

**Trajectories of Rehabilitation of Jewish Child Survivors in Poland, 1945 – 1949:
Approaches and Challenges.**

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Even though the remnants of Polish Jews jumped into the task of the reconstruction of the community with energy and vigour, their underlying mood spoke to their sense of profound sadness, mourning, and anxiety. Like for other Jewish communities emerging from the Nazi yoke, the miniscule surviving group of Polish Jewish children stood for renewal of the community. In fact it was a metaphor for renewal of Jewish life. However, to the Jewish activists involved in the recovery of the Jewish children, it was clear that this tiny group of child survivors needed to be rehabilitated first on physical, mental and emotional levels.

Already in the Spring 1944 in the issue of the *American OSE Review*, Dr. G. Bychowski, a Polish-Jewish psychiatrist, contemplated the potential range of mental disorders which Jewish and non-Jewish child survivors from Nazi occupied Europe might acutely suffer from as a result of their traumatic wartime experiences. Before Bychowski's lucky fleeing in 1941 Poland for the United States, he had first hand medical contact with Jewish children in the Warsaw ghetto. That experience had taught him that "fear, loneliness, isolation, loss of parents and all the various traumatic shocks to which children had been exposed during the war and Nazi occupation," could lead to

traumatic neurosis, anxiety hysteria, and the acute psychoneurotic symptoms. Regarding the potential rehabilitation of such child survivors, Bychowski attached great value to reeducation, which he understood as a holistic healing process where the children would have the opportunity to forget about hunger, fear and hatred, while simultaneously regaining a “sense of being human, of being real citizens of their liberated countries and of a liberated Europe.” Rehabilitation of child and adult wartime victims had begun immediately after the end of the war, but had proved to be a challenging process requiring time, skills, efforts and funds.

Jewish children’s homes, dormitories, and places of daily care set up under the patronage of CKŻP (Central Committee of Polish Jews) constituted the centres for rehabilitation of these children. They began to mushroom in Poland in the early spring of 1945. According to the minutes of the meeting of the leadership of the presidium of the CKŻP with members of the local committees of the CKŻP held on 13 and 14 July 1946, eleven Jewish children’s homes, thirty dormitories (*pólinternaty*), and seventeen Jewish schools functioned in Poland at the time. In these institutions large body of children’s testimonies were collected. The age of their authors varies between 6 and 18 years. The majority of the testimonies were written in Polish, with a smaller selection written by older children in Yiddish.

The purpose of collecting these testimonies was to register each individual wartime story of each child who survived *czas pogardy* (the era of contempt)—a term commonly used in the early post-war period to describe the impact of the war on children in general and on Jewish children in particular. In the first publication in Polish of a small

body of early post-war children's testimonies entitled *Dzieci oskarżają* (The Children Accuse 1946), the editor Maria Hochberg-Mariańska, herself a survivor expressed the wish for this material to 'go out to the world' as a document that would 'bear witness to the destruction of children in the war'.¹² Hochberg-Mariańska evoked children to insist on the specific Jewish experience during WWII.

Healing trauma and regaining childhood were the two major pedagogical goals of the Jewish children's homes. Older Jewish children, who were delivered, or who found their way of their own accord, to Jewish children's homes were instantly forced to confront the heavy burden of matters concerning their health, identity, family, and the future. Emerging from hiding in cellars, chicken coops, and dug-outs, many children instantly realized that their eyesight and ability to walk were affected by the conditions in which they had been sheltered for three or four years. Though their eyes quickly accustomed to daily light, persistent difficulty in walking often indicated that the children were suffering from the medical condition called rickets (*rachitis*, *rozmiękczenie kości*, *softening of the bones*), and therefore they were in need of operations on one or both legs to walk properly again. Rickets was a disease common among former hidden Jewish children who during the war were confined to small dim places without regular exposure to daily light, physical exercise, and movement. Lice then plagued almost all the children, and the hair on their heads had to be treated or shaved. Shaving hair was a particularly shameful and humiliating experience for older girls, while for those children, who had survived death and concentration camps, this was a reminder of their most dreadful nightmarish experiences in the camps. Tuberculosis and lung infections were also common.

