sup>11</sup> The school was named after the Jewish Brigade, thus positioning the young, brave, Zionist soldiers as the children's role models. Ideological factors were at play in the choice of Yiddish (and later Hebrew) as the teaching language for the school. The first students spoke mainly Polish as did the teachers who had also taught in this language before the war. Still, it

was decided that teaching would be carried out in Jewish languages. This was deemed more appropriate for the school's educational message of Jewish nationalism and Zionism. The decision had its practical benefits as well - especially when more and more children from Hungary and Romania joined the school. One of the testimonies shows the students' identification with the school's language policy:

Unlike the need we had for using Hungarian and Polish, we can now speak in Yiddish or Hebrew. It's much nicer to hear Yiddish. We have nothing to thank the Poles and Hungarians for. They are the diligent disciples of Hitler's annihilation ideology. It's wrong and unneeded to use these languages, especially after the pogroms there.<sup>12</sup>

Zionist ideology was even more apparent in the school's curriculum and educational values. While there was much general education with classes in physics, maths, archaeology and botany, particular emphasis was placed on Hebrew, Jewish History and Palestinian geography, and the like. Special school gatherings centred on the land of Israel, Eretz Israel, and the Jewish return there. One such event ended with the words: 'The whole land is our home. She is waiting for us, she needs sons to build her, sons to defend her. May we soon reach the day when we will all work together in building our homeland and defending it'.<sup>13</sup>

But how did the children respond to such education? Did they identify with its underlying values? From the testimonies it seems that they did. In the 'My Way from Home to Bergen Belsen' testimonies, some of the students ended their essays with the hope to go to Eretz Israel. 'Now my aim is Eretz Israel', wrote 13-year-old Pola Z. (15) after recounting the loss of her family. 'Just like we waited for liberation from the Germans', wrote Lea H. (35) 'we're waiting 100 times over for the day when we will come to our beautiful and faraway homeland'. These aspirations were not just the product of successful brainwashing by their teachers. The students' wartime experience brought them to these conclusions themselves. A student who returned to her hometown only to find that no one from her family had survived, wrote: 'I decided to go to Palestine because we had too many casualties in the Galus (exile). I want to live with my

brothers on my land and to build my life' (56).<sup>14</sup> 'I know that there I'll be treated as a human being', wrote 15-year-old Syma G. (27), reflecting on her experience in Europe.

### The Testimonies

In the first days of the school's existence Helena Wrobel made the students write essays titled: 'My Way from Home to Bergen Belsen'. Forty-six such testimonies were taken between December 1945 and February 1946 and many more were taken later. While most students wrote essays, some were asked to fill in personal questionnaires.<sup>15</sup> The later testimonies and questionnaires include comments and criticisms on the current situation of the children and on the school solicited by Wrobel-Kagan and her staff. Many of the testimonies give the children's age. Most had been born somewhere between 1928 and 1933, were children during the Second World War and at the time of writing were teenagers aged 13–18. They entered the adult world at an early age.

The majority of the first testimonies are in Polish – the language most children still felt most comfortable with, but some are in Yiddish. They are handwritten and on a variety of types of paper – many on pages torn out of German accounting books.

They are short, ranging from half a page to three pages, and usually the style is laconic - even dismissive: 'Everybody knows how life in the ghetto was - there was a terrible famine and hundreds of people died', wrote Syma G. (27). In a similar vein Edzia J. (41) wrote, 'What life was like and how everybody worked is known to everyone'. It is as if the students were 'skimming' over what they saw as the mundane in order to get to the harrowing stories of the war's final days of which they write extensively.

