Representing Children's Holocaust

Children's Survivor testimonies published in Fun Lezten Hurban, *Munich, 1946–49*

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It's impossible to describe how we suffered

—Genia Shurz, "My Experiences during the War"

The future of surviving children was a major issue in post-Holocaust Jewish society. Schools and educational facilities were set up in towns and in displaced person (DP) camps, as were children's homes in which orphaned children received care and education. Teachers were sent from the Yishuv in Palestine to work alongside survivor teachers in these schools. Youth movements, mainly Zionist, ran their own children's and youth groups replicating their prewar ideologies. Organizations such as the *kordinazia* (coordinated organization) in Poland arranged for the return of Jewish children rescued by gentiles, officially where possible but clandestinely when the need arose. International Jewish organizations such as the Jewish Agency, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the American Committee for the Rehabilitation of European Jewish Children funded and contributed to this work. All of this activity was fueled by the belief that in these children lay the future of the Jewish people. The children were seen as objects for care, love, and reeducation.

Less known is the fact that correspondingly, much effort was put

into listening to the child survivors, recording their stories, and publishing them. By 1947 three anthologies of children's testimonies were published, bringing to the public the stories of child survivors as they told them. The appearance of such a body of books all over the Jewish world (Poland, Tel Aviv, Paris, and Buenos Aires) in Yiddish, Polish, and Hebrew shows the widespread interest in the children's Holocaust experience.[1]

This chapter tells the story of the publication and representation of children's testimonies in the first-ever Holocaust research journal, *Fun Lezten Hurban,* published in Munich during 1946–48. The journal was published by the Central Historical Commission in Munich, which was established in December 1945 by the Central Committee for the Liberated Jews in Germany. The commission collected thousands of testimonies from Holocaust survivors in the DP camps, among them hundreds from child survivors of the Holocaust. The drive to collect testimonies from children was initiated by Israel Kaplan, a teacher from Kovno who together with Moshe Feigenboim led the commission. The child survivors and their stories held a strong fascination with Kaplan, whose own child survived the Holocaust in hiding and on the run.

Out of hundreds of testimonies collected from child survivors by the staff of the Central Historical Commission during its more than three years of existence, eight were selected for publication in the journal issues. What were the criteria for publication? Why were these specific testimonies chosen? Did Kaplan choose them in order to make a point, or was it instead a matter of availability? Testimonies had to be fit for print, and after years without proper education possibly not many children could recount the horrors they had experienced in a suitable way.

As for the end result, what picture of the Jewish child's Holocaust experience was the journal presenting, and what were the underlying suppositions and sensibilities behind this presentation? What can we learn from these children's testimonies about the worldview of adult DP survivors?

The *Fun Lezten Hurban* children's testimonies offer us a glimpse into one of the earliest representations of children's Holocaust experiences and thus enrich our understanding of the dynamics of memory in the DP community and of the place of children in DP worldview.

Fun Lezten Hurban

Fun Lezten Hurban (English title, *From the Last Extermination, Journal for the History of the Jewish People during the Nazi Regime*) was a

Yiddish-language journal appearing in late 1946. Edited by Kaplan, the journal featured eyewitness accounts, testimonies, documents, and photographs collected by the Central Historical Commission. The journal's aim was to "inspire every Jew from among the [Holocaust] survivors to give their testimony of their experiences under the Nazi regime." And indeed, claimed Kaplan, "Since we started with the Journal we get a wider response from survivors."[2] Somewhere between ten thousand and twelve thousand copies of the journal were published in all.

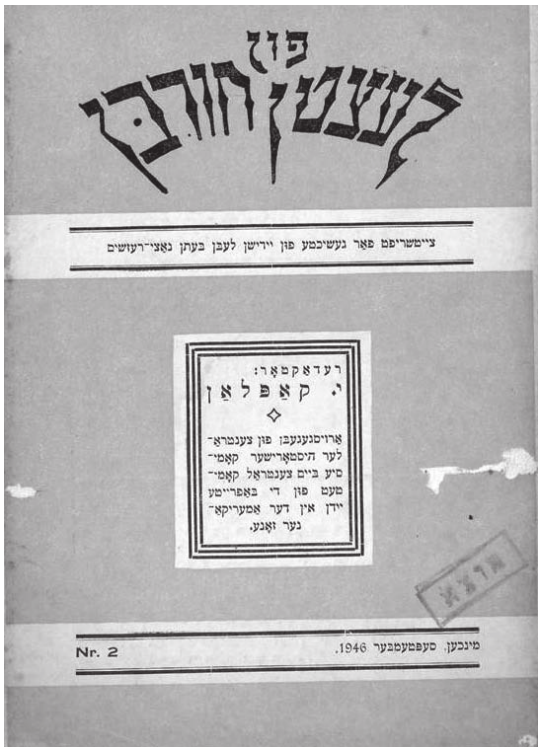
The journal was seen by Kaplan as a "people's project" (*folks arbeit*). "It is still too early for serious scientific research," he said. "Therefore, our purpose is simply a peoples [folk] journal with the participation of the masses. . . . It is the role of the people themselves to recount their experiences and fill in the great blank in our historiography." These testimonies will "furnish the historical material for the future scientific research and evaluations." The journal was to represent the "the frame of mind and experiences of the individual and the public in the destruction of a people," claimed Kaplan. "It is of course much more important to know the inner experiences, the people's frame of mind itself."[3]

In this people's project of recounting the Jewish story of the Holocaust, Kaplan gave a special place for the story of the Jewish child survivor.