While most children took great joy in tasting various food and devouring unknown or forgotten treats like chocolate, other children found it hard to conform to the East European model of being the good child who eats everything that he/she is being served. Prolonged hunger and severe malnutrition experienced during the war caused serious digestive problems for such children. Some also had to face a struggle with boldness, developed as a result of long-term malnutrition.

Many children were not able to fully grasp and reflect on the emotional problems and mental disorders that some of them had developed as a result of the drastic conditions they lived in during the war, but the adults in charge of them and their daily care could usually easily detect those troubled by emotional problems or mental illnesses. Children who exhibited such signs were usually either lethargic and socially detached, or unruly, violent and aggressive towards other children and adults for no reason.

Older children and youths were acutely aware that their childhoods had been shattered and that they had been consequently transformed into premature adults bearing little resemblance to children. Many accounts articulate this painful reflection that could be seen as a facet of the crystallization of a future collective Holocaust child survivors' identity. For example, in the testimony of Hinda Dowicz, born on 15 May 1928 in Tarnów, one reads: "We are young old women. Now I am an orphan."

Some poignantly articulated a sense of irreversible disconnection with their prewar childhood and family history. They mourned their childhood, so abruptly and violently lost. Joanna (Joasia) Hercberg, the future Yael Israeli, born on 27 December 1931, into an affluent, culturally assimilated middle class family in Warsaw, notes in her

early postwar diary: “The days of childhood for little Joasia were full of joy and carefree. At present I think about this little Joasia as though she were a totally strange girl, with whom I was connected in the past, but now I have no connection at all, except for fuzzy unclear memories.”

In many child Holocaust survivors’ testimonies written after the war, we come across the articulation of the process of the divided “self” between the self of the prewar happy Jewish child, the self of the wartime haunted Jewish child who often assumed a Polish Catholic identity in order to survive, and the self of the fragile child who just emerged from the genocide. This articulation is a marker of an irreparable destruction of a sense of a unity of self in young survivors. Child survivors continue to articulate this division of self as adults in their late postwar memoirs and biographies of the 1990s and the 2000s.

A strong desire for home and family is reflected in the testimonies of children who were placed in the Jewish children’s homes. For them these institutions were their ‘new home’. They viewed teachers, educators, and other orphaned children as their new family. For example, Jankiel Cieszyński, who stayed in the Jewish children’s home in Otwock, the town of his birth and of his parents’ deaths in the Otwock ghetto, stated: “Now I am in a terrible situation, because I am completely on my own in the world. I am like a stone, but I thank God that I am alive. I am just fine. After all, I am at home with other orphaned children and hope that I may “return” to my homeland in Palestine.” Similar is the testimony of Chana Grynberg, born in Głowaczów in the district of Radom: “I have been living here in the orphanage in Otwock since 7 April 1945. I have been fairly treated, equal with other children. I have become a child again and have now

“recovered my home”.” These statements reveal that children had internalized the CKŻP’s principles concerning rearing and upbringing. For the CKŻP, the institution that aimed at the revival of Polish Jews, the issue of individual and social identities of the surviving children was of great importance. Children were viewed as the social group on which the future of post-1945 Polish Jewry—its ‘successful rebirth’—would depend.

As early as July 1945, at the general executive meeting of CKŻP, directives were issued on how to improve a child’s individual well-being and how to strengthen his/her sense of Jewish identity. To a certain degree, the language of official communist ideology coloured the ways in which these goals were expressed in some official CKŻP documents. One of the CKŻP’s main goals was to develop in each child a sense of a ‘regained home’. The Jewish children’s homes were to be viewed as a new welcoming ‘warm home’. Therefore the educators discussed how this ideal home was to be created. For example, at the Conference of the Heads of Jewish Homes under the patronage of CKŻP, which took place on 12 and 13 December 1947 in Kraków, one of the speakers recommended that the same educators should be allocated to an individual child throughout his/her entire stay in the home. The educators were also expected to be compassionate towards children in order for them to gain a sense of emotional stability and fair treatment. Thus, despite the new communist reality, with its ensuing Soviet-style pedagogical model, Janusz Korczak’s pre-war nurturing pedagogical model was still prevalent among Jewish educators. The same speaker at the conference in Kraków also recommended that a children’s home should optimally number no more than forty children for them to ‘feel truly at home’. However, lack of funds only allowed the opening of larger homes, numbering between 100 and 130 children. These large homes were typical

between 1945 and 1947.

