

Families after the Holocaust: between the archives and oral history

by Rebecca Clifford

Abstract: After the Holocaust, parents and children who had survived the genocide faced significant obstacles to family reunification. Many children with at least one surviving parent were never reclaimed by their families, while others who returned to live with their parents confronted a fractured social unit. This article draws on both archival sources and oral history to explore family reunification after the Holocaust, arguing that while archival documents can illustrate the mechanics of reunification, oral history allows us to confront its long-term legacies, revealing the extent to which divided loyalties, traumatic experiences and desperate material conditions broke families apart, even where parents and children managed against the odds to survive.

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Very young children paid a devastating price in the Holocaust. They had the lowest survival rate of any demographic group, with the possible exception of the very elderly. Although survival rates varied greatly from region to region and over time, a Jewish adult's chances of surviving the Holocaust were roughly thirty-three per cent, while a Jewish child's were roughly eleven per cent. This figure includes adolescents up to the age of seventeen, whose chances again greatly outstripped those of children under ten (who are the focus of this article).¹ Of the estimated 150,000 child survivors of the Holocaust, the majority spent at least part of the war in hiding, often separated from their families for months or even years.² Some of these child survivors – an unknown number – managed to locate surviving parents at the war's end, and this paper explores what happened when surviving children and parents found each other again after the liberation.

It is seductive to assume that such outcomes, stories of family survival against incredible odds, marked happy endings for those involved. Yet both the archival and oral records tell otherwise. In many cases, surviving

parents did not feel they could provide stable homes for their children, and a considerable number of child survivors with at least one living parent were never reclaimed by their families. Other children did reunite with surviving parents, only to see these reconstituted families break apart again after a period of months or years. Still other families managed to stay together, but the rifts between survivor parents and children could be considerable. As historian Tara Zahra has observed, families that managed to survive the war intact often struggled to survive the peace.³

If we want to understand the impacts of genocide on individuals, families and communities, then the issue of family reunification is a good place to start. However, historians are faced with a dilemma concerning how to tell a story that straddles the institutional world of the aid agencies that managed the family reunification process, and the private realm of the families under their care. There has been a welcome recent wave of scholarship on children and families after the Second World War – the work of Zahra, Daniella Doron and Ruth Balint is particularly noteworthy here – but this

work is based almost exclusively on the archives of relief organisations, and primarily describes their actions and their concerns.⁴ The agencies that managed family reunifications after the war have left a rich and varied trail in the archives, but these records almost never show us what happened after families passed out of an agency's care, nor how children subjectively experienced reunifications. If we want to understand how families themselves negotiated reunions, and why such reunions so often failed, we need to go beyond the written archival holdings of organisations and institutions.

If historians have struggled to tell the story of the intimate sphere of families, this is also true of the histories of children. Earlier work on the history of childhood focused on 'childhood' as a social construct, but over the last decade historians have begun to turn their attention to children as agents and subjects, arguing that children are historical actors in their own right, and working to integrate their voices into the historical record.⁵ At the same time, these scholars acknowledge the limitations of written archives as a locus for sources on the history of children as agents; children themselves, and especially the pre-literate, leave very little trace in traditional archives. As Mary Jo Maynes has observed, 'adults have produced almost all of the available evidence on which the history of children and childhood has been based'.⁶ Oral history is, then, a tempting option for those of us seeking to foreground children's roles as historical actors, and is increasingly becoming a vital source for historians studying children in and after conflict.⁷

It is not one without complexities and challenges, of course. One of the obvious issues is that testimony about childhood rarely comes from children themselves. In general, oral history does not give us the child's voice: it gives us the voice of the adult trying to make sense of a child's experiences, using the categories and concepts that adults use to interpret and logically structure their worlds. This is true where adults recount childhood experiences decades later, but also true in some cases where adults interview children directly. It is fascinating to note that, in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, there were a number of individuals and organisations that collected the testimony of child survivors. These pioneers gathered testimony from hundreds of children, chiefly orphans, who had survived the war in ghettos, in hiding and in concentration camps.⁸ However, scholars such as Boaz Cohen, who have studied these early children's testimonies extensively, agree that they were heavily mediated by the voice of the adult interviewer, who imposed a logic and coherence on the children's stories, edited them ruthlessly in writing them up, and shaped them to fit a particular purpose: they were intended as witness statements attesting to the crime of mass murder, not as personal reflections on the subjective experience of surviving genocide.⁹

There are thus significant methodological concerns with using historic interviews with child survivors – and

equally, there are concerns with using interviews with child survivors collected decades after the war's end. We must question how an adult today, reflecting on her or his childhood, will be 'perceiving and interpreting that childhood through her adult, learned categories – from adult notions of propriety to the special vocabularies of popularized psychology'.¹⁰ Adults' memories of childhood are also influenced by cultural constructions of what childhood should look like, and what children should act like, constructs that themselves change over time.¹¹ There is also a broader issue of memory development in children: developmental psychologists agree that we tend not to remember our childhood years very accurately (few people remember anything before the age of three, and memories from before the age of six or seven are fragmentary and disorganised), although we often fervently *believe* that we do.¹² Oral history is thus an imperfect window onto a young child's world – but where children, especially the youngest, have left little or no trace in the archives, it can allow us to glimpse worlds which might be otherwise lost.

Scholars of Holocaust testimony have of course long maintained that oral history gives us a great deal that the archives do not and cannot. Working with the testimony of adults, literary scholar Lawrence Langer has argued that if there are factual errors in a testimony, 'the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy'.¹³ Psychiatrist Dori Laub, one of the founders of the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, has similarly argued that if we disregard testimony because it contains factual errors, we miss the fact that it speaks to broader truths about the subjective experience of surviving genocide.¹⁴ If this is true for the testimony of adult survivors, it is all the more true for that of child survivors, whose memories of the years of persecutions are often fragmentary, chronologically disordered, and sometimes filled with twists and turns that defy an adult sense of logic, but which nonetheless speak to historical experience *as a child perceived it* in a way that few other documents can do.¹⁵ With regards to the issue of family reunification after the Holocaust, without oral history we could say very little indeed about how reunion was experienced in the intimate and largely unrecorded sphere of the family, nor about why so many families struggled to get and to stay together after the war.