Many things were left unsaid – they were just too painful to remember and were left out in a process of self-censorship. A 13-year-old girl (9) recounted her arrival with her family at Auschwitz: 'When I stood in the *Apell* I was shaking from the cold. When I looked up I saw smoke-filled skies. With this I'm finishing the account of my life during the war'.<sup>16</sup> The clipped style stemmed, it seems, from the writer's awareness of the magnitude of their experience – it just couldn't be wholly told. 'I have kept what

happened to me short', concluded Estera (Edzia) Z. (8), 'because otherwise I would have to write without end'. Occasionally there are attempts to describe emotions: Edyta R. (11) recalled that she was 'lonely and lived in fear of death by gas and of the crematorium'. Students related to feelings of degradation: 'this was the end of our self-respect, our feminine identity', wrote another (50) of her treatment in Auschwitz, 'we were not humans anymore'. 'What we felt in the camp was depression and degradation', wrote one of the other girls (55). Another recalled the moment her brother was taken to his death. 'From that moment', she wrote, 'I was finished'.<sup>17</sup>

Much has been written in the last years on the construction of survivor testimonies and life stories.<sup>18</sup> It is commonplace to see them as attempts at a coherent exposition of one's life: constructed narratives with background and conclusions. The Bergen-Belsen testimonies are different – the students say almost nothing about their pre-war lives. Sometimes they provide basic information about family members, pre-war addresses, etc., but no more. Most start their narrative from the moment their community fell under Nazi control: 'On the 18th of February there was a general resettlement of Jews from our town Chrzanow', 15-year-old Taube W. (37) opened her essay, 'Our family fell apart'. It may be claimed that, obviously, when the students were asked to write about 'the way from home to Bergen Belsen' they concentrated on the 'way' and not on the 'home'. Still, there was their pre-war life, the home they came from, whose invisibility in the testimonies cannot be discounted. Likewise, liberation and its aftermath hardly appeared in the testimonies. These focus primarily on the wartime experience and on specific episodes at that. The last days of the war figure prominently. Evidently, the death marches and the last weeks in Bergen-Belsen eclipsed much of what happened before that.

We have to bear in mind that we do not know how these testimonies were taken and what instructions were given to the students. Were they receiving help from their teachers in constructing and writing the testimonies and if they did, were they asking for it or was it offered to them? Did they compare notes and stories with their schoolmates or with family members who survived? These questions have to be borne in mind when reading and analysing the testimonies.

The testimonies offer a wealth of information on childhood experiences of occupation and persecution. They relate to many

aspects of the children's lives and the horrors they saw around them. In the following pages three major issues prominent in the testimonies will be described: the death marches, family and loss, and moral and immoral behaviour.

### *The Death Marches*

The descriptions of the death marches, given as they were, only a few months after the events, provide a clear and poignant view of the last months of the war as witnessed by the children.

'On the 3rd of February 1945, when the guns of the approaching Russian army could be heard very clearly, we left the lager setting off for a terrible journey', wrote Taube W. (37). It was to be a six week march from Neusalz to Flossenberg from where she and those of her friends who survived the journey would be taken by train to Bergen-Belsen. Conditions were harsh:

900 girls were divided into three transports and were sent off for a long journey with one loaf of bread and wearing makeshift shoes. We were walking fast, rushed by the SS-women, who didn't care about food for us, only to make us walk as many kilometres as possible in one day.

Similarly, Pnina J. (39) set off from the camp in Peterswaldau (a part of the Groß-Rosen complex) on 21 January 1945. 'We were given bread for two days and started marching', she wrote. 'The cold was terrible and after two days there was nothing to eat. Death and fear were in our eyes. We had to do 30 km. a day. Many girls dropped down of hunger and exhaustion. After a week I could walk no more'. Other students also mentioned the intense cold and lack of clothing and shoes. 16-year-old Miriam B. (14), was on the death march from Neusalz to Bergen-Belsen: 'We started off in January, it was terribly cold. The girls had no clogs, we walked barefoot'. It was not hunger but thirst that was the most painful to bear. More than one student wrote of eating snow. 'Snow was like drink for us, because we were suffering from thirst', wrote Lea H. (35).

The last leg of the journey to Bergen-Belsen had been by train, and was remembered as even worse than the foot march. Miriam B. (14) remembered:

Walked so for 10 days and then reached the train cars, it was there that the nightmare began – an endless journey. The cars were open, we sat glued to one another. Our backs and bones broke. We were suffocating.

16-year-old Sara G. (44) similarly described her train transport from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen:

We were driven into cattle cars. They didn't count, just pushed in as many as possible. We stood for three days and three nights. Some were on their knees. Sitting was out of the question. On the way scores of bodies were hurled out. There was a terrible smell in the cars, filth. Some were crying, asking for some breathing space. Many jumped to their deaths because they couldn't breathe inside for lack of air.

