Survivor Caregivers and Child Survivors: Rebuilding Lives and the Home in the Postwar Period

Boaz Cohen
Western Galilee College

The educational and rehabilitative work that three young women carried out with uprooted child Holocaust survivors in postwar children's homes forms the subject of the following article. These caretakers also had lost most of their families, communities, and prewar social networks. While most survivors were rebuilding their own lives, they dedicated the immediate postwar years to their work in children's homes. The author establishes how they perceived the children and interacted with them, tracing their concerns, deliberations, and professional choices, and elucidates the practices and strategies they formulated.

Approximately one and a half million Jewish children were murdered in the Holocaust. Their survival rate was very low—only eleven percent survived the war in Nazi-occupied Europe. Nahum Bogner estimates that only 5,000 Jewish children survived the war in Poland—a survival rate of just three percent. This number rose to 28,000 with the return of the Polish Jews who had spent the war in the unoccupied Soviet Union.[1] The few who had survived in Poland had hidden with non-Jewish families or in convents, made their way as street urchins, or lived in the woods either alone or with groups of Jews or partisans. They hid in pits, barns, attics, or closets, or lived under assumed Aryan identities. They were hunted in the countryside and in towns, and locals denounced many of them to the Germans. If they were discovered in hiding, their host family also might be killed.

Child survivors in Poland often remained uprooted even after the war. The Nazis had murdered their communities and families; they had no homes to which they could return. They ended up in children's homes where caregivers, themselves uprooted and having experienced similar losses, mentored them. The homes in turn were uprooted more than once, moving from Poland across Europe on their way to Eretz Israel-Palestine.[2] My study focuses on three individuals who worked with child survivors in the immediate postwar period, documenting their concerns, deliberations, and subsequent choices. All of them in their twenties or thirties, these women were themselves Holocaust survivors or refugees who had lost most of their families, communities, and prewar social networks. Nevertheless, instead of rebuilding their personal lives, they dedicated these years to the child survivors: their own restoration of life through the national enterprise.

The subjects of this article are Nesia Orlovich (later Reznik), Chasia Bielicka (later Bornstein), and Lena Kuchler (later Silberman).[3] While they did not work together, they had much in common. All of them established and oversaw children's homes in Poland in 1945, each housing approximately one hundred children. All of them left Poland in 1946 with their groups for interim locations in either Germany or France, and eventually succeeded in moving their wards to Eretz Israel. All of them wrote memoirs interweaving the story of their postwar work with the

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children's stories of suffering and survival during the Holocaust. I employ these memoirs and other historical sources to give voice to these caregivers.

My study builds on existing research on Jewish child survivors in Poland, an effort that has centered on political disputes, organizational issues, and the mechanisms and heartrending dilemmas involved in reclaiming children from their rescuers and rebuilding their Jewish identities. Joanna Michlic has written extensively about Jewish children in postwar Poland and the ways they recounted their war experiences. Nahum Bogner explores and analyzes the myriad avenues of Jewish children's survival during the Holocaust and also their return to Jewishness after the war. The complicated and painful facets of this return are the subject of Emunah Nachmany Gafny's work.[4] Their work provides the background for this study.

Chasia Bornstein-Bielicka (1921–2012), the youngest of the three caregivers, was twenty-four when she established the first Koordinatzia (The Coordinated Commission for Jewish Children) children's home in Łódź for reclaimed child survivors.[5] She was a member of Hashomer Hatzair (the left-Zionist youth movement). During the war, Chasia was active in the Grodno Ghetto underground, and in spring 1944 joined the partisans in the Białystok region. She lost her entire family in the Holocaust. She and the children she oversaw moved from Poland to several locations in occupied Germany before setting out for Eretz Israel on the *Theodor Herzl*. Following the ship's capture by the British Navy, they spent months in a British youth detention camp in Cyprus—their last stop before reaching their coveted destination in August 1947.

Nesia Orlovich-Reznik (1914–1997), like Chasia a committed member of Hashomer Hatzair, had a different wartime experience.[6] A teacher in Soviet-occupied Vilna, she escaped the German occupation and spent the war working in a home for Lithuanian refugee children near Tashkent in Uzbekistan. She subsequently returned to Vilna to work in a children's home, but soon crossed the border into Poland, where she ran Hashomer Hatzair's children's home first in Sosnowiec and then in Ludvikovo in Upper Silesia. She was thirty-one years old at the time. From there the group moved to Germany and finally to Eretz Israel. She, too, lost all her family in the Holocaust.

Membership in Hashomer Hatzair had given Chasia and Nesia a spiritual and social "home" during the war. In the aftermath, it served as a support group for survivors and a framework for realizing the dream of emigration to Eretz Israel. It is through the movement that they gained the opportunity to establish and lead children's homes. Chasia operated through the Koordinatzia, a coalition of Zionist organizations that coordinated the work of finding, recovering, and caring for surviving Jewish children in postwar Poland. Her home was supposed to give the children a general Zionist-socialist education. Nesia's children's home was established as a Hashomer Hatzair institution and was also committed to the ideological ideals of this left-Zionist, activist movement.[7]

Lena Kuchler-Silberman (1910–1987) survived under an assumed Polish identity in Warsaw and the countryside.[8] She used this identity to rescue Jewish orphans from the Warsaw Ghetto by placing them in convents. She had been a teacher before the war, and married. During the war she gave birth to a baby girl, who soon died. Her husband, believing he had a better chance of survival alone, deserted her. Following liberation, she began a doctoral thesis at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. A chance encounter with neglected child survivors at the Kraków Jewish Committee headquarters changed the course of her life. Through the committee, she established a children's home in Zakopane, a resort in the Tatra Mountains. She was thirty-four years old. From there she clandestinely moved the group to France with the help of the American Jewish Orthodox relief organization Vaad Hahatzalah.[9] In 1949 she and her group arrived in the newly established State of Israel.