This article uses both archival documents from the immediate post-war period and oral history conducted decades later to explore how very young children understood the process of family reunification in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and how they made sense of this as they became adults.¹⁶ It draws on three case studies to explore the issue of family reunification, selected from a pool of 100 pre-adolescent children (born 1935–1944) whose stories are the backbone of my current book project on child survivors after the Holocaust. It interrogates the gulf between the reconstructed Jewish family as an ideological symbol and the reality of a broken social unit, and focuses on the child's perspec-

tive on this process, a perspective almost completely absent from the current historiography. It argues that an idealised vision of the nuclear family motivated both aid agencies and families, but the realities of competing claims on children's affections, of psychological damage and of material precariousness made this vision difficult to achieve. It calls, moreover, for a methodological approach that combines oral and archival research at the level of individual case studies, as each allows us to view a child's story from a different angle.

Archives reveal the day-by-day workings of family reunification, but rarely help us to understand *why* reunification succeeded or failed. Oral history, on the other hand, allows us to chart the after-effects of this process, which stretched long fingers down the length of these grown children's lives, shaping family dynamics for years and decades.

Aid agencies and family reunification

It is little wonder that the story of family reunification after the Holocaust has been told primarily from the perspective of relief organisations: they were the actors that organised, managed and policed the process. The monumental task of tracking down and then bringing together children and parents separated in the Holocaust was a global effort that involved Jewish and other charitable aid agencies, state governments, international bodies such as the United Nations, and a host of other local, national and international institutions. These efforts were driven by practical concerns, but also by ideological ones. The emergent postwar vision of the family as a potential bulwark against the return of fascism has been well studied, and both states and new humanitarian aid organisations shared in a vision of the family as a unit that could act against the collectivist impulses of fascism (and, of course, communism). As Zahra has noted, there was a powerful, shared perception in the post-war period (at least in the West) that if Nazism had sought to destroy the family, then the restoration of the family would be Europe's salvation. Moreover, this was, as Zahra reminds us, not simply a return to a pre-war order: the period after the Second World War was a moment in which the basic ideals of the family were being dramatically re-invented.¹⁷

This new image of the family was constructed and championed from a number of different camps. A new world of experts, including social workers using the casework model, psychologists, youth workers and the legions of volunteers who filled the ranks of aid agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), not only worked with the assumption that the nuclear family needed to be restored and protected, but sought to professionalise the process.¹⁸ States in western Europe and in the Anglo-American sphere were likewise interested and involved: beyond searching for meaningful pathways to strengthened democratic systems, states were also concerned with a perceived rise in juvenile delinquency after the war, and saw the 'nuclear' family – the term

itself reminds us of its Cold War conceptual origins – as a potential buttress against such problems.¹⁹ Jewish organisations at the local, national and transnational level were similarly committed to rebuilding the Jewish family, although their chief concern was less the strengthening of democratic systems, and more the re-establishment of European Jewry.²⁰ For all these actors, children played an obvious practical role in family reunification initiatives, but even more important was their central symbolic role: in children, presumed to be both innocent and resilient, these institutions saw a potent symbol of European and Jewish regeneration and restoration.

However, there was a significant gulf between this ideological vision of the family, and the messy on-the-ground reality of post-war family reunification. This was true for all families torn apart by the conflict, but particularly true where families affected by the Holocaust were concerned. Child Holocaust survivors had often been separated from their parents and siblings during the war years. Many were hidden with Christian families or institutions, some of which felt they had a continuing claim on the child's body, mind and soul in the post-war period. Surviving parents, for their part, had had a very different set of experiences during the war: they had worked as slave labour, had been held for months or years in internment and concentration camps, had spent years running and hiding, or had gone through any number of similar traumatic and terrifying experiences. They had been pushed to the brink of physical and emotional collapse. Children and parents' different life paths in the war years had transformed them, and in many cases at the end of the war they found that they were utterly strangers to each other. This was particularly true where survivor children were very young, and had no memory of the mothers and fathers that they had left behind when they went into hiding.²¹

The aid agencies whose work it was to reunite these families walked a difficult line between advocating family reunification – informed by that emergent post-war vision of the nuclear family – and worrying about its repercussions. One of their chief concerns was whether survivor parents could be fit parents. In this their actions were informed by a widespread prejudice against survivors, particularly concentration camp survivors, that developed on the heels of the liberation of the camps in the winter and spring of 1945, and the creation of new camps for displaced persons, administered by UNRRA. In the early post-war popular press, journalists and editors opined that camp survivors would be incapable of relinquishing the skills of deception that had helped them to survive in the camps. In the popular imagination, adult camp survivors relied on handouts, ran the black market and had had their moral compasses destroyed by their time in the camps – in other words, they were presented as fundamentally damaged by Nazism.²² Care workers from UNRRA fretted that camp survivor parents would not be up to the task of rebuilding families, and that survivor

mothers in particular had lost their 'maternal instincts'.²³ The rare child survivors of the camps were also regarded with some suspicion by a voyeuristic press, but child survivors were generally thought to be 'redeemable', while adults were less so. Thus, for all the pressures that agencies were under to work towards family reunifications, they did not always trust that parents were up to the task.

There were also practical issues that negatively influenced family reunification. Many aid workers believed that children would have a more secure material life if they were not returned to their parents, and some parents (and even some children) shared this assumption. Indeed, because survivor parents would be expected to resume their financial obligations to their children if they reclaimed them, both parents and children sometimes worked to conceal the very fact of a parent's survival from the aid agencies. Equally, because some post-war immigration schemes were open only to 'fully orphaned' children, some parents and children sought to hide the fact of the parents' survival so that the children might get out of Europe.