Israel Kaplan and Children's Testimonies

Israel Kaplan (1902–2003) was, as mentioned above, a teacher in prewar Kovno. Like many Jewish East European intellectuals, he studied history and wrote his thesis on the Spanish Inquisition. In the ghetto he was in charge of chronicling the ghetto's history. He went on collecting Jewish folk sayings and black humor throughout his odyssey through ghettos and camps in Lithuania, Latvia, and Germany. His urge to document and record the Jewish tragedy was so strong that even while recuperating in the hospital following liberation, he would sneak away from his bed and collect testimonies and ethnographic materials from the nearby DP camp.[4] Once the Central Historical Commission was established, he became its academic secretary and the editor of its journal, *Fun Lezten Hurban*.

Kaplan believed that children were a distinct group whose voice had to be heard. He also believed that children had a part to play in the documentation of the past. While in the ghetto he encouraged his son to collect historical materials, such as official stamps and papers. When they were reunited in Munich, Kaplan asked his son and his



Fun Lezten Hurban (From the Last Destruction), "A Historical Journal of Jewish Life under the Nazi Regime," edited by Israel Kaplan, Vol. 2, Munich, September 1946.

friends to reconstruct folk songs from the ghetto, which he subsequently published in the journal.

As one of the leaders of the Central Historical Commission, Kaplan initiated a project aimed at collecting testimonies from child Holocaust survivors in the DP camps. "Of great significance to our work is inspiring children to write about what they endured," he said in 1947. "We have already gotten in touch with children's camps, kibbutzim and schools for this."[5]

Kaplan explained to fellow DPs that the aim of collecting children's testimonies was not "the extraction of as many facts as possible." It was instead to record the "child's understanding, his approach and reaction to what happened to him; how the events affected him." The teachers were asked to look for the "psychological and pedagogical aspects" of the testimony to enhance their educational work. In order to enable a full understanding of the child's experience, it is imperative, he said, "not to make any corrections in these works, even in language."[6]

Although hundreds of children's testimonies were collected, Kaplan admitted that reaction to this initiative among teachers and educators wasn't so enthusiastic: "Up to now only a few have responded properly, despite the numerous reminders." He claimed that teachers were overtly shielding the children, fearing to "bring back the wounds that have already healed over." While he accepted that this was possible, he claimed that "It is nevertheless doubtful whether it is always and in every case preferable to have the young people forget their deep and meaningful experiences." He doubted "whether when they grow older the children will be grateful to their teachers for their excessive warm-heartedness." In order not to cause unnecessary pain to the children, he suggested that once teachers attempt "with the appropriate pedagogical approach" to have a child give a full version of his experiences, a copy would be deposited in a school archive, enabling teachers to consult the testimony "without causing further stress to the child himself."[7] Success in this project depended on convincing people in the camps to do the fieldwork. Even a cursory check of the children's testimonies taken by the commission shows that they come in batches from places where the teachers or United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) workers were won over to the project.

By the summer of 1946 the testimonies started coming in. By November 1946 the first testimony, Arieh Milch's, was published in the third issue of *Fun Lezten Hurban*.

As mentioned above, Kaplan was not alone in his view of the importance of children's testimonies. Fervent activity in Poland and elsewhere of collecting and publishing children's testimonies also took place. This was a general evolving trend in Jewish memorial culture after the war.[8]

But besides taking part in this nascent memorial culture trend, Kaplan's interest in children's testimonies also had a personal slant. Kaplan had been transferred from the Kovno Ghetto to a work camp, leaving his wife, daughter, and son behind. Just before she was murdered by the Nazis, his wife hid their son with a Lithuanian widow. Their daughter was also hidden with a non-Jewish family that eventually handed her over to the Nazis. Although Kaplan and his son were reunited after the war, it was a difficult reunion. His son blamed Kaplan for leaving him and his mother, and Kaplan, busy with matters concerning the Central Historical Commission, found it hard to rebuild a relationship with his son.

The fate of his children haunted Kaplan, and from the first days of liberation he looked for some sign of life from them. Through

his work Kaplan heard of a bright young boy participating in school plays in Orphanage No. 4, the Jewish orphanage in Kovno. He had a strong feeling that this was his lost son, Shalom, and sent emissaries to check him out. Once the boy's identity was verified Kaplan enlisted the help of Rabbi Abe Klausner, who used his contacts to get the boy to Munich. Father and son were reunited in March 1946. They were together for no more than twenty-two days before Shalom was sent to Palestine to board with his aunt and resume his schooling. Kaplan stayed in Munich to work in the Central Historical Commission and in the DP press and joined his son only two and a half years later.

Many years later Shalom told of his bitter memories from the reunion:

> He talked to me, he talked with the people I was introduced to. He never stopped talking. . . . He talked and talked, but he never asked me: "What happened to you son, what did you go through?" He didn't ask. What for? He was already working in the historical commission[;] . . . he didn't need me to tell him about the Ghetto. But as to what had happened to me, specifically to me; my experience, my pain, my fears and my distress, my worries and my apprehensions—these he never knew because he didn't ask.[9]

The ongoing correspondence between Kaplan and his son—far away in Eretz Israel—shows that Kaplan's work in the Central Historical Commission, which kept him in Europe until 1950, did not serve to build the relationship between father and son: the son constantly criticized his father for not coming to Eretz Israel, while the father repeatedly explained the importance of his historical and cultural work.

It is interesting to note that while Kaplan did not get around to listening to his son in the short time they had together and certainly did not take his testimony, he showed a growing commitment to the collection and publication of children's testimonies. As we shall see, a number of children who had their testimonies published were Kovno children and acquaintances of his son. Kaplan's private correspondence shows how much he wanted his son to write a testimony. His letters to him are replete with pleas on the matter. In May 1947, for example, after several such pleas were left unanswered, Kaplan wrote, "If you could send me your memoirs—good but as quickly as possible (two [separate] times by Air-mail) . . . write everything you went through from the beginning of the war until you reached Munich (or Eretz Yisrael). . . . If it's not too hard and if the effort will not harm

Israel Kaplan, his son Shalom (Eilati), and others.

your health—do it!"[10] But Kaplan's pleas were left unanswered. His son would not write a testimony for the journal. He was already in another world, living on a kibbutz in Eretz Israel and forging his new identity. It may also be that he didn't feel any obligation to his father's memorial project, which was keeping his father away from him in Germany.