Lena Kuchler poses with some of her children in France shortly before leaving for Israel in 1949. Central Zionist Archives.

Why did these young women devote themselves to full-time work with child survivors? The answer lies in both the personal and ideological realms. Nesia explained, "There is only one thing that can justify my escape from Vilna. To collect these surviving orphaned children, to build a Hebrew home for them, and to inculcate in them a love of homeland and kibbutz [agricultural collective], to a new life—for this I yearned."[10] Chasia wrote, "I remained in Poland … I had a feeling that this was the right place to be, to collect the remnants of our children and youth and to begin anew."[11] In a 1946 interview in France, Kuchler recounted a motivational speech that she had given to female Auschwitz survivors, whom she saw as prospective personnel for the home. These were women who had lost their entire families. Kuchler recalled, "I told them that if they do not have their own children to take into their hearts, these children are parentless, and we should become true mothers to them."[12] Thus, personal motherhood was enlisted to the national mission of rehabilitating Jewish children.

There was obviously also a personal aspect to the choice of devoting themselves to the children. In an interview in 1970, Chasia spoke of the personal void she felt after liberation,

> I never dreamt of liberation [during the war] and at the moment of liberation I found myself separate from my entire movement. Hundreds of my friends from Hashomer Hatzair were dead. I lost all my family.… It was hard for me to return to normal life; I needed a task, a mission. When they offered me work with the children I thought and felt that if I dedicated myself to these children, and became like a mother to them, then maybe I would return to life. And I decided not only to work with them but also to move in with them, to live together as one family, give them a warm home and share everything with them.[13]

Overcoming personal loss through devotion to others is a common theme for the three caregivers. It is also a relevant concept in modern works about overcoming trauma in which Holocaust survivors serve as an exemplary case.[14] Lena Kuchler expressed similar sentiments in 1962, "After the war I was broken and crushed, with nothing to live for. The children saved me—by helping them I redeemed myself."[15] She wrote about her coworker, sixteen-year-old Hanka, who had survived Auschwitz, and when interviewed for the job by Kuchler said, "I want to work with children.… I had six brothers and sisters, and when I came back from Auschwitz there was no one left.… The

work with the children will free me of my loneliness and reconnect me to people."[16] At a reunion in 1964, Nesia explained, "Caring for the children gave me a sense of purpose, a meaning to my life."[17] Or, even more poignantly, "We needed them more than they needed us."[18] At her 90th birthday celebration organized by her "children," Chasia also stated that working with the children had saved her.[19]

Regaining Humanity through (Surrogate) Home and Family

How could these women bring back "normal life" for the children? The caregivers understood that the children were scarred not only in body, but in spirit. "One thing I've already learned from my work with children during the war," wrote Nesia, "was that the mental and moral damages outweighed the physical.… I was not troubled by their pale complexion and physical wounds." The real question was "how to allay the terror in their eyes, to free them of nightmares and night terrors."[20] It was obvious to the caregivers that the children had lost their basic trust in humanity and had no hope for the future.

Although working separately, all three women reached a similar conclusion: their task was to give the children a home and a family. They emphasized the value of love and, in particular, the important role that they as surrogate mothers played. Nesia continued, "First and foremost, we have to gain the children's trust. In the face of all the hate, all the evil they encountered, we have to infuse in them huge doses of love, unrestricted love, motherly love, with all its manifestations and exaggerations. In face of the hostile environment we have to establish for them a home radiating warmth and security, each child has to feel that 'here you are a king.'"[21] For Chasia that love had to be shown not only in words but also in deeds. "I knew they had to have a constantly caring home," Chasia remembered, "To gain their trust and to make sure they have a sense of requited love, I hugged, I embraced, I woke up at all hours of the night … I gave every child the feeling I belonged to him and at the same time I built up the group as a family."[22]

Familial and motherly love were particularly important because most of the children, especially during the first year after the war, were orphans. Many had witnessed their family's disintegration and extermination. The caregivers found themselves filling in for missing families, and specifically for the lost or absent mothers. The concept of family and motherhood "gained a new and lofty meaning," said Kuchler: "Familial feelings had to be rebuilt in the children and since there was no possibility of bringing the dead mother back, we—those who were still alive—had to be the mothers and to rebuild a new family for them.… The children became brothers and sisters, and we, the female caregivers, became the mothers."[23]

The issue of motherhood was central to Kuchler's educational work. She saw herself as the children's mother, and many addressed her as Mother. In 1946 she told an interviewer that "my feelings toward these children, toward all of them, is the same as the feeling of a mother toward the children born to her. Maybe even … deeper. I protect these children, and I will go on protecting them as long as they are with me." She saw her role continuing after the children grew up. "I would like … to remain with them forever," she continued; "I would like to see them get married, and to already have my own 'grandchildren.' I do not have a family of my own. I have nobody here."[24]

The children responded warmly though it took time and effort. An outstanding example is the surprise Mother's Day celebration they organized when the group was at a facility in France. It was a big event, recounted one of the boys: "We woke up at five o'clock in the morning.… We

organized and decorated the dining hall, put up a wall poster [with letters to Kuchler written by the children] that covered more than two windows, with a large photograph of her in the center. The younger children stood by the stairs leading from Lena's room to the dining room"[25] and as she passed by them, showered her with flower petals they had collected beforehand. One of the other boys wrote in her honor,