Educators also argued that children who had reached the age of 16 should not necessarily be transferred to boarding schools for young people, since such a transfer might undermine a child's sense of fragile stability. This argument applied especially to those who had younger siblings in the same homes. Separation of the siblings was generally viewed as an undesirable action. As one speaker stated, 'We cannot place newcomers at our "homes"—boys and girls of 16 and 18 years of age. However, at the same time, we cannot agree to boys of 15 or 16 years of age leaving the homes merely because their place should be in boarding schools for youths. No "family" displaces of 16-year-old children from their home and separates them from their younger sisters and brothers.'

Other main CKŻP goals were for the children to regain their 'lost childhood' and humanity. The CKŻP also intended to bring up happy, assertive, and secure individuals who were not afraid of life's future challenges. CKŻP records show that the implementation of these goals was often difficult. For example, at the previously noted Conference of the Heads of Jewish Orphanages, participants spoke about various difficulties they were encountering in instilling notions of happiness, assertiveness, and security, owing to the terrible emotional and physical injuries that the children had suffered in the war. One of the speakers reported that she came across children who were not familiar with warm and caring human bonding, who had no recollections of being cuddled and kissed with affection by their parents, and who in fact did not know what being kissed and kissing meant.

Children's early postwar essays in newspapers, produced by the children themselves in the homes, also spoke about the gap between the goals of the educators and the children's mental and emotional state. Some of the children's works inform us about the chasm between the ideal and the reality and about the oppressive impact of the war and the Holocaust on the children's lives after the war. We find examples of these reflections in the most highly praised and well-known inter-homes children's newspaper called *Gazeta Międzyzakładowa* (The Inter-Orphanage Newspaper), run by children 13 years of age and older. In an article published in 1947 in *Gazeta Międzyzakładowa*, Ida Kelberg, a child of Zatrzebie Home, stated: "The aim of every Head and educator of our Children's Home is to mould us into individuals of high morale, optimism, and hope, people who are able to take control of their lives in the most difficult circumstances. However, the fulfilment of these goals is not easily realized. One must have much courage and persistence and must be prepared to fight against many obstacles." Similar reflections appeared in the essay of Ewa Goldberg of Otwock children's Home, published in the same issue of *Gazeta*. Golberg's essay "Dom naszych marzeń" (The Home of our Dreams), gives a rather somber portrayal of some of the children's struggles with their wartime past. It illustrates how difficult it was for some of the young inhabitants of Otwock's home to regain the joys of childhood, and shows the major emotional, mental and social problems that some of them endured.

"Two years have passed since the Children's orphanage was established in Otwock. And it seems that this only happened yesterday . . . It is pretty difficult to imagine and convey the feeling the inhabitants of Dom Dziecka in Otwock might have had when they were told that they would

no longer be homeless and when they saw the clean white building – the home of their dreams. To understand how such a child might have felt at that moment, one would have had to accompany him throughout the years of [Nazi German] occupation. One would have had to experience being treated as an object of abuse (*popychadlo*) by anyone. One would have had to listen to shocking and terrifying words, words spoken out of “charity” by those at whose home a child was hidden. One would have had to listen in silence without disagreement to nasty comments and lies about the most dear and precious things in life, because one was a Jew. One would have had to sleep in open spaces without shelter, to wander around without having any personal possessions, and to rely on strangers’ charity At the time when a Jewish child had to rely on the charity of strangers, his thoughts were somewhere else: the child lived by his/her memories. He constantly thought about his home where he did not have to be ashamed of his/her face [semitic features] and where no-one suggested to him/her that he/she was so unlucky because he/she was born Jewish.