As well as underscoring Nazi inhumanity, the testimonies record the general chaos and breakdown of the camp system in the last months of the war. 'We were walked towards the little town of Goben, where the K. D. was situated', wrote Taube W. (37), 'but the Russian army conquered this lager from a different direction and we had to go back'. Then, 'a real miracle happened: the SS-women were commanded to leave us immediately. We remained alone, 200 girls under the supervision of 2 men'. The guards allowed the girls to forage for food but then continued the march. They had nowhere to flee to.

#### *Family and Loss*

For the children caught up in the horrors of this period, the family was the one single factor enabling a sense of security in insecure times. Students wrote extensively about their fathers, mothers and siblings. Even in cases where the family had eventually perished, students recalled how, in times of deep uncertainty, the fact that the family had been together had empowered them and enabled them to face the threatening future. 'In spite of everything I feel relief because I'm with all my family', wrote Jona B. (36) of her feeling when her family and herself were transferred from the ghetto to the camp (probably from Lodz to Birkenau). 'Come what may but we are together. We survived the ghetto and will survive this'. Similarly, 19-

year-old Fira P. (5) who went through several work camps in Estonia with her family wrote of their importance for her: 'Fate was kind to us. We passed all the selections and I stayed with my parents. These were terrible times indeed. Hunger and hard work sucked up all our spirit. But I was with my family all the time and therefore very happy'.<sup>19</sup> These lines were written after the students had lost their families or most of them, and show just how meaningful this issue was for them.

Most painful to describe was the last sight of their families. Stela L. (42) wrote of her separation from her father and brothers on the platform in Auschwitz:

I didn't have enough time to kiss Daddy, he quickly disappeared... I didn't see where the brothers went and didn't realise that I remained alone with Mummy.... In my ears I could still hear my brothers' words: 'Our dearest Mummy, come with us'. And in my eyes I can still see my Daddy's sad eyes.

Jona B. (36) also wrote of her family's arrival at Auschwitz: 'The first blow: we are separated from our father and brother. But it doesn't end here. Selection, I'm separated from my Mummy. In one minute they took all I had'.

The loss of family was remembered by the students as a distinct breaking point. 15-year-old Estera (Edzia) Z. (8) had been incarcerated with her family in the Lodz Ghetto. In July 1944, while searching for bread for her family, she was rounded up and deported to Auschwitz. 'The journey was horrible for me', she wrote, 'I cried all day and night with no break, because I knew that I would not see my parents and my brothers again'. The realisation that now they were alone was excruciating: 'I was so shocked I didn't know what was happening to me', wrote 15-year-old Syma G. (27) about her mother's death in the camp: 'Later I felt lonesome and miserable for remaining alone in the world'. Upset at the prospect of having to cope alone was even stronger after liberation. 'It's so tragic to be left alone, without parents', wrote one of the students (19), 'and to lose all the family in such a terrible way'.<sup>20</sup> Another girl (50) wrote in retrospect: 'On September 1942 I was taken to the camp. I was there alone for three years. I lived in terrible conditions. I was in seven camps. I've been through a lot. The hardest part was being alone, so young and without parents'.<sup>21</sup>

Many youngsters assumed the role of parent to younger family members: 'In our first year in the ghetto I lost my parents', wrote one of the girls (55). 'As an 11-year-old orphan I had to be a mother to my 6-year-old brother. We were separated in Auschwitz in 1944. From that moment I was finished'.<sup>22</sup>

The sense of being alone in the world was accentuated after liberation, as students realised that they had to build their lives anew without a family to support them emotionally and materially. 'It's so tragic to be left alone, without parents and to lose all the family in such a terrible way' (19).<sup>23</sup>

*Moral Evaluation: Good and Evil*

In the introduction to a book on children's testimonies published in Poland in 1947, Maria Hochberg-Marianska attempted to characterise their moral approach:

Every time a child came across noble people, where it found help and heart, it expresses its gratitude with the words filled with best feelings. Every gesture, giving a piece of bread, a word of sincere compassion – these responses of the heart in the awful days of destruction – did not disappear from the memory of the children... Children speak about the bad deeds and the awful people with the same honesty and directness.<sup>24</sup>

Many of the testimonies describe cruel or selfish behaviour among prisoners – sometimes involving discrimination against particular groups. 'The Gypsy women are distributing the food' wrote Jona B. (36) of her experience in Birkenau, 'and because they "like to eat" we get less than half of the food we deserve'. Pola Z. (15) recounted her arrival in Bergen-Belsen: 'We were attacked by Russian women who took all we had left, it was very hard'.<sup>25</sup> This was not an isolated encounter. Another of the girls (2) told of continuous strife: 'We had to fight for our lives and for food', she wrote. 'To be five Jewish girls among many wild Russians was no great pleasure. They took the water we got with such great pains'.<sup>26</sup> Problems were first and foremost caused not by national rivalries but by the impossible conditions. Miriam B. (14), whose account of the death march from Neusalz to Bergen-Belsen was mentioned above, wrote of the conditions in the train cars taking her and her friends on the last leg

of the journey: ‘Strong and weak began to battle for space. We were no longer humans but animals. Each one of us fought for some air to breathe and for space. We were woken many times at night by our thirst and started fighting for the snow that fell upon us’.

But the testimonies are also replete with description of humane behaviour and of prisoner solidarity. Many of the students – especially the younger ones – owe their lives to aid given to them by adults. 15-year-old Edyta R. (11) and her aunt were the only survivors of their families. In September 1943 they were sent to Plaszow. Edyta, 12 years old at the time, was to be sent to death, but she wrote, ‘My loving aunt saved me [from selection], at a very great risk for her’. Similarly, 15-year-old Syma G. (27) was watched over in the camp by a cousin: ‘[she] watched over and took care of me in the camp, only because of her I’m still alive’. 16-year-old Sala R. (12), survived the last weeks in Bergen-Belsen through a chance meeting with ‘a friend of my mother, she gave me some bread and promised to help’.

From the pages of the testimonies come some extraordinary acts of kindness. In one selection at Auschwitz, wrote Ruita S. (1): ‘I was to go to death and my mother to the transport. The *blukova* [woman in charge of the block] moved me from oven to oven (it was very dangerous). When she gave me a sign I ran to my mother’. She was 12 years old at the time. Stela L. (42) was also 12 years old and in Birkenau when her mother was taken from her. In her testimony she recounts that ‘I wanted to throw myself on the barbed-wire, other women held me back with difficulty, comforting me by saying that I would see my Mummy in a few days’ – surprisingly she did.

Sara G.’s (44) description of the harrowing conditions in the train cars to Bergen-Belsen was mentioned above. Yet, she does not fail to recount that, in spite of the unbearable thirst, ‘a bucket of water was brought to the wagon but no one dared drink because we saved it for the people who fainted’. 16-year-old Bronka S. (45) remembered the *Judenaltëste* (senior Jewish inmate) in the Neusalz forced labour camp. ‘She was always on our side. She was a 22-year-old girl to whom we owe our lives’.<sup>27</sup>

### Why Children’s Testimonies?

The children’s testimonies of Bergen-Belsen are a unique cultural and

historical document. It still has to be asked why were they taken at all? What were Wrobel's aims in collecting the testimonies? Why did she make students, all trying to open a new page in life, open their wounds and recount their horrendous experiences?

We have nothing from Wrobel or her co-workers on this subject. In the 1950s she had the testimonies typed up with a view to publication but nothing came out of it. Neither Yad Vashem nor a mysterious British professor who allegedly offered to work on them were interested enough in publishing them.<sup>28</sup>

Wrobel's initiative was in fact another manifestation of a more general phenomenon: the collection of children's testimonies in the Jewish post-war world.<sup>29</sup> This work was done mainly by the Historical Commissions established by Jewish survivor historians and memory activists.<sup>30</sup> The leading commissions, those in Poland and in Munich (working in the American zone) targeted children, developed research methodologies, and published children's testimonies.