Children's Testimonies in *Fun Lezten Hurban*

Who were the children, and what did they disclose in their testimonies? What can be learned about the way in which their testimonies reached the editors of *Fun Lezten Hurban,* and how did the editors process them?

The Children: General Characteristics

Eight children—four boys and four girls—had their testimonies published in the journal. At the time of liberation, they were nine to fourteen years old. Two were born in 1931, four in 1932, one in 1933, and one in 1936. They wrote their testimonies no more than three years after liberation. (The last published testimony, Genia Shurz's, is dated June 1948).

All but one of the children came from an area occupied by the Russians until 1941 and then by the Germans. Four of them came from Kovno; a fifth, from Warsaw, was incarcerated in the Kovno Ghetto.

Israel Kaplan and his son Shalom (Eilati).

Two others came from Podhajce in southern Galicia. Two of the girls were cousins. As we can see, the Kovno children figured prominently in the testimonies.

Another notable feature among the testimonies was the existence of living family members. All of the children came out of the Holocaust with some family members still alive. Three survived with both their parents, the mothers of another two had survived, and two had a surviving sibling. Only two had no one from their immediate family left.

How is the predominance of the Kovno group to be explained? And is there a connection to the overrepresentation of children with surviving family members? Did the fact that they had surviving family members aid them in processing the horrors they went through? Or is it that having parents in the same circles as Kaplan helped get their testimonies noticed? Or was Kaplan, as a Kovno teacher, partial to the testimonies of his pupils and their friends, who were also the friends of his estranged son, Shalom. Or was it a combination of all these reasons?

It seems that while all of these things may have influenced Kaplan's editorial decisions, there were more mundane reasons that explain the high proportion of testimonies of the children from Kovno and of children with parents. Kaplan needed testimonies that were coherent and appropriate for print. There weren't many children who came out of the Holocaust with the ability to write an essay that could be incorporated in a journal.

The Kovno Ghetto existed well into 1944 (as did the Łódź Ghetto). In the chaos of the German retreats of 1944, there were more opportu-

nities for survival for both children and parents. This also meant that children had a chance to receive some education, read books, and be tutored for more years then their counterparts in most Polish ghettos. From the testimonies we learn that some parents of this group were teachers. One father was a celebrated author, and the rest of the children came from middle-class and well-to-do families that usually held education in high esteem. The children tell of their parents teaching them or of studying by themselves. For example, while hiding in a gentile's house, Joseph Shuster received lessons from his father. "In quiet times we used to go out into the room, where my papa taught me to read and do arithmetic," he wrote.[11] Daniel Burstin read books supplied by the peasant he was hiding with and spoke Yiddish to the cows in the pasture. "I didn't want to forget the Yiddish language. It was deeply engrained in my heart; it was my mother-tongue. I used to converse thus with the animals: 'My dear calf, how well off you are, that you don't know and didn't know who Hitler is.' The calf or the cow used to low back at me: 'You're right.'"[12]

Children who were on the run or were hiding with non-Jewish families for more years had fewer opportunities for developing the ability to express themselves, certainly in Yiddish, which is the original language of the testimonies. The children whose testimonies were chosen for the journal had a better chance to overcome the lost years of Nazi occupation and write testimonies that were fit for publication.

Choosing the Testimonies

How were the testimonies chosen? The absence of editorial notes and protocols curtails our ability to reconstruct fully the editorial process. Yet the Central Historical Commission's archive (now in Yad Vashem), which was the clearinghouse for the testimonies collected in the DP camps, fortunately provides us with several of the testimonies in the children's handwriting and some other relevant documentation. Interweaving the printed testimonies with these materials offers answers to some of the above questions.

The first child's testimony, Arieh Milch's, was published in volume 3 of the journal (November 1946).[13] He was born in 1932 in the town of Podhajce in Galicia, a town occupied by the Russians in 1939. In July 1941 the German army occupied the town, and four days later his mother was murdered. His father, a Judenrat member ("against his will," insisted Milch), was murdered a year later. Just before the annihilation of the ghetto in 1943, Milch, his brother, and an uncle went into hiding in a gentile's house and were liberated there in March 1944. His original testimony can be found in the Central Historical Commission's archive and is titled "My Survival." It comes from As-

chau bei Kraiburg, and it is a part of a group of about twenty testimonies by teenagers from the camp. Aschau was a UNRRA children's transit camp known in Yiddish as the *kinder lager*. The testimonies were written between June and August 1946. They are, as their serial numbers show, among the first testimonies obtained by the commission.[14] Most of them, like Milch's testimony, are in Yiddish, although some are in Hungarian. They were collected under the auspices of UNRRA Team 154. Milch's testimony states his present address as the "D.P. Kinder Lager Block 14." Many of the teenagers who testified with him stated that they belonged to Kibbutz Atid (Kibbutz Future) of the Zionist youth movement Hanoaar Hazioni (Zionist Youth). But Milch's testimony carries no such information.