Could one expect that these children be “regular good kinds? Their wartime past worked against this. One would have to work very hard to “recreate” children out of them again. For each of us a stay in the *Dom Dziecka* was like a new beginning – a reentry into life. Each of those who had already left the Home left behind a closely knit family. These days new children arrive and replace the first group of children who are gone already. The new kids are not as depressed and morally and

physically degraded as the first groups of children were. Still to all of them the Home is their new Family's Home....Could one have expected that these children become regular good kids? Their experiences stood against their becoming regular good kids."

Golder's essay (as you can tell) idealizes the children's urgent desire to maintain Jewish identity after the war. In many cases, in reality, children wished to cease to be Jewish as a result of the witnessed murder of their parents and their entire Jewish communities, and acquired fear of being perceived as a Jew. For them regaining Jewish identity proved to be a gradual process and for some a fluid process something they have struggled with throughout their adulthood. The Otwock Home and other Jewish Children's Homes, operating in the early postwar period, played a salient role in those children's process of shedding acquired negative perceptions of Jews and Judaism, and in their acceptance of Jewishness as a positive social identity. But this was not a smooth educational task.

One of the most troubled groups of child survivors were those who survived the war in homes of what I call rescuer-abusers. A history of the brutal mistreatment of Jewish young fugitives by those who were supposed to rescue and care for them during the war is only now fully investigated. The picture that emerges from the children's early postwar testimonies reveals a disturbing picture of strange intimacy and cruelty in the realm of home of a rescuer-abuser. What it should have been a safe shelter was often for the hidden children a space of daily suffering, isolation and loneliness. Children were capable of expressing what they felt and what they thought as a result of being exposed to different doses of cruelty everyday. They articulated their confusion, fear, and

helplessness in the face of being dependent on abusive individuals who experienced pleasure from tormenting the young Jewish fugitive. Some of these children entered into what one can call a pathological dependency on her rescuer-abusers as a result of the years of mistreatment at a very young age and the lack of loving care. They felt that they own them something and were unable to depart from them even if a relative found them and wanted to remove them from their rescuer-abusers.

After the Soviets came, the people started to tell me: “The Germans will not kill you any longer, you are free.” But I could not believe in my luck. In the spring of 1946, I converted to Christianity as a way of thanking them for sheltering me [the Wajdzik family]. I wanted to simply give them my soul. After I went to visit my parent’s grave that is the ditch where they were buried. I put violet flowers there and cried a lot. Today I do not cry any longer, my heart has hardened out of fear, because of my experiences.....After one of my cousins found me and wanted to take me away from them, but they demanded “A half a million for a child.” He did not have the money because he served in the army, and left. I did not even want to say “good bye” to him; I was so stupid. I wanted to remain with them forever, and to be a Pole, I was so used to that life. But my cousin told the Jews about my existence and they took me from Wajdziks. But at the first attempt of taking me away, I run away and walked seven kilometres back to the farmer. At the end, the police had to come to take me away, they held me by my hands and legs because I did not want to go with them. The Jews placed me in the orphanage, and now I feel good.”

Conclusions

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Today, historians of the Holocaust and Genocide accept that the subjectivity of children's gaze constitutes an appropriate topic for historical inquiry. The catalogue of scholarly works on child survivors and youth during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and the studies of the ways young survivors remember the traumatic past, is constantly growing. Thanks to the last decade and a half of historical, sociological, literary, and ethnographic investigations, today we know much more about the experiences and challenges of the rehabilitation of Jewish youth in the aftermath of the Holocaust than two decades ago. With the endorsement of the child-centred historical methods and interdisciplinary approaches, the field continues to thrive and bear new fruits. The history of Jewish youth --the smallest group of young survivors from the Nazi --occupied Europe is worth examining for its own merits, and in order to understand better the plight and challenges of rehabilitation of other young victims and survivors of wars and genocides in the second half of the twenty century and the twenty first century.

Thank you.