> Today is dedicated to our mother. We were not supposed to celebrate this day, as our mothers were killed. But we are celebrating it all the same.… Why? Because we have a mother, a mother who is devoted to us and loves us. Yet our attitude towards her is different than towards our [birth] mother. With the former we never sufficiently appreciated her feelings and dedication. With her [Kuchler] we appreciate her toil, sacrifice, and care for us. Her heart that beats only for us. Only now, when we are free, do we appreciate that she saved our lives while endangering hers.[26]

The acceptance of a motherly role influenced how the caregivers lived. Working for no salary, they threw themselves into the task with total dedication. "From the first day we opened the home, I moved in and lived there," recounted Chasia, "twenty-four hours a day, the children and me, day and night, Sabbath and holy days, nonstop for eighteen months."[27] It was not only a challenging schedule, but also mentally and emotionally exhausting. However, Chasia felt it was necessary and worthwhile: "I'm not complaining, I could have worked less, but I did it because I felt it had to be done."[28]

They all saw the importance of constructing the home as a new family. Chasia wrote of this awakening following a conversation with one of the children who said that "she was fed up with orphanages." This inspired Chasia: "That night I thought about what makes a group of children into a family. I tried to analyze my own feelings—where were all my yearnings directed?—and at once I understood: they were towards my sisters and brother Avrem'el, to my parents. It dawned on me that … it would be right to have the older children 'adopt' the younger ones. To be an older brother means to be there for the younger one, to assist him in getting dressed, to look after him."[29]

In this sense, Chasia saw herself as an older sister.[30] She indeed treated the older children at the home as her colleagues. "They had a unique sense of responsibility and full dedication to our project; they were not only assisting us, they were my close friends, I could share with them distress and worries and talk about pain and grief," she remembered. "Together we fought the Polish teenagers in the stone-throwing confrontations at the public park, and together we went at night to search for children who ran away because they would rather be somewhere else."[31]

Kuchler also conceptualized the children's home as a family. When asked about their future in Eretz Israel, she explained, "It is our deep desire that all of us continue together, because we comprise one family." She emphasized, "This is not a [children's] home, this is not an institution. This is one family." In the family atmosphere, even if they quarreled, it was like siblings quarreling. The older children insisted on taking the toddlers from the home to an outing—even if it meant that they had to carry them on their backs. "It was very moving, because it shows how close the older children are to the young ones, how very much they love them."[32] All three caretakers had fond memories of their own homes and mothers: inspiration for their new roles.

The "family" concept also manifested itself in the self-management frameworks established in the homes. While the caregivers had very strong personalities and frequently led by charisma, they nonetheless established children-led bodies to regulate social life. Chasia wanted the older

children not only to receive instructions from the staff but also to have a say and make decisions as full partners.[33] Kuchler formed a children's court to deal with disputes and disciplinary problems, and Nesia established a child-directed "secretariat." Self-management, even on a small scale, was central to the caregivers' efforts to help the children reestablish social skills, moral judgment, self-confidence, and trust.[34]

The physical setting was also important. The caregivers faced the challenge of providing the children with a feeling of home and a sense of security in an unstable postwar world in which the physical homes changed according to the fluid situation. One way of addressing this was the issue of food. Both children and staff had endured dire hardship during the war—hunger and anxiety over obtaining food were familiar to all. "The terror of hunger still haunts the children," wrote Nesia, "We would still find slices of bread [hidden] under the mattress."[35] Chasia related to this: "I, who starved so many times, knew how much security could be gained from a slice of bread hidden under a mattress."[36]

Food security, especially an abundance of bread, was central to the homes.[37] "I made sure the existence of enough food was apparent to the children," related Chasia, "A plate with bread was constantly on the kitchen table. Anyone could take bread and we automatically refilled the plate."[38] In Nesia's children's home, immediately after breakfast, "we put out plates full of sandwiches, the kitchen was open to all, and a child could take as much as he wanted."[39] Kuchler also stressed this point, "Bread here was 'free,' it was not handed out, anyone could take as much as he wanted—until he was full."[40]

Mealtimes were not just about food. "We wanted to set the table appropriately: a white tablecloth, a flower vase and nice tableware," wrote Nesia.[41] Kuchler recalled the children's awe when they sat down to "tables covered with snow white tablecloths, and, with care, touched the cool china plates and the shiny and jingly knives and forks" in the new building of her children's home.[42] Nesia spoke of the importance of cooking in the home. Though her children could eat in the dining room of the nearby kibbutz—the collective of Zionist young adults preparing for immigration—she decided that she needed to cook to warm the drab apartment. She recalled how "cooking smells coming from the kitchen, [children] helping with the preparation of the meals … could help the children feel at home."[43]

Uprooted Identity—the "Convent Girls"

Identity was a major issue in the children's homes: children who had spent the war in hiding with Polish-Christian families or in convents often had confused identities that conflicted with their caregivers' sense of Jewishness. Many of the children saw their Jewish identity as a liability. The fact that Jews in postwar Poland were still in danger magnified this feeling. The older children, who remembered the prewar years and who had not adopted Aryan identities adapted more easily to their caregivers' notions of Jewishness. It was much harder for the younger ones, who had few memories of home and family life to help them connect. This was most difficult for the children—typically girls—who had survived in convents steeped in a strong Christian (and at times antisemitic) identity. All three caregivers struggled with the challenge of the "convent girls."[44]

The clash between Christian convent education and the daily life in a Jewish children's home was especially strong during holy days—Jewish and Christian. Chasia recalled hearing sobbing from the girls' room one Easter; some of the girls were kneeling and crying, "Jesus will not forgive

us.... Today is Easter and we are with the Jews, not praying, not going to church, and there is not even a single crucifix on the wall."[45]