Daniel Burstin was born in Warsaw in 1931. His eight-page testimony was published in volume 4 (March 1947).[15] Following the German occupation, his parents escaped to Soviet-occupied Kovno, where he spent the war years until the ghetto's liquidation by the Germans in 1944. Burstin, thirteen years old at the time, was sent to Germany to Landsberg and Dachau and from there with 130 children from Kovno to Auschwitz. He jumped from the train and spent the rest of the war working as a farmhand for Polish peasants. After liberation he went to Łódź and was taken into a Jewish children's home. When his mother arrived they joined the Mishmar Hanegev children's home in Ludwikowo just before it moved from Poland to the Lindenfelz DP camp. The camp was home to three youth groups, each working independently of the others. Early on Burstin showed literary abilities and ended up editing and producing the group's journal together with Hadasa Rozen and Aryeh Shapira. Being older and better educated than many of the children in the group, they solicited essays, rewrote them, and copied them in fine handwriting in the journal. In 1946 he wrote the first version of his testimony, "Kovno 1944—Fragments of Liquidation."[16] Burstin makes no mention of the prewar years and the flight from his Warsaw home to Kovno; he ends his testimony with a call for revenge.

Burstin's testimony printed in the journal was longer and more complete, starting with the prewar years and ending with his reunion with his mother and their arrival in Lindenfels. His testimony was received by the Central Historical Commission on January 28, 1947. While preparing it for print Kaplan exchanged letters with Burstin, checking out several issues mentioned in the testimony. From this correspondence it turns out that the handwritten testimony was actually in Burstin's mother's handwriting. She transcribed and rewrote it for him; he apologized, "as I was deep into my studies."[17]

On the same transport from Kovno with Burstin was Jacob Lewin,

whose testimony was published in volume 5 (May 1947). He did not escape and arrived in Auschwitz with the children's transport. He survived several selections and was incarcerated in Children's Block No. 29. In the winter of 1944 he was sent on a death march on foot and by train through Mauthausen and was liberated in the Austrian countryside. After the war he was reunited with his parents and brother, who had been in German camps. His detailed testimony describing his experience in the death march from Auschwitz was in an issue of the journal dedicated to the subject of death marches. His original testimony could not be traced.[18]

Rosa Pinczewski, whose testimony was published in volume 6 (August 1947), was the only child who was under German occupation since 1939. Born in Łódź in 1931, she and her family spent the first year of the war in Polaniec, where her grandmother lived. They later moved from hideout to hideout and suffered many privations. Toward the end of the war her father was killed while looking for food, and the rest of the family was attacked and killed by the people who had initially hidden them. Rosa escaped and survived by passing as a Christian. Her testimony was sent to the commission from the trade school in Greifenberg. This was her second testimony; the first was given in the children's home of the Jewish Committee of Czentochowa in July 1945.[19]

Joseph Shuster, whose testimony was published in volume 7 (May 1948), was the youngest of the group. Born in 1936, he was also a Kovno boy. He survived the war in hiding with his parents. With the help of a former non-Jewish maid they found refuge with a Christian family, and when that family would not hide them anymore the maid found them another family to hide with.[20]

Also from Kovno was Fania Olitzki (born in 1932) whose testimony appeared in volume 8 (June 1948). She was in the ghetto with her mother until its liquidation in 1944. They were taken to Stutthof, were she was saved again and again by her mother's resourcefulness. In April 1945 they were taken on a death march by foot and by boat. They miraculously survived and were liberated by the British in Neustadt.[21]

Ela Grilihes (Grillechs), Fania's cousin, also from Kovno, was born in 1933. Her two-page testimony was printed in volume 9 (September 1948). She was put in a non-Jewish children's home with a Russian alias. Her parents later died in German camps, the father in Dachau and the mother in Stutthof. After the war she was taken out of the children's home by messengers sent by her aunt, Fania Olitzki's mother, and was reunited with her brother Zvi in Munich.[22]

The testimony published in the last issue of the journal (December 1948) was written by Genia Shurz. She was born in Podhajce in

1932 and told a tale of survival by hiding in the ghetto, flight from the ghetto to a hideout in a gentile's house, and ten months spent there in deprivation with her parents and brother. Her testimony was given at Bad-Salzchlirf in June 1948.[23]

Rewriting the Children: The Question of Editing

How much editing did the printed testimonies undergo? Can the editing process be traced, and what can be learned from it?

In a general comment on his editing work, Kaplan talked of the need to rewrite the essays submitted to the journal. In one of the pleas to his son to write his testimony, Kaplan instructed him to "write in any language . . . you feel comfortable with. I'll polish it up. If you would have seen some of the 'manuscripts' I get (even from the high and mighty) and the way they come out from under my pen, they can hardly be recognized—apart from the author's name."[24] But how much polishing was put into the children's testimonies?

Each of the published testimonies was appended with a comment stating that "The work is presented with only the necessary modifications in language." But how extensive were these changes? A clue can be found in Joseph Schuster's original testimony preserved in Yad Vashem. While most of the testimony remained as Schuster wrote it, two stages, or layers, of editing can be discerned. In the first stage, style and historical details were corrected. Schuster wrote that 534 people died in the first action in the Kovno Ghetto, and the editor corrected it to 500. Later the editor reordered some paragraphs and shifted some lines. Other testimonies show no traces of such comprehensive editing. But editing was not only about language and style. Kaplan went back to the children and questioned them about their testimonies. He asked them to explain discrepancies in their stories and to provide further information on events or people mentioned in the text. Where things were unclear, he asked again. While no original letters by Kaplan were found, two letters remain in which Burstin replies to Kaplan's queries. From the answers, it is apparent that Kaplan's questions focused on Burstin's survival story. In responses to Kaplan's request, Burstin provided the address of the Pole he had hidden with and the ethnic origin of the reapers he met after jumping from the train: "they were Poles or more accurately Silesians." Kaplan wanted to understand, among other things, how a camp inmate in uniform could survive wandering around the countryside. Burstin explained that he "traveled in civilian clothes because they took away our striped uniforms in Dachau and exchanged them for civilian clothes."[25] This probably looked strange to Kaplan: Why would the Germans give the Jews a chance to blend into the countryside? Burstin explained further

in cynical overtones. "It is clear that the few 'loyal' fascist Jews would not leave 131 Jewish children without any sign of their origin. Close to our being transported from Dachau they gathered us together in a big barrack and painted long wide stripes on our civilian clothes with durable red paint; on our pants, shirt and blouses. They wanted to make sure that nothing bad would happen to us on the way."[26]