How much was Wrobel informed about this work? It's hard to know. Bergen-Belsen's DP community was isolated from the majority of Jewish DPs concentrated in the American zone and from its cultural and historical centres. This was due to British policy, which would not accept Jewish self-determination and therefore worked to isolate 'its' Jewish DPs from the huge and thriving Jewish DP population in the American Zone, and to Bergen-Belsen's camp leadership which, because of this British policy, developed independently from Jewish leadership in the American Zone. It seems that while Wrobel's work developed in isolation, it nonetheless reflected the general mode of thinking at the time.

The issue of surviving children held a special place in survivor culture. The suffering of children epitomised the enormity of German evil. The innocence of the children targeted by the Nazis, and the horrible fate they suffered during the war were the culmination of the Jewish tragedy. Their plight had political implications as well, and the testimonies could be used in the ongoing political struggle. A paper on the collection of children's testimonies was published by the Polish Central Historical Commission in 1945. In typical communist rhetoric the first goal of such testimonies was the anti-fascist struggle:

1. To give – as much as possible – a rounded picture of the criminal Nazi activity, whose purpose was to first morally corrupt and physically exterminate the young Jewish generation.
2. The ultimate tasks of the research are to provide material for an accusation against fascism and to convince the world that it must mercilessly and finally eliminate every trace of fascism.<sup>31</sup>

And there were also issues of Jewish rebuilding to consider. Adults were awed by the children and their stories. The children and their survival played a major role in fulfilling the need for Jewish heroism in the Holocaust. Jewish children survivors were also the nation's hope for the future. Their tragic life during the Holocaust was the backdrop for the building of their new lives. Historically, the aim was to integrate the children's stories into the Jewish narrative of the Holocaust.

But Wrobel and her fellow teachers were not historians and did not see themselves as the chroniclers of the Holocaust. Neither were they political leaders needing the testimonies in order to underline the plight of the Jewish people. They were teachers, interested first and foremost in giving their pupils some sense of normality, and a basis on which to build their future. They had to understand what went on in the not-so-distant past. Without such understanding the students could not be helped, for how can you help a student if you do not know the emotional baggage he is carrying? An acknowledgement that the testimonies were a crucial tool in understanding the students appears also in the Polish Central Historical Commission's paper on children's testimonies. There it was claimed that the testimonies were needed in order:

3. To establish the psychological and physical state of the Jewish youth after living for a period of several years under the conditions of the Nazi regime (ghetto, bunker, 'Aryan side', camp, forest, partisans, etc.)
4. To gather together information about the plans and aspirations of the Jewish youth, investigate their political convictions, their attitude towards other nations, etc., in order to obtain informative material for the direction of our further educational work.<sup>32</sup>

But there were other important reasons for getting students to write their testimonies. Israel Kaplan of the Central Historical Commission in Munich claimed that the Holocaust was an important and far-reaching chapter in the life of the children and that they should not be made to forget it. As grown-ups, he continued, 'the children will probably thank their teachers for these memoirs'. He also suggested something that Wrobel did intuitively: establishing a school archive containing all the students' testimonies. As a teacher, Wrobel must have been no less interested in having the students 'work out' their experiences. Survivors collecting testimonies, such as Rachel Auerbach in Poland and later in Israel, spoke of the act of testifying as an essential catharsis on the way to building a new life.

In conclusion, it can be said that the collection of testimonies from children survivors of Bergen-Belsen by the adult survivors is a fascinating historical and cultural phenomenon. The testimonies themselves enable us to see the camp and the last months of the war through the eyes of a distinct group of victims. Even more so, they offer an insight to the unique Holocaust experience of children and young people, and enable us to integrate their story into the historical narrative of the Holocaust and of Bergen-Belsen camp.

## NOTES

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1. Testimony no. 70, name unknown to us, see note 3. Emphasis added.
2. I was introduced to these testimonies by Mr Yosi Shavit, the director of the Ghetto Fighter's House archives where the testimonies are deposited. His co-operation has been vital for the success of this project. I'm indebted to the work of Ms Edna Elazari in her MA thesis: 'The Hebrew Gymnasium "The Jewish Brigade" in Bergen-Belsen, December 1945–March 1947' (Hebrew), Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1988. Elazari had access to personal papers of the Gymnasium staff and her work is invaluable. She is also the last researcher to see the whole set of testimonies in the Yad Vashem branch in Givatayim. The file has since disappeared and only an incomplete copy exists in the Ghetto Fighters House archive. Elazari's own collection of material on the Gymnasium was destroyed in a flooding of her basement. I have therefore used excerpts of sources and testimonies from Elazari's work in places where the original is unavailable.