In Canada, where a post-war 'war orphans scheme' run by the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) was responsible for bringing 1,116 child survivors out of Europe, CJC workers refused to accept even those children rumoured (but not confirmed) to have surviving parents. A 1947 report from a CJC worker recorded that 'a girl and a boy were commended to me and presented as cousins, [but] I refused to accept the girl because there were strong rumours that she had a mother living. I later discovered they were not cousins, but brother and sister, and therefore declared them both ineligible'.²⁴ It is not clear if the mother in this case ever reclaimed her children (or, indeed, if she was really alive at all), but such cases suggested to surviving parents and children that a child's life chances might be better *without* their parents. Some commentators in the press echoed these sentiments. Journalist Alexis Danan, writing in the left-leaning French daily *Libération* at the end of 1944 (and thus before the liberation of the concentration camps), argued that children would be better off if they were kept away from their surviving parents:

The real truth, which everybody – particularly those [involved] in the rescue of Jewish children from Hitler's hell – knows is that the rescued children do not wish in reality to find their mothers. On the contrary, deep in their hearts, is the wish that they need never return [...]. You who are living – if you still exist somewhere in a concentration camp in Poland or in Czechoslovakia! Out of love for your children, let your children enjoy life where they are, for if not, they will carry hatred against you because of your return. The children do not want to know you any more. If you are not yet dead, your children have died for you.²⁵

Those involved in family reunifications – agencies, Jewish organisations, parents and children – thus

walked a precarious line between espousing faith in the process and fearing that reunification actually worked against a child's best interests. This was the climate in which family reunification took place (or failed to take place) in the early years after the Second World War, and helps in part to explain why reunification efforts so often failed. This is, however, only a slice of the story: the slice that we can reconstruct via archival documents. Archival documents on family reunions wonderfully illustrate the tussles between agencies and families, and shed a useful light on aid workers' own perspectives and prejudices, but they largely leave out the voices of parents and children. These documents, moreover, tell us about the process leading up to family reunions, but not about what happened afterwards. They do not tell us how these reunions were subjectively experienced, nor what long-term implications the process had.

Here I would like to turn to three case studies of attempts at post-war family reconstruction: the first examines a successful, if problematic, reunion; the second a family that was reunited only to break apart again; and the third a case where a parent and child did not manage to resume their family life until more than a decade after the war's end, and then only temporarily. Each could be told, at least in part, through archival documents alone, but this would reveal only a sliver of the story. Combined with oral testimony, however, we can begin to piece together how a family's post-war material and emotional circumstances shaped the limits and the outcomes of the reunification process.

Joan S

Joan S was born Fanny Z in Brussels in February 1940. When the Nazis invaded Belgium in May, her father was taken prisoner, but managed to escape; he survived the war by fleeing first to France, then crossing the Pyrenees into Spain and finally entering Britain in 1943, where he joined the British forces. Joan's mother, with Joan and her older half-sister Liliane, took a similar route separately, fleeing Belgium for France and then France for Francoist Spain. Once in Spain, the two girls were helped by the Quaker aid organisation American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which worked together with the governmental US Committee on the Care of European Children (USCOM) to bring some hundreds of children, mostly Jewish, from Europe to the US during the war.²⁶ Joan and her sister sailed for the US in the spring of 1943, and after a brief stay in an orphanage, Joan was placed with a well-off foster family in Philadelphia. The foster family changed her name from Fanny to Joan. She was three years old.

Joan's is a rare example in which mother, father and children were scattered into a global diaspora during the Holocaust, but all survived. Her father was in Britain, her mother waited out the war years in Barcelona, and Joan and her sister were on the eastern seaboard of the United States. In 1947, after four years with her foster family in Philadelphia, Joan and her sister were sent back to live with her parents, who had

moved to London to try and re-establish their lives and livelihoods.

Joan's case is richly documented in the archives of the AFSC, and at least a part of her story can be reconstructed through archival documents alone. It is clear that the AFSC aid workers who managed Joan's rescue from Europe, her placement with her American foster family and her eventual return to her parents had high hopes for the success of this particular family reunion. Her caseworkers gave a positive assessment of Joan's birth mother, who they interviewed in August 1944, noting that 'she makes an excellent impression. Although obviously very much moved by news of her children, she was restrained and intelligent in speaking of them'. They equally praised her foster family as 'middle-class people living in a suburban community and having fine standards of living', and described Joan herself as a 'continuously good child' who had 'walked into the arms of her foster parents, and had a very secure place in their affections'.²⁷ From the agency's perspective, Joan's story of family reunification should have been untroubled: her foster parents were affectionate and, in the agency's eyes, were rendered respectable by their social class; her birth parents were likewise deemed respectable and – again in the eyes of the agency – had not been psychically damaged or morally compromised by the concentration camps; and the child Joan herself seemed to have benefitted from a stable and loving environment. Her situation thus seemed to fit the agency's ideal of what a healthy family reunification might look like. Her case file closed with her return to her birth parents in the summer of 1947.

Joan's oral testimony, however, gives a decidedly less rosy picture of the process of family reunification. She attests to a childhood caught in a tangled web between her birth family and her foster family, a situation that only became more complex and laden with emotional obstacles as she grew older. In this, her experience is one shared by many child Holocaust survivors who spent part or all of the war years with foster or rescue families, and particularly poignant for the youngest child survivors, who often had no memory of their birth parents after years apart. Although Joan's case notes state that she recognised a picture of her birth mother in 1944 (after a separation of a year), in her oral testimony she recalls that she did not recognise the couple who met the children on the airport tarmac when Joan and her sister arrived in Britain in 1947:

So here I am, and my mother grabs hold of me like her baby's come back, only her baby's now seven and a half, where she was three and a half when she left. I just didn't want them to touch me. [...] It was a nightmare, you know. It was like being abducted, as far as I was concerned.²⁸

It was emotionally destabilising to come back to unremembered parents with whom she had no common language, and equally so to experience a sudden, unexpected descent in material standing. In

Philadelphia, Joan's foster family had lived in a large house with spacious grounds, but in London, her formerly well-off parents were living in a small, cold-water flat above a shop, with 'a tiny little gas stove, and a table and four chairs, and a door to a balcony with an outdoor toilet'. She recalls feeling embarrassed both by the large suitcases and trunk that she had brought from the US, which clearly had no place in such a small flat, but also by her father's discomfort in showing them the flat: 'So my father is introducing us to our new home, like we're being taken into a palace, and you know, as an adult I realise that that was his embarrassment'.