The red stripes were aimed at marking out any child who might try to escape the train. In his original testimony Burstin wrote that while preparing to jump from the train the boys cut their pants and turned their shirts and jackets inside out. Kaplan wanted to ensure that the reader would immediately see the connection between this and the red stripes. He therefore added to the text the following opening sentence: "First of all we had to erase all the outer signs that we were concentration camp inmates." To Burstin's description of the cutting of the clothes he added that they were "marked in paint."[27]

Kaplan's correspondence with Burstin shows that he tried to provide the readers of *Fun Lezten Hurban* with testimonies that were both coherent and readable. Publishing a testimony demanded getting the facts straight and clarifying any ambiguities. Kaplan regarded the published product his creation no less than the author's. "How do you like my article on Burstin?" he asked his son. "Mrs. Burstin and the son were very satisfied."[28]

Children's Experiences

What could the readers of *Fun Lezten Hurban* learn from the testimonies about the Jewish child's experience of the Holocaust? The testimonies recount different survival stories and different experiences, but three issues stand out: the centrality of family, the encounter with death, and relations with non-Jews.

Family

Family—its loss as well as its endurance and resilience—figures prominently in the testimonies. Daniel Burstin wrote about his feelings when transferred to Dachau without his parents: "I remained alone, without a father or mother, all alone, without a good friend."[29] Rosa Pinczewski, sent to hide with a gentile peasant, was eloquent in describing the parting from her family: "You can't imagine my parting from my parents. I will never forget it as long as I live. I can't even describe it."[30] Joseph Shuster, whose parents wanted to send him to an Aryan family, refused to part with them. He was seven years old at the time. "At first my parents wanted to send me by myself," he recounted,

"but I didn't want to go because I was afraid of being left without a father and mother." Even when warned by his mother that the Germans would take him away, he refused to go by himself. He told his mother, "Mama, whatever happens to you will happen to me."[31] His insistence paid off; his mother went with him, and the father joined them later. Although they had to change hiding places, they survived the war as a family.

Genia Shurz's testimony centered on her family's efforts to keep the family together while hiding from the Nazis. At one stage, after the formal liquidation of the ghetto at Podhajce, they hid in a concealed bunker under one of the remaining buildings. They found a German who agreed to help them leave the ghetto grounds. During the escape they were found out, and a chase ensued; Shurz was knocked unconscious by one of the guards and taken for dead. Regaining consciousness, she found out that she was separated from her family. In an old ruin where she looked for shelter, she found her father. "I was overjoyed at not being alone," she said, but then she noted that her mother and brother were still missing. "I didn't want to go on," wrote Genia. "I cried over having run away from them. I was filled with a child's need for its mother." Hearing the sound of gunfire, she started shouting, "Mama, they're shooting you!" And then the unexpected happened: "Suddenly I heard a voice from far, far away: 'Geni' (that's my name). I was so happy, like a person who has lost his mother and then she rises up from the grave. I couldn't get up from weakness. So my father left me and ran to look for the voice. That is how we found each other again. I couldn't believe that I still had a mother and a brother, because you really can't grasp it. It can only be a miracle or a dream."[32]

Following this experience, the family decided to seek a hideout that would enable them to stay together. There was a gentile they knew who was willing to hide some of them. "He liked us and he told us that if we were ever in a hopeless situation we should come to him, but not everyone, just two people. But after our experience, we decided not to separate again; we would either all live or would die together."[33] He took them all in, and they stayed with him for ten hard months until liberation. But he never really forgave them for forcing the whole family on him, and this, as will be seen, made their survival very precarious.

Another major point regarding family was the parents' commitment toward their children's survival. In the testimonies the children tell of this commitment. Parents attempted, sometimes successfully, to find the children a hiding place with a gentile family or non-Jewish children's home. The children saw their parents digging bunkers for

concealment, foraging for food (and sometimes dying in the attempt), and bribing guards to prevent the child from been taken away. At times the efforts had an immediate effect. Fania Olitzki and her mother were in the Stutthof camp when her mother understood that she might be sent to Auschwitz. "She gave me a wink and we both stole away between the barracks until we reached the morgue where the corpses were lying. My mother told me to lie down among the dead, and she tore off a piece of her shirt and covered my face, and threw a mound of dead people around and over me. She instructed me not to move and not to dare crawl out until she arrived. So I lay this way for over 24 hours."[34]

This was not an isolated occurrence. Olitzki's mother saved her again and again. "They took me away many times," she wrote, "but my mother would rescue me. . . . [M]ore than once she pulled me out at the last minute before they gassed me."[35] She noted that the mother was frequently punished for this.