3. Testimonies were numbered and named by Wrobel-Kagan. Where possible the number and name of witnesses are given. For testimonies not available in the archives today, only numbers are given as in Elazari's work. Much thought had been given in the preparation of this project to the question of unveiling the full names of witnesses. On one hand these testimonies are accessible to the public in the archives and (partially) on the net. Sixty years had passed since they were taken and they are now in the public domain. Publishing the names would have made the paper much more humane as befits its subject matter. It would also be a great help to historians to have the full name of witnesses. On the other hand the testimonies were taken when the witnesses were young, some were even minors. They were taken at a time of great emotional upheaval and at a very sheltered setting. At the time, the issue of publication was not on the children's minds. It has therefore been decided to use first names and initials of the surname. The full names of the witnesses are available for further research.
4. Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.53.
5. Yehudah Tubin, Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.51.
6. Wrobel-Kagan, Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.83.
7. Littman's letter to his family, 28 November 1945, Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.87.
8. Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', pp.83-6.
9. Littman's letter to his family, 28 November 1945, Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.87.
10. Other educational institutions opened in the camp: the 'She'eris Israel' yeshiva opened in November 1945, the ORT vocational school in June 1946 and later a 'Beis Yaacov' girls' school and seminary.
11. Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.89. See also Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany 1945-1950* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2002), esp. chs.8-11.
12. Testimony no.60, Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.89.
13. Private papers of David Littman, Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.96.
14. Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.98.
15. One such questionnaire exists in the Ghetto Fighters House archive, file no.5592.
16. Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.70
17. *Ibid.*, p.78.
18. See Gabriele Rosenthal, 'Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews', in Amia Lieblich and Ruthellen Josselson (eds.), *The Narrative Study of Lives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), pp.59-91; Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
19. Jona B. 'lost everything - dad, mom and brothers and sisters' in Auschwitz. Fira P's father was murdered in Stutthof.
20. Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', p.80.
21. *Ibid.*, p.79.
22. *Ibid.*, p.78.
23. *Ibid.*, p.80.
24. Maria Hochberg-Marianska and Noe Greuss (eds.), *The Children Accuse* (Polish edn., Warsaw, 1947; English edn., trans. Bill Johnston, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996, 2005).
25. Interestingly, she uses a Polish-Catholic expression 'The cross was horrible', meaning hard work.
26. Elazari, 'The Hebrew Gymnasium', pp.64, 70.
27. *Ibid.*, p.66.
28. In years of extensive work in Yad Vashem's archive I did not find any mention of this

matter. The 1950s were years of internal and public conflict concerning the institution's goals and it had a very poor publication record. Elazari recalls that Wrobel mentioned she had an interested British professor but refused to divulge his name.

29. For an extensive coverage of this issue, see Boaz Cohen, 'The Children's Voice: Post-War Collection of Testimonies from Child Survivors of the Holocaust', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (forthcoming, 2007).
30. In the early post-war years Jewish survivors all over Europe organised historical commissions aimed at documenting the Jewish tragedy. These commissions collected thousands of survivor testimonies, unearthed documentary evidence built up by Jews during the Holocaust, and collected German documents. For more information on the commissions see Boaz Cohen, 'Holocaust Survivors and the Genesis of Holocaust Research', in Johannes-Dieter Steinert and Inge Weber-Newth (eds.), *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution* (Osnabrück: Secolo Verlag, 2005); Shmuel Krakowski, 'Memorial Projects and Memorial Institutions Initiated by She'erit Hapletah', in Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (eds.), *She'erit Hapletah, 1944-1948: Rehabilitation and Political Struggle* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990), pp.388-98.
31. Gita Selkes, 'General introduction to the Questionnaire for Children', Central Jewish historical commission, Warsaw 1945.
32. Ibid.