All three caregivers believed that head-on confrontation or coercion would be counterproductive. "I tried to reach out to them with warmth, a hug, and protection against evil," recounted Chasia. "I sat with them, and started to delineate between the war years and the present, to differentiate between the need to deny Judaism in order to escape death and the privilege of returning to Judaism as free people. I tried to draw a line between the terrible loneliness of living with a false identity and the privilege of being a part of a large family of children who, although parentless, have brothers and sisters, a home, and a nation."[46]

Many times the openly Christian identity of girls with crucifixes on their necks and icons near their beds antagonized the other children. Kuchler told of one episode in which the convent girls complained that the boys were snatching their crosses. To her question one the boys responded that "such girls should not be here.... They spit when they hear the word Jew.... I tore off their crucifix because I couldn't take it anymore.... Did we suffer in the woods, fight and almost die so that these girls would come here to insult us?" Kuchler answered, "You are trying to force them to discard their faith that is everything to them now, their treasure.... The faith that they believe saved them. When you tear off their cross you are using force, violence." The boy countered, "So we have to stand aside and see them pray all day and look down at the Jews?" Kuchler responded, "Unfortunately, yes ... the more you press them the more they will resist. You should give them space ... let them be ... these things will sort themselves out with time."[47]

"I understood that I should not break their faith, but rather begin by building a new one," said Chasia, "transferr[ing] belief in Jesus to belief in the Jewish people and in Eretz Israel." This was not a clash between religions: the children's homes were secular institutions and they stressed a national Jewish identity. Chasia's motto was "love of the Jewish people, of Eretz Israel ... love of humanity." It was bound to be a long process. "I didn't take away their crosses," said Chasia; "they first wore them openly, then under their shirts and finally took them off, and packed them away as a memento." Actually, she claimed it was easier to instill a Jewish identity in children who believed in something than in those who "did not trust or believe in anything or anyone."[48]

All three caregivers shared this approach, but it was not universally accepted. Kuchler's dispute with the Orthodox Vaad Hahatzalah arose because they believed that she was too lenient and not committed enough to returning the children to Judaism. Other educators took different approaches. The caregiver who replaced Chasia in Poland recalled, "We argued, and it was difficult."[49]

Listening to the Children

The caregivers encouraged the children to tell their stories, which subsequently figured prominently in the caregivers' testimonies and memoirs. They viewed this process as part of the children's rehabilitation. Working with the children entailed listening to them describe what they had gone through. Usually, the stories came out naturally, with children opening up due to chance events. For example, Chasia tells a story about a young girl named Irka: "She would never speak about the past, but once, as we were walking down the street in Łódź, she caught my hand and directed my attention to a peasant carrying a bunch of brooms made from tree branches. She went on to explain that she had survived alone in the forest by making and selling such brooms, and then told her story at length."[50] The caregivers recorded the children's experiences and physical

and mental condition in notebooks, tracking their progress towards "normalization." But there was another motivation at play here, the children's experiences were important to the documentation and understanding of the Holocaust and as such, the caregivers believed they deserved to be heard and recorded.

Berko, one of Nesia's teenagers who had fought with the partisans, was severely depressed—particularly because he had lost one of his legs. Nesia thought that it might ease his depression to "open his heart and write everything that was haunting him." Writing his autobiography did indeed improve his condition.[51] Nesia brought his testimony to Benjamin Tenenbaum (later, Tene), a Warsaw-born writer who had immigrated to Eretz Israel before the Holocaust and returned to Poland after the war on a cultural mission. This proved the catalyst for Tenenbaum's initiation of a major collection of children's testimonies.[52]

Chasia had the children tell their stories while they waited in the British detention camp in Cyprus on their way to Eretz Israel. In her memoirs, she explained why this was exactly the right time for this endeavor. "Psychologically, it seemed like the right thing to do," she wrote; "I had no other tools and was not trained to deal with their psychological needs." On the other hand, she did not think that "anyone else in the world knew more [about them] than us." The effect, according to Chasia, was "clearly apparent." The time spent on this group project of drafting, writing, and illustrating was "like opening a wound and extracting the pus. It was as if the children were throwing up entire chunks of painful issues and easing their pain accordingly."[53]

Kuchler juxtaposed forgetting and retelling, opening the wounds of the past and coming back to life. She explained that in 1945, "the children were still deep in this hell; they talked of nothing but crematoria, 'organizing' another bowl of soup, who was beaten up, and so forth.… I wondered how does one move from the shadow of death to life, how does one cross over the abyss of memories? He who shelters under the wings of death will not be able to live.… The children … must be freed from the clutches of ghastly memories." This was the way she coped with her own memories and nightmares, and so it could be with the children. Every time the children played in the sun, laughing, she knew that "we have won, we overcame the evil plan to exterminate us—we are alive."[54]

Yet, as the children bounced back, "we started dreading another death—death from forgetfulness … that would be a victory for the enemy.… I realized that the world must know the story of those days…the truth from which we all seek to protect ourselves. [It has to be done] So as to eradicate from the world the evil that the Germans perpetrated against our children and us.… All we had left was a handful of sick children who miraculously survived … and each is a witness of a generation."[55]

Kuchler, like Chasia, preferred informal conversations to having the children write down their testimonies. She would choose a moment, a walk in the woods, or a quiet moment in the sitting room and then ask, "What do you remember of the past? Tell me your experience." She preferred to have the children speak freely, unguided, and uninterrupted. "I did not 'interview' the children, nor prepare questions.… I could not do it, I myself was trembling as the child spoke." She wrote the testimonies in shorthand or, if the child felt uneasy, shortly afterwards. Later, she transcribed them into longhand. "I was not aiming just to hear the historical truth," she explained, "I was looking for another truth, the emotional experience, the suffering." She also noted the importance of these testimonies for "psychological research," and tried to record language, syntax, body language, and responses.[56]