Facing death

Death had a constant presence in the world the children lived in. They saw men, women, and children taken to their deaths in massive actions by the Germans. They saw people dying in the streets. Some lost their parents or other family members in front of their eyes. Quite a few encounters with death were more immediate or personal. The surviving children hid with other Jews in hideouts or bunkers. Often there were many people there, and silence was crucial. But what should be done with a crying baby? In one bunker in Kovno where Fania Olitzki hid, a baby started to cry. "A moment arrived when a father wanted to strangle his child," wrote Fania, but she did not disclose the outcome.[36] Genia Shurz was more forthcoming on a similar story. "In the bunker a child suffocated on my lap. It was crying, so someone stuck a rag into its mouth. After twenty-four hours the Aktion [roundup] came to an end and I saw that the child was dead. I became like a crazy person from fright. But I got used to that too."[37]

Death figured in the children's conversations and thoughts, Shurz wrote of the last night of Podhajce Ghetto's six hundred remaining Jews. "That is the most terrible moment in your life, to wait for death. People went out of their minds. My friends ran around wildly in the street. Blood flowed. People poisoned themselves, and those who didn't have poison were the unlucky ones. Very few people remained. People poisoned, killed and stabbed themselves."[38] The children did not want to die; "the desire to live . . . was so strong that we clawed at the walls."[39] She recounted the children's conversations in those harrowing nights:

> One said: "It is so beautiful outside, but not for us." Another one said that he would like to be free just once more in his life and eat until he was full, and then die. Another one said: "Who knows whether there is another world and whether we will meet there." We settled between us that as soon as they started shooting us we should immediately think about meeting each other in the next world. That is how we talked all night, until morning.[40]

Rosa Pinczewski saw her mother and brother murdered by the same peasant who had hid them and was supposedly transferring them to a new hideout in the woods: "The peasant told us to get out of the cart. The peasant's brother stood by the water. Then a terrible picture began, which I will never forget. He quickly, brutally, took my mother off the cart and threw her into the water. He beat me and then my little brother cruelly."[41] This is the story as recounted in her testimony and printed in the journal. While not the end of Pinczewski's tribulations under Nazi rule, it is certainly the focal point of her narrative. At another time, Rosa told more about this harrowing moment than she was willing to divulge here. As mentioned above, Pinczewski had given a testimony two years earlier in 1945. In it she gave a more extensive and shocking account of those traumatic moments:

> Out of the bushes came Bucek's brother who lived with us in the same hut and started to shoot. I jumped first off the cart and started running toward the fields. Bucek's brother ran after me and fired. He caught up with me and held me by the hand. I pulled the gun because he was aiming at me. I asked him to spare me—but he refused. Waclaw came up to us, took the gun and as I looked on he shot my little brother. There was a full moon. I started screaming but he wanted to shoot me, I ran, fell into the water, reached the opposite bank of the stream and survived. Then I heard two more shots and my mother shouting "Help." Then there was silence.[42]

How is the difference between the two testimonies to be explained? Did the editors of *Fun Lezten Hurban* water down the testimony on this point so as not to overly shock the readers? From an examination of her 1947 handwritten testimony in the archive, we can rule out this possibility. She certainly gave a different narration of the event. But why? It seems that the explanation lies in the time gap between the two testimonies. The first testimony was given right after liberation; events were still vivid, the pain was great, and she did not yet have any

future to look forward to. In the intervening two years she became a part of a group, a community of children like herself. While the pain was still there, life was going on, and there was a future opening up. In such a setting, there was a reluctance to recount every terrible detail and reopen healing wounds.

The Rescued and the Rescuers: Jews and Gentiles

Children's testimonies open a window to the intricate relationships between gentiles and Jews during the Holocaust. The children were on the run; their fate was in the hands of strangers. Every non-Jew the child met could be his savior angel or the angel of death. The first collectors of children's testimonies commented on the way the children recounted their interactions with the world around them. As Maria Hochberg-Marianska recounted in her introduction to a 1947 anthology of children's testimonies:

> Wherever the children encountered good people, help or encouragement, they express their appreciation in words full of the warmest feelings. Every human gesture, even just the offering of a slice of bread or words of genuine sympathy, these heartfelt reactions in the terrible days of the Holocaust—none of these has been forgotten by these persecuted children. . . . In the same frank and straightforward way the children describe evil deeds and base people. . . . Bitterness and pain fill the children's recollections of those Poles who hunted them, betrayed them and handed them over to the common enemy.[43]

Children encountered gentiles who risked their lives for them. Sometimes the help was given on the basis of prewar relationships. When Joseph Shuster and his mother escaped from the ghetto, their former maid was waiting for them and took them to the hideout she prepared for them with a gentile family. After a while "the Christian took fright and demanded that we leave. We had no choice, and our former maid traveled 80 kilometers and found us a place in Visakedvar, with a Christian who knew my grandfather."[44] But, it seems, a prewar acquaintance was not always an asset. Genia Shurz was recognized by her former schoolmates when she bought food outside the ghetto. "On the way my former Ukrainian schoolmates recognized me," she wrote, "They beat me till I bled."[45]

Children and their families were also rescued by people they had no prior acquaintance with. Genia Shurz told of the gentile with whom

her family hid: "The gentile had previously been a stranger to us. He had only seen us through the fence in the ghetto. He liked us and he told us that if we were ever in a hopeless situation we should come to him."[46] Hiding a Jewish family or child was a family project for their rescuers. Shuster noted that his family's survival had been facilitated by the "very clever" six-year-old daughter of their rescuer who "always guarded us well."[47]

On rare occasions help was even given by a German. While foraging for food for his family hiding in a bunker under the ghetto's ruins, Genia Shurz's brother came across a German guard. It was a moment of utter desperation: "He didn't run away from him, because he wanted to tell the German that he should take us out to shoot us. The German was amazed at how we could have survived for such a long time and he said: 'If you could survive for such a long time, I won't hand you over.' He said that we should wait in the bunker until he came to take us out of the bunker and the ghetto."[48] The German guard was true to his word and helped them escape. It was but another example of the fickleness of life in hiding. One day's rescuer could be a potential murderer the next, and vice versa. The story of the murder of Pinczewski's mother and brother by their former rescuers has already been recounted above. They were hidden for two months with this family before being murdered by them. This was not an isolated occurrence. Arie Milch recounted that the gentile he and his uncle and brother had hidden with for almost a year wanted to "hand us over to the German murderers, but the Red Army was already in our city, so he let us live."[49]