As an adult, Joan can make sense of her parents' behaviour, but as a child this was more challenging. She longed to return to her foster parents, and when they invited her back for a holiday, she went happily, and ended up spending the remainder of her childhood shuttling back and forth between her foster and birth parents. Both sets of relationships began to break down. Joan's foster mother 'started being cruel', and her birth mother was increasingly distressed by the presence of this second maternal figure. No matter which side of the Atlantic she was on, she remembers constant suggestions that the other household, and her other self, were not worthy; in her words, as an adult trying to make sense of the experience, she recalls that she was constantly 'being told that who I am is not good'. Joan ended up running away from home when she was seventeen, and living in a Jewish youth club in London's East End, where the sympathetic warden saw how greatly Joan had been traumatised by 'this tug of war between my birth parents and my American parents'.

From the perspective of the agency and of the archives, Joan's case seemed to match an ideal and ideologically-driven model of the 'good' family reunion. The difficulties she experienced in returning to her family, however, were very common for child survivors. Her case reminds us that where there were multiple claims on a child's affections during the war years, these claims could then stretch into the post-war years with profoundly damaging consequences. The confusion and guilt caused by two different families battling over her very identity made this a difficult reunion, if from the agency's perspective a successful one. The archival documents in this case do help us to understand why and how this was, overall, a 'successful' reunion – but Joan's oral testimony reminds us that even those families that appeared on paper to have every chance of success were battered by forces that made reunification an extraordinary challenge.

Eric C

Eric C was born in March 1938 in Mannheim, Germany. He was only two and a half years old when he was deported, along with his father, mother and baby sister to an internment camp at Gurs in the south of France. The Jewish aid organisation *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE) worked to rescue children from the Gurs camp, and Eric was among those taken first to a care home for small children in Limoges, and



A group of children at the OSE care home in Draveil, Seine-et-Oise, France. Eric C. is in the very front on the left.
Photo: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Hermine Markovitz.

then – after the unoccupied Vichy zone was occupied by the Nazis in late 1942 – to the home of a French Catholic family in the countryside, who hid him for a year and a half in a room in their basement.²⁹ He recalls, in his 1995 Survivors of the Shoah Foundation testimony, spending most of his time alone in this room, and ‘being afraid, being unhappy, wanting to be with my mother, spending a lot of time sleeping, crying a lot – all those sorts of things are memories I have’. He was four and a half years old.³⁰

Towards the end of the war, he was briefly taken to another family home and reunited with his younger sister there; his parents, meanwhile, had been taken to the internment camps at Rivesaltes and Drancy before being deported to Auschwitz, where his mother was murdered upon arrival. His father was admitted to the camp, and survived. After the liberation of France, Eric and his sister were taken to two different OSE-run children’s homes. They then learned in 1945 that their father was alive, and were sent to live with him in September 1946.

We can tell from the ample archival documents on Eric’s case – here, files from the Red Cross International Tracing Service – that this reunification did not work out. The children stayed with their father for only a few years before they were sent to live with their maternal grandparents in Pueblo, Colorado. What we cannot tell from the archival records is why this happened. We can guess that financial pressures might have played a role in the father’s decision to relinquish his children, as there is a 1949 request from Eric’s father for financial assistance in the family files.³¹ We can also see from these files that the orphanage wanted to maintain control over the reunification process, and staff were hesitant to send the children back to live with their father without having the opportunity to meet with him directly (possibly concerned about the moral and psychological impacts of his years in Auschwitz). A December 1945 letter from the OSE to the head of the military government in the French occupied zone of Germany suggested that ‘if Mr C could obtain the necessary authorization to come and visit his children, we might decide together on their future’. (It does not appear that such a visit ever took place).³² But the files tell us little more than this: they end with a brief note, dated 25 July 1950: ‘Case closed: left for USA in April 1950’.³³

Using Eric C’s 1995 interview, however, we can reconstruct the afterlife of this failed family reunification, and consider what it might have been like to be returned, without preparation, to a survivor parent grappling with his own demons. When Eric gave his 1995 testimony, he was fifty-seven years old, and was in the midst of a period of intensive research into his own past, aspects of which he could only dimly remember. The interview thus speaks to us from a moment when Eric was deeply engaged with trying to make sense of his childhood, including the reunion with his father and its dissolution. Speaking from this particular point in his middle age, Eric recalls the shock of return-

ing to a father he had no memory of, nor common language with, to discover a cold and emotionless person:

In terms of how I remember him from the beginning, he was a very cold person at that point. Having grown up now as an adult, I try to give him the benefit of the doubt in terms of why he was the way he was, and of course his experiences in Auschwitz had to have been horrendous. But there was no warmth, there was no love, no affection, and he really, for whatever reason, could not give us what I would have liked to have at that time.

Eric recalls that the gulf between father and children was stretched further by his father’s silence on the recent past: he would tell the children nothing about their mother, and never spoke of his time in Auschwitz: ‘There was no discussion about it, and it must have been implied by my father that there was no need to talk about it’. We can understand this as the adult Eric’s preoccupation as much as the child’s: at the time of the interview, Eric had been recently researching his past, and had only just seen a picture of his mother for the first time. We must understand his resentment over his father’s silence, particularly on the topic of his mother, through this lens. His testimony nonetheless gives a refracted picture of a household in which a survivor parent was unable to care for the emotional needs of his children.