These caregivers were not alone in listening to and recording children's accounts. This was a widespread phenomenon among Jewish teachers and activists, many of them survivors, who transcribed or published child survivor testimonies in the late 1940s.[57]

Hopes and Dreams—The Notion of Eretz Israel

All three memoirs dwell on the harsh reality of Jewish life in postwar Poland, and in Nesia's case, in Soviet Lithuania as well. Both Jewish adults and children encountered hostility from many Gentiles. Children were attacked on the streets; Nesia's children's home (in Sosnowiec) was the object of so much harassment that "the fear from the street forced us to stay inside our tiny apartment for many hours a day."[58] Thus, the children shared the experiences of many surviving and repatriated Jews in postwar Poland. The overtly antisemitic and sometimes violent welcome from many in the Polish public manifested, for instance, in the murder of returning Jews on the roads and in trains culminating in the July 1946 Kielce pogrom. While the central authorities did not condone these attacks, they were not in a position to prevent them.[59]

Chasia's children were also victims of Polish antisemites. Because there was no free space in the Łódź apartment and no private garden or yard, the only place to play was at the public park. "It was postwar Poland and antisemitism was rife," recounted Chasia. "We were often met by a barrage of antisemitic insults. Polish teenagers used to throw stones at the children. Once we had a very rough skirmish and barely made it out of the park.… There were adult Poles there, who did nothing to help:… I had to face the thugs all by myself. No one helped us."[60]

Lena Kuchler's children were constantly bullied by their classmates in the Zakopane public schools, physically abused during regular hours and beaten up afterwards. There was no option but to educate them at home. Kuchler herself was robbed and severely beaten. Following an armed attack on the children's home in Rabka (also belonging to the Kraków Jewish Committee) that brought about its closure, Polish authorities had to provide weapons and armed guards in order to ensure the children's security at the Zakopane home. Kuchler recorded one attack by the nationalist NSZ (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne Polski). The attacks necessitated restrictions on the children and had a very negative effect on morale: "They could not go into town alone or even in groups because of the stones thrown at them. But the stones reached them even in the home—it was dangerous to eat in the dining room with its many windows because it faced the street. The silhouettes of the armed guards passing back and forth were always seen from our windows and made us feel that we were closed in, locked down, under constant threat."[61]

Approximately 150,000 Jews fled Poland in 1946 and 1947, with the children's home residents taking precedence.[62] The organizations running or supporting the homes (Koordinatzia, Hashomer Hatzair, and Vaad Hahatzalah) saw no future for Jews—especially Jewish children—in Poland, though the Jewish Communist (and anti-Zionist) administration contested this. For ardent Zionists such as Nesia and Chasia, the answer naturally lay in emigration to a Jewish homeland. "In lieu of the unknown and bleak future in Poland," said Nesia, "we can offer the children emigration to Eretz Israel and the establishment of a kibbutz." That was a future they could work towards. "After breakfast, the dining room became a study room.… Someone brought us a map of Eretz Israel. We studied Hebrew, math, and geography. I would tell the children Bible stories from memory."[63] She took her inspiration from *Shvambranye*, a Yiddish children's book by Lev Kassil, which tells the story of two children who overcome the harsh conditions of World War I by inventing a world of their own, spending their days playing and building in this dream world.[64] After

World War II, the dream of a kibbutz offered a hope to work towards and to lean on. Nesia and the children played a game called "daydreams" in which each child fantasized about the kibbutz they planned to establish.[65]

Unlike the others, Kuchler was not originally an active Zionist, and had planned a career in child psychology in Poland. Yet, the work with the children in the bleak reality of postwar Poland reinforced her Zionist leanings. She too came to see hope only in Eretz Israel. "The latest events in Zakopane reinforced my realization that the children's fate is intrinsically connected to the fate of the Jews in Poland," recounted Kuchler. "Anyone who could, escaped from Poland; everyone wanted to save themselves. But what about the children, were they to stay and pay the price? I understood that there is no salvation for us but to flee abroad with all the children," she told her staff.[66] In a contemporary letter she wrote to the Kraków Jewish Committee after she left Zakopane she explained, "I do not see any option of staying in Zakopane or any other place. I think that after the hell they went through I cannot expose them to the danger in the name of building a new democracy."[67] The final destination was to be Eretz Israel.[68] "We desire to live in Palestine," she told David Boder in late 1946,

> All the children desire this; us too, and I most of all. We have wandered enough; it's been enough roaming. We do not want to be insulted anymore because we are Jewish. We want to be proud of it, and we are proud of it, that we are Jews. We want to live in our own country, on our own land. We want to be citizens of our own country. We want to develop, free and unimpeded.… We want to fight for our Fatherland, for our country. This is … our aim. The children are learning a lot of Hebrew, because they know this is their native language. We all dream about reaching Palestine.[69]

Departure

The process of leaving Poland underlined how dependent the caretakers were on Jewish organizations to help them navigate postwar power struggles. Kuchler left Zakopane with her children without coordinating the move with the Kraków Jewish Committee, the organization with which the home was affiliated. It seemed obvious to her that they would try to prevent the move, since they had to answer to the Polish authorities. She accepted an offer from the Vaad Hahatzalah Orthodox relief organization that promised her passports for the border crossing and continuing support in France on the way to Eretz Israel. In France, bitter disagreements with the Vaad resulted in her transferring the group to the OPEJ (Oeuvre Protection des Enfants Juifs), a socialist-Zionist organization. Chasia's home had been established by the Zionist Koordinatzia, which itself decided it was time to smuggle the children out of Poland and facilitated the move. Hashomer Hatzair, to which Nesia's group belonged, expedited their move. While Kuchler thus acted as an independent agent seizing on an opportunity, Chasia and Nesia acted within the framework of their parent organizations.