Children were also taken advantage of and let down by supposed rescuers. Pinczewski's parents sent her into hiding with a peasant woman. They paid her in advance for hiding their daughter. On the way to the woman's house they passed through a forest. The woman told Pinczewski "that she had to arrange something and had to leave for ten minutes." The girl waited for some time until she understood that the would-be rescuer would never come back. "I saw that she wouldn't return," she wrote. "I understood that she had taken the money and run away."[50] With their lives dependent on rescuers' caprices, the attitude toward rescuers could be very negative. The gentile hiding Genia Shurz's family was angry at having to hide the entire family instead of only a part of it. "He stopped giving us food," she wrote. "We began to suffer hard times, it was hot and we were hungry and thirsty." They were sure that he intended them to die. "The gentile had decided not to give us food until we died. We suffered so greatly that it can't be described. Once a day we received a small pot of food;

no bread, no water, no change of shirts. So we became filthy; the dirt ate at us. We sat that way for five months."[51] They eventually got into a heated argument, and they told him that he was "worse than Hitler." That brought some improvement in their situation. "But I was already sick, and we looked liked skeletons," she wrote. They decided that "if one of us died, we would revenge ourselves against that gentile after liberation and not let him live either."[52]

Postscript: Why Children?

The children's testimonies published in *Fun Lezten Hurban* are survivor stories. The surviving child is naturally at the center of the story. The emphasis is on agency. The children (and their parents) take their futures into their own hands, developing survival skills: resourcefulness, sharp wits, and the ability to wiggle out of tight corners. The stories also make a strong statement regarding the parents' powerful commitment to their children. They prepare hideouts, negotiate with potential rescuers, and are highly instrumental in their children's survival.

The stories tell the reader about the gentile world where the children had to be responsible for their own survival. All types of gentiles—the good and the bad—appear in the stories. There is a tragic reason for the preponderance of stories with gentile rescuers: children who met murderous gentiles usually did not live to tell about it. It is obvious that non-Jews played a major role in the survival of Jewish children and their families. The testimonies underscore the role of moral choice made by the individual. It was a point made by Maria Hochberg-Marianska in her preface to *The Children Accuse,* an anthology of children's testimonies published by the Central Historical Commission in Poland. An individual making the right choice "prepared to make sacrifices in the interest of an innocent child, and the person's own dignity,"[53] made a world of difference for the Jewish fugitive. "From the testimonies of the Jewish children it emerges quite clearly that where will power [of the non-Jew] was directed toward a conscious goal, courage and rectitude join hands, [and] the Nazi thug is defeated in his desire to murder."[54] In a way, by juxtaposing stories of gentile rescuers with stories of gentiles who refused to help and even killed Jewish fugitives, the editors were making a point: if more gentiles had made the right choices, then many more children and adults would have been saved.

Children were the only distinct group of survivors accorded a separate place in the journal. The series about children's experiences

during the war is the only one of its kind in the journal, which usually brought an assortment of testimonies and documents sometimes loosely organized around a general theme such as Kovno or death marches. Although these are children and teenagers, their testimonies are brought in their own words without an adult figure as a go-between. They are witnesses in their own right asserting a voice of their own.

How are we to explain the special place accorded to the children? Three factors stand out:

The cultural role of children in Eastern Europe. Interest in children and in children's experience was characteristic of Jewish culture in Eastern European before the war. It started in the late nineteenth century with the appearance of child heroes in the literary works of the great Yiddish masters such as Y. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. Telling the story from a child's point of view brought children's experiences into the limelight of the literary and cultural scene. The child-narrator figure could be used to lay out society's failings and maladies.[55] Between the world wars this interest matured into research interest in children and their experience. This was the time of Janus Korczak who, tuning in to the experience of inner-city (poor urban) Jewish children, wrote for and about children. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Culture likewise focused on Jewish youths. YIVO ran three prize-bearing competitions in which teenagers and young people were encouraged to write essays describing their life and surrounding society.[56] By publishing these essays, YIVO accorded them a legitimate role as witnesses to current Jewish society. In this way the literary child narrator so prominent in works of Sholom Aleichem and others gave place to an authentic real-life one. The interest in children continued during the war in the work of the Ringelblum archive, where children were specifically targeted and solicited for information and essays. Once the war was over, it was obvious to the members of the Jewish intelligentsia working in the historical commissions that children had to be questioned and heard and that their experiences should be integrated into the story of the Holocaust.

The child as an authentic witness. Children were seen as having an edge on adult survivors. While adults had a reputation to uphold commitments to the dead or to fellow survivors, children were accepted as authentic witnesses unencumbered by agendas or social connections. Adult survivor testimonies, claimed Benjamin Tennenbaum, who collected hundreds of children's testimonies, are very apologetic: people feel obliged to explain the choices they made under Nazi occupation. Children, on the other hand, were innocently telling their

stories, and therefore it was through them that the real story of the Holocaust could be told. While this may seem somewhat idealistic, as children also had reasons of their own to speak or to remain silent about specific experiences they went through, it was the prevalent view at the time.

Children as symbols of Jewish fate. Being young and innocent, the children epitomize the cruelty of the Nazis and their accomplices. Hounded all over towns and the countryside, they exemplified the Jewish tragedy. There was no better way of underscoring the evilness of the Nazis than by showing their most innocent victims. The children could not be blamed for exploiting non-Jews or for being politically disloyal; no apology for anti-Semitism or for Nazism could be given in their regard. In a way, they were also a major element of the Jewish indictment of the non-Jewish world for its behavior during the Holocaust and beyond.

Stories of Jewish children's Holocaust experiences were thus an important building block of post-Holocaust Jewish identity. The surviving children were a symbol of hope, a promise for the future. Their survival against all odds, as seen in their stories, spelled resilience and heroism that would be vital for the building of a viable future for the Jewish people. Israel Kaplan, by bringing forth the children's stories in *Fun Lezten Hurban,* made an important contribution to this building process.