In the spring of 1950, his father sent Eric and his younger sister to live with their maternal grandparents in Colorado, an experience which he remembers as ‘even worse than living with my father’. After three joyless years in this equally emotionally sterile household, and after having learned yet another new language and adapted to yet another new culture, the grandparents placed the two children in foster care. Eric spent nine months in a foster home, and was then sent to a Jewish children’s home, where he recalls that he ‘felt comfortable’ for the first time in his life. He did not see his father again until 1970, when, then age thirty-two, he went with his wife to visit his father in Germany. They ‘spent three hours talking about mundane sorts of things’, and then he left, feeling as if ‘I had gone to see an acquaintance as opposed to my father’. Eric never saw his father again.

What caused this family to break apart, and what did this mean for the children involved? In Eric’s adult understanding of the situation, trauma was at the root of the family’s breakdown: his father was too traumatised to step into the role of the parent. Here we would greatly benefit from being able to add Eric’s father’s voice to the story, but beyond his 1949 request for financial assistance, the father left nothing in the archives or in the oral record to allow us to do so. Eric’s case is an example of precisely what the aid agencies feared: that concentration camp survivors would be unable to function as parents. It is worth noting that cases like Eric’s were not unusual, but were less

common than cases like Joan's. The agencies' prejudices against camp survivors were based as much on anxieties as they were on realities. It is equally true, however, that a parent's ongoing trauma could have severe, destructive consequences for a family; this is a phenomenon that has been well-studied by psychologists and psychoanalysts, but largely ignored by historians.³⁴ Eric's case reminds us that the after-effects of traumatic experiences could sound the death knell for a family, even where most of its members survived.

Vic C

Vic C was born in April 1941 in Berlin. His father was taken away only two weeks after his birth, and his mother was working as a slave labourer in a local rubber factory. Vic was admitted to the Berlin Jewish Hospital with an ear infection when he was roughly a year old, and from there was deported to Theresienstadt ghetto-camp, an infant separated from his family. He survived the ghetto-camp due to the dedication and sacrifice of the adults who worked in the camp's children's wards, and after the war was one of a cohort of 300 children sent from Theresienstadt to England, as part of a broader scheme to bring a thousand 'camp orphans' to Britain.³⁵ Most of the 300 children in this group were older, but Vic was among a small number of children under twelve years old who were sent to Weir Courtney care home in Lingfield, Surrey, an institution that enjoyed the patronage of Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund Freud and founder of the field of child psychoanalysis.³⁶

The children at Weir Courtney offer in themselves a snapshot of the shape of family reunifications, and their failure rate, after the war. Although numbers at the orphanage waxed and waned, there were fewer than thirty children who spent part of their childhoods there. Of this small number, two of the children, Italian sisters who had been admitted to Auschwitz through the mistaken assumption that they were twins, had both their mother and (non-Jewish) father survive, and they were returned to their parents in 1946. An additional four children had surviving mothers, but these mothers never reclaimed their children.³⁷ This was the case for Vic. Orphanage staff learned in 1946 that Vic's mother was alive and living in Austria, but although some attempts at reunion were made, Vic did not see his mother again until he was in his late teens.

The archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or Joint) contain a number of documents on Vic's case, which offer suggestions as to why reunion between Vic and his mother proved challenging. The files show that his mother, Margot, was working as an interpreter for US troops stationed in Austria, and was boarding in a hotel with other single working women. Vic's maternal grandmother and uncle had also survived and were living in Sweden, but the entire family was struggling financially. The documents show that Margot hoped to join her mother in Sweden, but a JDC case worker recorded that the grandmother 'cannot even provide them with living

accommodation'.³⁸ Margot had had two additional children with a different father, and these children were boarded out to a foster family. Vic's family was thus in desperate material circumstances.

Nonetheless, in the autumn of 1946, Margot wrote to the Austrian Red Cross in the hopes of finding Vic; when she located him in England, she wrote to the British Jewish Refugee Committee and asked them to send Vic to Berlin, where she claimed to be living with a friend. However, the agencies involved were suspicious that, were they to send Vic to his mother, she would end up placing him in foster care. Vic's maternal grandmother herself even warned against returning Vic to his mother, writing that 'it would be preferable' to send Vic to her niece in Palestine, rather than return him to a mother living in such a materially precarious position in Austria. The archival records also show that in June 1947, official permission was given to 'repatriate' Vic to Austria, but the permission closed in November without his having been sent.³⁹

A rather different perspective on the situation was recorded in the orphanage's files. Staff clearly felt it was their duty to protect Vic from his mother, and were suspicious of both her motivations and her character. In March 1952, when Vic was eleven, Weir Courtney matron Alice Goldberger wrote rather piercingly that:

Vic has got a mother who is in Austria or Germany. We heard last of her that she is a waitress. She has several children from different men. Very unfortunate [sic] for Vic she wrote to him and promised to take him to her and we started to teach him German, which he had forgotten, because we expected the call for him to go home. Vic was very bewildered at that time, talked about his little sister and his mummy in Austria or Australia, because of course he had no memory of her. One day a 'new uncle' wrote to Vic, promising to take him and his mummy to America. I kept this letter from Vic, because I did not want to upset the child and bring new conflicts to him. It looked as if Vic's mother had met a young American soldier with whom she had made all kinds of future plans. This was the last we heard directly from her.⁴⁰

Was his mother's situation too precarious for her to be able to reclaim her child? The JDC archival holdings suggest that this was certainly the case at first, but the orphanage's records, while judgmental (and in places factually inaccurate) indicate that the explanation may have been more complex. Oral testimony further complicates the story. We are privileged, in Vic's case, to have testimony from his mother Margot, recorded by psychologist Sarah Moskovitz in 1978. Margot recalled in this interview that in the immediate post-war years, her circumstances made it impossible for her to keep a child with her:

For a while I thought to take him and wrote to Alice Goldberger. But then what would I do with him? He

spoke no German. I was still ducked under [here she refers to the fact that she survived the later part of the war by passing as Aryan]. I decided I couldn't take him. I had nothing, absolutely nothing. I had the two children boarded out, and I was living in the hotel with the other girls. [...] I was very torn. Here's a child who had been taken away by force, and all of a sudden I can't take him back. But the life he had there was better than the life I could ever give him in Austria.