Departure from Poland was an emotional process, another uprooting for the children. It challenged the social and psychological cohesion of the groups. Chasia was given a day-and-a-half's notice before departure, which had to be carried out clandestinely. Chasia opposed this approach and argued with the Koordinatzia leaders. She believed that the children should not undergo another traumatic uprooting: "I created a family home only a few months ago, gave some warmth and regular meals, calmed them down. How can I wake them up one morning and tell them 'we are leaving'?"[70] There was another problem: some of the children had surviving family members

who (for security reasons) could not be informed. One of the girls had a grandmother with whom she had survived in hiding, recounted Chasia. "How could I tear apart these souls without saying a word?" Yet, she was told, if the authorities got word of the impending move they might close the borders. Chasia obtained special permission to take this girl for a goodbye visit, but "there were other cases where I couldn't, I did not get permission."[71] Kuchler also addressed the issue of surviving family members. After telling the older children personally that they were going to leave, she understood that one of the teenagers was reluctant because his only remaining family member, a younger sister, was still residing with the Polish family who hid her during the war. Kuchler gave him travel money to visit and try to convince his sister to come along, which she did.[72]

Neither Nesia nor Kuchler mention negative reactions to news of the impending move, but Chasia's account remains illuminating. She decided to inform the children the night before. Carefully she asked if they remember that they were to go one day to Eretz Israel. "I was surprised by the fierceness of their response," she recounted. "Many started crying: 'we don't want to go!' While many of the older children identified with the move, the initial reaction of many of the younger ones was their objection." There were those who started shouting, "Send us back to our Poles." One threatened to run away if he was not returned to Lublin. Most of those clamoring to stay really had no one to go back to. They had been "sold off" (Chasia's words) by their rescuers or had been housed in inhospitable institutions and convents. The hysterical responses stemmed from the suddenness of the move, which the children had no time to adjust to. Crying was also contagious, with younger children following their older role models. That night was very hard emotionally; the children had to leave behind many precious personal belongings since they could not be seen packed for a long journey. There were many arguments, the children would not go to bed, and after lights-out "the sound of muffled crying could be heard from several corners of the bedrooms."[73]

The unrest continued throughout the arduous and perilous journey to the DP camps in Germany. There the group remained together for almost a year, regaining its cohesion and sense of purpose as a warm family group with a strong Jewish and Zionist identity. This enabled the children to weather hardship, privation, and British incarceration on their way to the Promised Land.

The departure also entailed clandestine activities and risktaking by children and caretakers alike. Kuchler had passports for most of the children, but had to smuggle some of them through customs, even hiding some of the younger ones in rucksacks carried by the older children. This was a perilous decision; once one of the younger children relieved himself in the rucksack that started dripping and was noticed by a customs official. Luckily, the official thought it was a dripping water bottle.[74]

Chasia's account highlights the logistical and psychological aspects of the move. First, the group had to leave its abode in Łódź unnoticed by the authorities. "We organized the children into small groups, each led by an older child and escorted by an adult," she recalled. "A group was sent out every ten minutes" to the train station. The next stage was the border crossing from Poland to Germany in Szczecin. The children stayed for several days in a ruined building, with "no windows, no doors, [sleeping] on the filthy floor." In order to cross the border the group had to be broken up with two or three children allotted to a pair of adult Jewish refugees posing as their parents. Each group included at least one refugee with German roots, which entitled them to enter occupied Germany. The adults were expected to take care of their "own" children but not all lived up to this task and there were problems of neglect and mistreatment. Once in Lübeck, the group reunited, but the hardships continued. Sanitary conditions were bad with "no space to take care of

the children, no place to wash them and clean them." They also underwent traumatic disinfection procedures. All this taxed the children's nerves: "The situation was very tense, the children were uneasy … afraid, they felt isolated and out of place."[75] Due to her insistence, the group was separated from the adults and moved across Germany. In Salzheim, near Frankfurt, Chasia began again, under difficult conditions, to reconstruct the home the children needed.

DP youth line the deck of the captured *Theodor Herzl* before transfer to British detention in Cyprus; April 14, 1947. Central Zionist Archives.

Conclusion

The rehabilitation of many Jewish child and adolescent survivors in Poland took place in children's homes, where they and adult survivors and returnees from the Soviet Union, sharing similar losses and pain, coalesced into surrogate families that enabled them to transcend the abyss between liberation and a new life. The success of the project owes much to the educational approach and practices adopted in the children's homes. The caregivers' limitless commitment to dealing with the children's often problematic behavior; ensuring material and physical security; involving the children in the running of the homes; and shaping their education towards a renewed Jewish identity—all these were geared toward reviving trust in humanity, inculcating a strong Zionist identity, and enabling them to share in the building of the Jewish people's future in Eretz Israel. The fact that these practices evolved in geographically distant homes with no regular contact, suggests that this is not a chance approach by a gifted educator, but rather a historical phenomenon.

The homes evolved around the caregivers, who brought to the task memories of their own loving families and home life. When envisaging themselves as surrogate mothers, they had their own mothers as role models. While secular, they grew up with traditional or religious parents and grandparents, and had a clear knowledge of Jewish culture and religion. They related to the modernist-humanistic educational philosophy embodied in the work of the venerable Polish-Jewish educator and physician Janusz Korczak. While they do not mention him directly, they practiced many of his educational teachings. Kuchler had studied educational psychology while Nesia and Chasia drew on the culture and ideals of Hashomer Hatzair, the socialist-Zionist youth movement with its emphasis on togetherness, the youth collective, and youth empowerment.

In an existence in which uprootedness was the underlying experience, the children's homes described here provided a haven for children uprooted from their family, home, community, and

identity. While each home was uprooted more than once, the caregivers succeeded in providing the children with a sense of security, identity, and hope for a better future in the Promised Land. Considering that the caregivers shared the same uprootedness, their success strikes one as outstanding.