Notes

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1. Benjamin Tennebaum, ed., *Ehad me-ir u shenayim mi-mishpahah: Mivhar m'elef autobigrafiot shel yaldei Yisrael b'Polin* [One of a City and Two of a Family: A Selection from a Thousand Autobiographies of Jewish Children in Poland] (Merhavyah, Israel: Sifriat Poalim, 1947). Maria Hochberg-Marianskwa and Noe Grüss, eds., *The Children Accuse* (London: Vallentine-Mitchell, 1996), was originally published in Polish as *Dzieci Oskarzaja* (Cracow-Łódź-Warsaw: Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, 1947); all translations and references used here are from the 1996 edition. Noe Grüss, ed., *Kinder-martirologye: zamlung fun dokumentn* (Children's Martyrdom: A Document Collection) (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1947), was

published as part of a series on the fate of Polish Jewry.

2. Israel Kaplan, Protocol of the first meeting of the [historical] workers of the Central Historical Commission, Munich, May 11–12, 1947, Record group (hereafter RG) 1258, file 476, YIVO Archive, New York.
3. Israel Kaplan, "Day to Day Work in the Historical Commission," 23. Lecture given at the meeting of the Historical Commissions, Munich, May 12, 1947, published by the Central Historical Commission of Liberated Jews in the American Zone.
4. Shalom Eilati [Kaplan's son], *Lahazot et Hanahar* [*Crossing the River*] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1999), 293.
5. Kaplan, "Day to Day work in the Historical Commission," 16.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. For an extensive description of this phenomenon, see Boaz Cohen, "The Children's Voice: Post-War Collection of Testimonies from Children Survivors of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 73–95.
9. Eilati, *Lahazot et Hanahar,* 292–93.
10. Israel Kaplan to (son) Shalom, May 16, 1947, Shalom Eilati Private Archive (hereafter SEPA), Jerusalem.
11. Joseph Shuster, "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 7 (May 1948): 91–94. The original testimony is in RG M1E, file 1800, Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter YVA), Jerusalem.
12. Daniel Burstin (Burztyn), "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 4 (March 1947): 75–83. His original testimony is in RG M1E, file 675, YVA.
13. Arieh Milch, "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 3 (November 1946): 65–67. His original testimony is in RG M1E, file 159, YVA. Children's names are given as published in the English-language back cover of the respective issues. The editors of the journal did not give the names as used by the children on their handwritten testimonies but instead gave an Anglicized version. The original names are given in brackets and are the ones used in the archives.
14. Collection of Children's Testimonies from Aschau bei Kraiburg, RG M1E, files 147–63, YVA.
15. Burstin, "My Experiences during the War."
16. Burstin also illustrated the group's journal. The only existing copy was lost later (fortunately after photocopying). Interview with Daniel Inbar (Burztyn) and Hadassah Shapira (Rozen), Tel Aviv, October 4, 2006.
17. Daniel Burstin to Israel Kaplan, February 26, 1947, and March 7, 1947, RG M1E, file 675, YVA. The quotation is from the first letter.
18. Jacob Lewin, "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 6 (May 1947): 75–81.
19. Rosa Pinczewski (Rozia Pinczewska), "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 6 (August 1947): 58–61. The original testimony is in RG M1E, file 368, YVA. The testimony from 1945 is Rozia

Pinczewska, RG M49E, file 1566, YVA.
20. Shuster, "My Experiences during the War."
21. Fania Olitzki, "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 8 (June 1948): 85–89.
22. Ela Grilihes, "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 9 (September 1948): 82–83.
23. Genia Shurz, "My Experiences during the War," *Fun Lezten Hurban* 10 (December 1948): 123–30.
24. Israel Kaplan to Shalom Kaplan, January 11, 1948, SEPA.
25. Burstin to Kaplan, February 26, 1947.
26. Burstin to Kaplan, March 7, 1947. I could not find information on the "'loyal' fascist Jews" mentioned here. In a phone interview on December 11, 2006, Burstin could not recall this matter.
27. Burstin, "My Experiences during the War," 80.
28. Israel Kaplan to Shalom Kaplan, June 8, 1947, SEPA.
29. Burstin, "My Experiences during the War," 79. After the war he was reunited with his mother.
30. Pinczewski, "My Experiences during the War," 59. She would later rejoin her parents in their forest hideout, although they were both subsequently murdered.
31. Shuster, "My Experiences during the War," 92.
32. Shurz, "My Experiences during the War," 127–28.
33. Ibid., 128.
34. Olitzki, "My Experiences during the War," 87.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 85.
37. Shurz, "My Experiences during the War," 125.
38. Ibid.
39. Shurz, "My Experiences during the War," 126
40. Ibid.
41. Pinczewski, "My Experiences during the War," 60.
42. Rozia Pinczewsk, RG M49E, file 1566, in Polish, YVA. This type of testimony was usually done as an interview. The adult who interviewed the child wrote down the testimony and sent it to the Central Historical Commission.
43. Hochberg-Marianskwa and Grüss, *The Children Accuse,* xxix–xxx.
44. Shuster, "My Experiences during the War," 92–3.
45. Shurz, "My Experiences during the War," 124.
46. Ibid., 128.
47. Shuster, "My Experiences during the War," 91.
48. Shurz, "My Experiences during the War," 127.
49. Milch, "My Experiences during the War," 67.
50. Pinczewski, "My Experiences during the War," 59.
51. Shurz, "My Experiences during the War," 129.
52. Ibid.
53. Hochberg-Marianskwa and Grüss, *The Children Accuse,* xxx.

54. Ibid.
55. On this issue see, David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
56. See Jeffery Shandler, ed., *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).