This explanation corresponds to what the JDC archival documents set out, but other intriguing details in Margot's narrative suggest a further layer of complexity. Margot relates that she remarried and emigrated to the US in the early 1950s, around the time that Goldberger's notes refer to the 'new uncle' who wrote to Vic. She also reveals, however, that a few years later, she heard from the orphanage that there was a family who wanted to adopt Vic – and she refused to allow the adoption to proceed. Finally, she discloses the surprising fact that she did eventually send for Vic, when he was seventeen years old.

At first we were close. But it didn't work out. I didn't like him giving cigarettes to my fifteen-year-old daughter. He was young, stubborn, cocky. He couldn't stand me getting mad at him. He went into the Air Force.⁴¹

When I interviewed Vic in July 2017, he recalled the terrible tension between the frequent promises that he would go to live with his mother, and the equally frequent disappointment when these promises failed to materialise:

In 1947, I heard that my mother was still alive, and living in Germany or Austria, one of those. And nothing ever really came of it. It was kind of under the rug. But then in the early '50s, it rose up again. I was all excited, I was going to go to Germany and be with her. And I started trying to learn German again, because I had forgotten what I had very quickly. Then that fell apart, nothing came of that. Then in May 1958 I got a letter from my mother, she was in the United States, I had a brother and sister, she was married to a man who had a steady job, and she was telling me to come, and I wanted to go.⁴²

Vic remembers that he had fond 'dreams about what it would be like to be reunited' with his mother, but that the reunion itself was disorienting, and the mother he found on arrival in the United States was unsympathetic and emotionally distant. Moreover, she lived with her two younger children and her third husband in a remote outpost in the mountains, four hours' drive from Seattle, Washington, leaving the adolescent Vic in complete isolation with a family where, it soon began to emerge, abuse had already gnawed at the bonds between mother and children:



It didn't take long to realise that I might not have done the right thing. [...] It was not what I thought it would be like, it was not all peaches and cream. I had visited school friends who had regular families, so I thought I knew what it should have been like. But when I got there, nobody really said anything to me, and I felt strange. [...] My mother was not kind at all, and there were times that I wondered what I was doing there. It wasn't until years later that I found out from my sister that she and my brother



Children at the Weir Courtney care home in Lingfield, Surrey. Vic C is on the right. Photo: World Jewish Relief.

were hoping that I would get them out of there. One thing [my mother] did was she hit them, and that just did not go over well with me at all. [...] But then I got a job in Seattle, and I only went back on the weekends, and everyone seemed happy to see me and things were halfway nice, and then I decided I wanted to join the Air Force.

It is worth noting that Vic's story of re-encountering an unpredictable and sometimes violent mother after a

separation of sixteen years is unusual: far more common were stories such as those of Joan and Eric, where families were reunited within the first two to three years after the war, and where emotional distance and silences shaped the relationship between newly acquainted parents and children, rather than physical abuse.⁴³ Yet all these stories suggest that rebuilding a relationship with a survivor parent could be a minefield for children who were themselves survivors. For all parties involved in family reunifications – aid agencies,

parents and children – the dream of the ideal family loomed large, but material and emotional insecurity were all too frequently the post-war reality.

So what do we gain from reconstructing such cases via both archival and oral sources? Joan, Eric and Vic's stories represent trajectories that many child survivors of the Holocaust will recognise, and serve as examples that illustrate both why some families never managed to live together again after the war, and why others faced such enormous challenges when they did manage to reunite. In these three cases and more broadly, the archival holdings of aid agencies can show which families reclaimed their children and which did not, but they rarely tell us *why* this happened, or what the consequences were. Oral history, giving an adult's perspective on childhood experiences, allows us to see beyond the short-term mechanics of family reunification to its long-term consequences, particularly highlighting the impacts of broken parent-child relationships over the course not only of childhood, but of an entire life.

Many readers will remember the concluding scene of Roberto Benigni's 1997 film *La vita è bella* (Life is Beautiful), in which a mother and child are reunited after having survived a concentration camp, and the little boy, hugging his mother, yells 'we won!'⁴⁴ I thought about this scene frequently in writing this article, because I think it lays bare just how seductive is the assumption that there is an implicit happy outcome

in survival alone for families ruptured by genocide. We want to believe in the 'victory' of Benigni's fictional family; we find the stark experiences of the very real families described in this paper shocking. This sense of shock is vital to acknowledge, because it unmasks how far we are from understanding fully the power of genocide to destroy families and communities long after the fighting has stopped. In recent years, historians and other scholars have turned in increasing numbers to studying 'reconstruction' after conflict, but this term itself is deceptively positive, implying that individual lives and the social fabric that knits them together *can* be rebuilt.

In studying attempted family reunions after the Holocaust, and in acknowledging how often these attempts fell apart, we come face to face with the bald reality of what the European Jewish family as a social unit looked like in the wake of the genocide. It is a jarring picture of the long reach of destruction into the most intimate of spheres, the home and its inhabitants, and it calls out for further study. Moreover, we are now facing a global refugee crisis in which aid agencies are once again managing, on a large scale, the reunification of families torn apart by conflict. There is thus enormous potential here for the past to speak to the present, not only to inform how agencies might best help the families in their care, but also to consider what might be done to help children and their parents once an agency's case file closes.

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NOTES:

1. Nechama Tec, 'Jewish children: between protectors and murderers', *Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies Occasional Papers*, Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), 2005, p 2.
2. This estimate is based on early post-war reports, and while it has been generally adopted by historians, it is likely inaccurate. See Zorach Warhaftig and Jacob Freid, *Uprooted: Jewish Refugees and Displaced Persons after Liberation*, New York: American Jewish Congress, 1946, p 119; and the Jewish Chronicle, 13 July 1945, p 1. See also

Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p xii.

3. Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, p 3.

4. See Zahra, 2011; Daniella Doron, *Jewish Youth and Identity in Postwar France: Rebuilding Family and Nation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015; and Ruth Balint, 'Children left behind: family, refugees and immigration in postwar Europe', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 82, 2016, pp 151-172.

5. On these historiographical developments, see in particular the articles in the seminal issue of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 2008.

6. Mary Jo Maynes, 'Age as a category of historical analysis: history, agency, and narratives of childhood', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, vol 1, 2008, p 117.

7. For a helpful recent example, see Lindsey Dodd, *French Children Under the Allied Bombs, 1940-45: An Oral History*, Manchester: Manchester

University Press, 2016. See also my own recent work, Rebecca Clifford, 'Who is a survivor?: child Holocaust survivors and the development of a generational identity', *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, vol 37, 2017, special issue 'Generations and Memory: Continuity and Change'.

8. These individuals and organisations included the Central Historical Commission in Munich, which collected hundreds of testimonies from children in displaced persons' camps; the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, which similarly collected hundreds of testimonies and published some in an edited volume in 1946 (for an English translation, see Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, *The Children Accuse*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996); translator Benjamin Tenenbaum, who collected 1,000 brief 'autobiographies' of child survivors in Poland in 1946; educator Helena Wrobel-Kagan, who had child survivors write personal testimony in Bergen-Belsen after its conversion to a displaced persons' camp; and US-based psychologist David P Boder, who recorded over 100 interviews with survivors, nineteen of which were with

child survivors. With the exception of Boder's interviews, all were written (rather than recorded) and generally heavily edited in the writing-up process. Adults involved in collecting children's testimony generally favoured that of older children; for example, of the nineteen children interviewed by Boder, the youngest was thirteen in 1946, and the majority were between seventeen and nineteen. On Boder's work, see Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, and Rachel Deblinger, 'David P. Boder: Holocaust memory in displaced persons' camps', in David Cesarani and Eric Sundquist (eds), *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp 115-126. Boder's interviews can be heard, and the transcripts read, via the Illinois Institute of Technology's 'Voices of the Holocaust' online project (<http://voices.iit.edu>). Regarding the written testimony collections, the authoritative work is that of historian Boaz Cohen: see Boaz Cohen, 'Representing the experiences of children in the Holocaust: children's survivor testimonies published in *Fun Letsten Hurbn*, Munich, 1946-1949', in Avinoam J Patt and Michael Berkowitz (eds), *We Are Here: New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010, pp 74-97; Boaz Cohen, 'The children's voice: postwar collection of testimonies from child survivors of the Holocaust', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol 21, no 1, 2007, pp 73-95; and Boaz Cohen, 'And I was only a child': children's testimonies, Bergen-Belsen 1945', *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, vol 12, no 1, 2006, pp 153-169.

9. Here see especially Cohen, 2007, pp 79-91.

10. Jay Mechling, 'Oral evidence and the history of American children's lives', *Journal of American History*, vol 74, 1987, pp 579-586.

11. Katie Wright and Julie McLeod, 'Public memories and private meanings: representing the "happy childhood" narrative in oral histories of adolescence and schooling in Australia, 1930s-1950s', *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, vol 32, 2012, pp 1-19.

12. The phenomenon known as 'infantile amnesia' or 'childhood amnesia' has long puzzled

developmental psychologists and continues to do so. Before the 1980s, it was generally believed that children under three were incapable of forming long-term memories. Psychologists have now demonstrated that very young children can indeed form such memories, but that these earliest memories begin to fade by the age of six or seven. See Patricia J Bauer, 'Development of memory in early childhood', in Nelson Cowan (ed), *The Development of Memory in Childhood*, Hove: Psychology Press, 1997, chapter 5; and Katherine Nelson, 'Self and social function: individual autobiographical memory and collective narrative', *Memory*, vol 11, 2003, pp 125-136. On the discrepancy between how accurate we believe our earliest memories to be, and how accurate they really are, see Christine Wells, Catriona Morrison and Martin Conway, 'Adult recollections of childhood memories: what details can be recalled?', *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, vol 67, no 7, 2013, pp 1249-1261.

13. Lawrence L Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p xv.

14. Here Laub uses the example of a survivor who witnessed the Auschwitz Uprising and spoke of having seen 'four chimneys' go up in flames that night. Amidst historians' protests that such testimony could not be accepted because it was 'not accurate', Laub argued that the witness 'testified to an event that broke the all-compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. [...] That was historical truth'. See Dori Laub, 'Bearing witness, or the vicissitudes of listening', in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp 59-60.

15. There are exceptions for those studying older child survivors, children who had received enough education (generally before the war) to be able to write. Children's diaries, for example, written by those on the cusp of or in adolescence, are an excellent source; for a collection of such diaries, see Alexandra Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. However, for historians dealing with pre-adolescent children, such precious first-hand written sources are non-existent.

16. The 100 case studies I use in my book project draw on oral history interviews (including, wherever possible, multiple different interviews with the same child survivor) from a range of collections. In addition to interviews I conducted myself, I have used interviews from the Yale Fortunoff collection, the Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, the USHMM oral history collection, Judith Kestenbergs's International Study of Organized Persecution of Children oral history collection and a number of smaller collections. For the three case studies referred to in this article, Joan S's case draws on an interview that she and I conducted in 2014; Eric C's case uses his 1995 Shoah Foundation interview; and Vic C's case draws on both a 1978 interview that psychologist Sarah Moskovitz conducted with Vic's mother Margot, and an interview that Vic and I conducted in 2017.

17. Zahra, 2011, pp ix-x.

18. On UNRRA and its work with children, see Ben Shephard, *The Long Road Home: The Aftermath of the Second World War*, London: Bodley Head, 2010, chapters 15 and 16.