This paper has offered a mere glimpse into the sensibilities and effort of adult survivors working with child survivors, but more study is needed. Additional writings by caregivers remain to be analyzed. The experience of non-Zionist children's homes should be explored, as should children's homes in Western Europe. Gender remains an issue for further study. How many male caregivers managed or worked in children's homes, how did they approach the children, and in what role did they cast themselves? It would be useful to compare the work in children's homes established across Europe by other national groups and states in the wake of the war. The story of the postwar rescue, care, and rehabilitation of Jewish child survivors not only forms an impressive chapter in history, but bears relevance to work conducted with children in current conflict areas.[76]

Boaz Cohen is chair of the Holocaust Studies Program of the Western Galilee College in Akko, Israel. His work focuses on the development of Holocaust memory and historiography in their social and cultural context and on Jewish and Israeli post-Holocaust society. He also lectures in Jewish studies at the Shaanan College in Haifa. His current research is on early Holocaust historiography, Holocaust testimonies, and early children's Holocaust testimonies and adult interest in them. He is the author of *Israeli Holocaust Research: Birth and Evolution* (2013).

Notes

1. See Debórah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), xxxiii, n. 27; Nahum Bogner, *At the Mercy of Strangers: The Rescue of Jewish Children with Assumed Identities in Poland* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), 15. For a picture of non-Jewish children, their condition, and policies towards them see Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

2. I chose to use "Eretz Israel," literally "Land of Israel," as it was used in the homes. Any translation or other term loses the aura this much spoken of destination had for caretakers and children.

3. I chose to use first names when relating to Nesia and Chasia. I am convinced this best conveys the educational atmosphere in the children's homes. Many of the children called Lena Kuchler "Mother," while others referred to her as "the Director." Outsiders or staff used "the Director" or "Lena." In her case I chose to use her last name, as I believe that would have been her preference. Chasia also appears as Hasia on several Internet sites and in archives. Kuchler also appears as Kuechler. Chasia and Kuchler are used here as they appear in the English-language versions of their memoirs. After remarrying in Israel, Kuchler published her books under the name Lena Kuchler-Silberman.

4. See among others Joanna B. Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008); "'Who Am I?' The Identity of Jewish Children in Poland, 1945–1949," *Polin* 20 (2007): 97–121; "'The war began for me after the war': Jewish Children in Poland, 1945–49," in *The Routledge History of the Holocaust*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (New York: Routledge, 2011), 482–97; and "Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Some Vignettes of Jewish Children's Lives in Early Postwar Poland," in *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities*, ed. Dalia Ofer, Françoise S. Ouzan, and Judy Tydor Baumel Schwartz (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 46–87; Emunah Nachmany Gafny, *Dividing Hearts: The Removal of Jewish Children from Gentile Families in Poland in the Immediate Post-Holocaust Years* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); Bogner, *At the Mercy of Strangers*.

5. Chasia Bornstein-Bielicka with Neomi Izhar, *Ahat mi-me'atim: Darkah shel lohemet u-mehanekhet, 1939–1947* (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 2003). Published in English as *One of the Few: A Resistance Fighter and Educator, 1939–1947*, transl. Naftali Greenwood (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009).

6. Nesia Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima, ha'mutar kvar livkot?* (Mother, May I Cry Now?) (Ramat Gan, Israel: Moreshet and Sifriyat Poalim, 1964).

7. For an example of the Hashomer Hatzair's importance to survivors see Anita Shapira, "The Yishuv's Encounter with the Survivors of the Holocaust," in *She'erit Hapletah, 1944–1948: Rehabilitation and Political Struggle: Proceedings of the Sixth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1985), 80–106. See also Neima Barzel, *Ad kelot umi-neged: Ha-mifgash ben manhige mered ha-getaot le-ven ha-hevrah ha-Yisrelit* (Sacrifice Unredeemed: The Encounter between the Leaders of the Ghetto Fighters and the Israeli Society) (Jerusalem: Zionist Library, 1998).

8. Lena Kuchler-Silberman published *Meine Kinder* (My Children) in Yiddish in Paris in 1948. A later version was published in Hebrew in Israel: *Anu Ma'shimim* (We Accuse/My Children) (Merchavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1961). Originally published in 1959, her epic book is *Me'ah yeladim sheli* (My Hundred Children) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 2004). Published in English as Lena Kuchler-Silberman, *One Hundred Children* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961). This was joined by two other books, *Ha-Me'ah li-gevulam* (The Hundred [Will Return] to their Borders) (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1969), and *Beit imi* (My Mother's Home) (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1985), to form a trilogy. I chose to use the original Hebrew editions even when there are translations into other languages—all translations by Boaz Cohen. Lena Kuchler's files in the Ghetto Fighters' House Archives (GFHA, 29625/10–12) show her dissatisfaction with the translations of her works, but she was satisfied with the Hebrew versions.

9. On Vaad Hahatzalah see Efraim Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939–1945* (New York: Yeshiva University Press KTAV, 1999).

10. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima*, 42.

11. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 256.

12. Lena Kuechler (sic), interviewed by David P. Boder, September 8, 1946, Bellevue, France; available online at http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kuechlerL&display=kuechlerL_en (accessed January 29, 2018). For more on the Boder interviews see Donald L. Niewyk, ed., *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

13. Hasia (sic) Borenstein (Bilitzka), interviewed by Avigdor Baranovich, October 28, 1970, Oral History Division (OHD), Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Interview no. (68) 26.

14. Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt, "Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 78, no. 3 (2008): 267–80.

15. Lena Kuchler, speech in the presidential residence upon receiving the "A Mother in Israel" Award, December 25, 1962, GFHA, 29625/10.

16. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 178.

17. Quoted in Upper Galilee local council newsletter no. 38, December 1964, Reznik family private collection.

18. Quoted in *Hashavua*, December 18, 1964, Reznik family private collection.

19. Private video of Chasia and her husband's 90th birthday celebration organized by the "children," July 20, 2007.

20. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima*, 43.

21. Ibid.

22. Bornstein-Bielick, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 279.

23. Kuchler, speech, 1962.

24. Kuechler, Boder interview, 1946. Although she remarried in Israel and gave birth to a daughter, she maintained close contact with many of her "children," attending their weddings as a mother and receiving their visits with their children, her "grandchildren."

25. This recollection, in Hebrew, was written in 1959. See http://www.shiller.org.il/viewpage.asp?pagesCatID=17962&siteName=shiller (accessed February 24, 2018).

26. Quoted in Kuchler-Silberman, *Ha-Me'ah li-gevulam*, 85.

27. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 277.

28. Bornstein-Bielicka, OHD interview, 1970.

29. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 276.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 285.

32. Kuechler, Boder interview, 1946.

33. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 285.

34. Children's courts formed a pillar of Janusz Korczak's prewar work in his orphanages, but none of our caretakers mentioned him in this context.

35. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima*, 63.

36. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 279.

37. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 232.

38. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 279.

39. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima,* 63.

40. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 232. Again, we do not know how much they knew of Janusz Korczak's work in his prewar orphanage, or his writings on the importance of having bread constantly available to the children. See *Selected Works by Janusz Korczak*, http://www.januszkorczak.ca/legacy/CombinedMaterials.pdf (accessed February 24, 2018).

41. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima,* 63.

42. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 232.

43. Orlovich- Reznik, *Ima*, 63.

44. See Michlic and Nachmany-Gafny's works cited in n. 4.

45. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 283.

46. Ibid.

47. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 203–4. This episode is recounted also by the boy in a 2003 video documentary: Amalia Margolin and Oshra Schwartz, *My 100 Children* (2003).

48. Bornstein-Bielicka, OHD interview, 1970.

49. Mordechi Bahat, interviewed by Avigdor Baranovich, October 29, 1970, OHD, Interview no. (68) 20.

50. Bornstein-Bielicka, OHD interview, 1970.

51. Benjamin Tene (Tenenbaum), *El 'ir ne'urai'* (To the City of My Youth) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), 150.

52. On Tenenbaum's work see Boaz Cohen, "The Children's Voice: Postwar Collection of Testimonies from Child Survivors of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 73–95; Boaz Cohen and Gabriel Finder, "Children from the Ruins of Poland: The Representation of the Child Survivor in Benjamin Tenenbaum's *Ehad Me'ir U-shnaim Mimishpahah*," in *Jewish Families in Europe 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 196–208.

53. Bornstein-Bielicka, *Ahat mi-me'atim*, 324–25.

54. Kuchler-Silberman, *Anu Ma'shimim*, 6.

55. Ibid., 7.

56. Ibid., 8.

57. See Cohen, "The Children's Voice"; Boaz Cohen and Beate Müller, "The 1945 Bytom Notebook: Searching for the Lost Voices of Child Holocaust Survivors," in *Freilegungen: Überlebende-Erinnerungen-Transformationen*, Jahrbuch des International Tracing Service Band 2, ed. Rebecca Boehling, Susanne Urban, and René Bienert (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013), 122–37; Beate Müller, "Trauma, Historiography and Polyphony: Adult Voices in the CJHC's Early Postwar Child Holocaust Testimonies," *History and Memory* 24, no. 2 (2012): 157–95.

58. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima,* 44.

59. See Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

60. Bornstein-Bielicka, OHD interview, 1970.

61. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 331. On the attacks see Karolina Panz, "'They did not want any more Jews there': The Fate of Jewish Orphans in Podhale, 1945–1946," in *Freilegungen: Rebuilding Lives—Child Survivors and DP Children in the Aftermath of the Holocaust and Forced Labor,* ed. Henning Borggräfe, Akim Jah, Nina Ritz, and Steffen Jost (Bad Arolsen: Wallstein, 2017), 93–104.

62. On the Jewish exodus from postwar Poland see Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (New York: Random House, 1970); Natalia Aleksiun, "Beriḥah," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010), http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Berihah (accessed February 21, 2018).

63. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima,* 43.

64. Lev Abramovich Kassil, *Shvambranye* (The Land of Shvambrania) (Moscow: Emes, 1934). A digitized version is available at https://archive.org/details/nybc213414 (accessed January 29, 2018).

65. Orlovich-Reznik, *Ima,* 79–80.

66. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 369.

67. Kuchler to Kraków Jewish Committee, March 17, 1946, Jewish Historical Institute (ZIH), 303-XI 1628/3422. I am indebted to Ms. Karolina Panz for acquainting me with this and other relevant documents.

68. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 369.

69. Kuechler, Boder interview, 1946.

70. Bornstein-Bielicka, OHD interview, 1970.

71. Ibid.

72. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 250–56. The boy and his sister recount the story in the Margolin and Schwartz documentary *My 100 Children*.

73. Bornstein-Bielicka, OHD interview, 1970.

74. Kuchler-Silberman, *Me'ah yeladim sheli*, 260.

75. Bornstein-Bielicka, OHD interview, 1970.

76. In the 2012 bibliography *War-Affected Children: A Comprehensive Bibliography* Holocaust child survivors figure mostly in psychological research on their condition many years later. The work conducted with these children after the war, with its achievements and problems, is not mentioned at all. See http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/law/bibliography.pdf (accessed January 29, 2018).