19. On the involvement of states, see Zahra, 2011.

20. On the role of Jewish organisations, particularly useful is Daniella Doron, *Jewish Youth and Identity in Postwar France: Rebuilding Family and Nation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015, which looks at the French case. On Jewish organisations and children in Britain and Israel, see Mary Fraser Kirsh, 'The lost children of Europe: narrating the rehabilitation of child Holocaust survivors in Great Britain and Israel', doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2012. There is also some discussion of British Jewish organisations in Martin Gilbert, *The Boys: Triumph over Adversity*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996.

21. On children in hiding, see Mary Fraser Kirsh, 'Remembering the "pain of belonging": Jewish children hidden as Catholics in Second World War France', in Simone Gigliotti and Monica Tempian (eds), *The Young Victims of the Nazi Regime: Migration, the Holocaust and Postwar Displacement*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, pp 257-276 on the French case; Suzanne Vromen, *Hidden Children of the Holocaust*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 on the Belgian case; and Diane L Wolf, *Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden Children and*

Postwar Families in Holland, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007 on the Dutch case.

22. On the prejudice against camp survivors, see Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp 50-77.

23. IRO child care officer Yvonne de Jong in a June 1948 report; quoted in Zahra, 2011, p 110.

24. CJC worker's report quoted in Ben Lappin, *The Redeemed Children: The Story of the Rescue of War Orphans by the Jewish Community of Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963, p 49.

25. Alexis Danan, 'Les vivants même sont morts', *Libération*, 30 December 1944, quoted in Kirsh, 2012, p 79, footnote 197. The translation from the French is Kirsh's.

26. Michal Ostrovsky, "We are standing by": rescue operations of the United States Committee for the Care of European Children', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol 29, no 2, 2015, pp 230-250.

27. AFSC refugee assistance case files, 2002.296, file 9758, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

28. Interview with Joan Salter; recorded by Rebecca Clifford, 22 October 2014. All quotations below are from the same interview.

29. On the OSE and its role in rescuing children from Gurs (and from other internment camps in the south of France), see Dwork, 1991, pp 55-65.

30. Interview with Eric Cahn, interviewed by Gary Lubell, 23 October 1995, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. All quotations below are from the same interview.

31. 'Demande d'assistance', 26 April 1949, digital document number 79248629, ITS Digital Archive, USHMM.

32. 'E Masour to Gouvernement Militaire de la Zone Française d'Occupation', 13 December 1945, digital document number 79248637, ITS Digital Archive, USHMM. Translation from the French by Rebecca Clifford.

33. 'Care and maintenance form', digital document number 26936031, ITS Digital Archive, USHMM.

34. The consequences of a survivor parent's ongoing battles with trauma

have been best studied in relation to the impacts on 'second generation' children born after the war. Journalist Helen

Epstein's *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*, New York: Penguin, 1979, was the first work to bring this phenomenon to wide attention. In the wake of the success of her book, a number of psychologists and psychotherapists began working on the inter-generational transmission of trauma; see in particular the work of Judith Kestenberg, Eva Fogelman and Bella Savran, all based in the United States. See also Arlene Stein, *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, especially pp 75-84.

35. On the 'children's homes' in Theresienstadt, see Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis*, London: Pimlico, 2006, pp 203-213. On the scheme to bring 1,000 child survivors to Britain after the war, see Martin Gilbert, 1996, pp 278-280.

36. On the Weir Courtney orphanage and its connection to Anna Freud, see Sarah Moskovitz, *Love Despite Hate: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and their Adult Lives*, New York: Schocken Books, 1983, pp 3-9, 35-43.

37. The case histories of most of the children who spent time at Weir Courtney are covered in Moskovitz, 1983. On the return of the Italian sisters Tatiana and Andra Bucci to their parents, see Moskovitz, 1983, p 39; and 'Sisters live to tell their Holocaust story', *Washington Post*, 7 April 2013. In addition to the four children whose mothers survived the Holocaust but did not reclaim them, there were also three boys at the care home whose mothers had fled Nazi Germany and come to Britain on domestic visas before the war. Their material circumstances were so constrained that they could not care for their children after the war, and placed them in care.

38. JDC to Ruth Fellner, 19 March 1947, ST 41-67.3.3.ST. 129, doc. 911389.

39. Jewish Refugee Committee to JDC, 14 April 1947, ST 41-67/3/ST. 92, doc. 935533.

40. Lingfield Colony report, March 1952, Alice Goldberger collection, 2007.423, USHMM.

41. Interview with Margot C, interviewed by Sarah Moskovitz, 1978; edited version printed in Moskovitz, 1983, pp 101-104.

42. Interview with Vic C; recorded by Rebecca Clifford, 7 July 2017. All quotations below are from the same interview.

43. Indeed, although stories of physical abuse by survivor parents do crop up with some regularity, it is difficult to assess if abuse was more common in these families in the post-war period than it was in the general population. I suspect it was not. Six of the 100 children in my project described physical violence (usually hitting) in their post-war homes. This closely resembles the numbers found in larger projects, such as the 'International Study of Organized Persecution of Children' (with 1,500 respondents), where roughly one child survivor in fifteen described such violence in the post-war home. It is impossible to ascertain rates in the general population in the post-war period, although it was an era in which the physical punishment of children was a common practice in the countries where child survivors settled. Although cultural attitudes towards corporal punishment for children have changed dramatically over the last seventy years, it is interesting to note that an estimated one in fourteen children – numbers very close to those mentioned above – are thought to encounter physical violence in the home in Britain today. See Lorraine Radford, Susana Corral, Christine Bradley, Helen Fisher, Claire Bassett, Nick Howat and Stephan Collishaw, *Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK Today*, London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2011.

44. Roberto Benigni (dir), *La vita è bella*, 1997. The little boy, Giosuè, is referring to having won the fictional game that his father invented to keep his spirits up in the concentration camp – but a broader meaning of victory through survival is implied.

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