

# Freilegungen

## Rebuilding Lives – Child Survivors and DP Children in the Aftermath of the Holocaust and Forced Labor

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Boaz Cohen

## Research on Child Holocaust Survivors and Displaced Persons

### Goals and Challenges

Dieser Beitrag gibt einen Überblick über zentrale Aspekte der Forschung zu Kind-überlebenden des Holocaust und Displaced Persons im Kindesalter. Er diskutiert grundlegende Fragen und Überlegungen zur Definition von Kindern und der Chronologie der Nachkriegszeit und skizziert, wie Hilfsorganisationen, Erzieher und die betroffenen Kinder mit Displacement und Survival umgingen. Dabei richtet der Beitrag u. a. den Blick auf Fragen in Bezug auf Sprache, Migration, Erziehung, Resozialisierung, Sexualität und Beziehungen sowie auf den familiären Status, das Geschlecht und die Auswirkungen, die diese Faktoren auf die Kinder hatten. Der Beitrag versteht sich als Impuls für künftige Forschungsvorhaben zu den Themen Child Survivors und Displaced Children. Ziel ist es dabei, weitere Arbeiten mit sozialen, psychologischen, kulturellen oder politischen Fragestellungen anzuregen, um die Geschichte von Kindern in den *Aftermath Studies* zu verankern. Zudem plädiert der Autor dafür, das in der Nachkriegszeit erworbene Wissen im Umgang mit den Kindern für den heutigen Umgang mit minderjährigen Flüchtlingen und Überlebenden von Völkermord nutzbar zu machen.

Research on post-war Child Holocaust Survivors and Displaced Persons has developed over recent years, and now occupies a significant place in studies on the Holocaust and its aftermath. This paper, which takes the form of a program for further research, aims to map the field and define the major research directions. It also conceptualizes these children's experiences and work done with them in the immediate post-war years. As the first step, the rationale behind this work is outlined.<sup>1</sup>

1 The original version of this paper was presented in the Workshop *Life in the Aftermath – DPs, Displaced Children and Child Survivors: New Approaches in Education and Research*, organized by the MMSZ and ITS. It was later opened for discussion on the [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) site. I am indebted to the many colleagues who shared with me their comments, insights and criticisms, many of which have been incorporated into this version of the plan. Special thanks to Dr. Verena Buser who read this version and offered valuable comments and suggestions. While this paper does not offer a full bibliography on the subject, it refers to major works and examples of research on various issues. Although many of the books and papers address several of the issues discussed, each reference is only mentioned once.

## Rationale

*Completing the historical record:* The story of the post-war period is incomplete without considering the experiences of the children, who were an intrinsic part of the survivor community. Such research provides a more accurate understanding of this chapter of history. The place of children in the post-war agenda and the funds and facilities invested in them illustrate society's concerns at that time.<sup>2</sup>

*Understanding the post-Holocaust generation and the world they built:* Studying the children and their concerns, experiences and feelings provides insight into their lives and their perceptions of adult society after the war. These children formed the generation who built the post-war world, and, therefore, work with them in the post-war years has a direct influence on today's world.

*Learning for today:* Information on children in the post-war years is relevant to today's world, with millions of people uprooted or in war zones. Child victims of war and genocide need help and rehabilitation, both physically and mentally. This involves setting up and running organizations and institutions; training aid personnel; working out ethical and procedural issues. This underlines the importance of such post-war and Holocaust research and its relevance for tackling today's challenges.

## Note on primary sources and on children as historical actors

This research should avoid focusing only on what adults did or should have done for these children. Post-war history viewed from such perspective considers the children as passive. But is this the full picture? This type of history does not provide information about the children's agency, their actions, the choices they made, and ways in which they determined their future. Research is called for in this area. Their voices, thoughts and feelings can be gauged from sources produced by children: essays, wall-newspapers, diaries and drawings from those times, as well as later autobiographies and recollections.

2 For a full length book addressing the general phenomenon of children in the post-war era: Tara Zahra: *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II*, Cambridge 2011.

### Methodological questions

Questions of age and chronology pose specific challenges to researchers, which may be described as follows.

*Age – who is a child?* Age is a major category for exploring post-war or post-Holocaust children? When does a child become a teenager or an adult? Defining the appropriate year-range is a preliminary question for all historians of childhood and children. Theories viewing childhood as a social construct have a bearing on this.<sup>3</sup> This is also a complicated issue in research on Holocaust children. Susan Suleiman discussed the particular complexity based on the fact that the encounter with the Nazis and their policies occurred at different points of time in various communities (e. g., in 1933, for Jewish children in Germany; and, in 1944, in Hungary). Therefore, it is very hard to define an age range that would be appropriate for all Jewish children during the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> The immediate post-war period covers several years, during which children grew up. A 13-year-old child in 1945 would have become a 17-year-old teenager by 1949, and a young adult by 1950. Thus, a child at the start of this period, according to all official definitions, would no longer be so after a few years.<sup>5</sup>

Many agencies worked with children during that period: UNRRA, Allied occupation authorities, German authorities, and Jewish and other aid organizations. What age criteria did they apply? Did they have an agreed standard, or were there discrepancies and disagreements? For example, under UNRRA, a child was defined as up to age 18, but, under the successor organization, the IRO, up to 16. The official age structures and their implications on the child's fate, as in visa requirements, led to widespread manipulation of ages by the children and their caretakers. This is clear in many sources and can be traced easily by comparing ITS documents of specific children.

It should be noted that age is not only a chronological construct and certainly not an objective one. Aid workers and others talk about »old children«, children prematurely aged, who have adapted character traits of older people during the Holocaust and its aftermath. Children who went through the horrors of the Holocaust, who had to take care of themselves, and, sometimes, parent their siblings, or even their parents, had chronological, objective ages, which often differed from their psychological, emotional and social ages.<sup>6</sup>

3 See, for example: Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout: *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge 1998; Virginia Morrow: *Understanding Children and Childhood*, Lismore 2011.

4 Susan Robin Suleiman: »The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child Survivors and the Holocaust«, *American Imago*, 59/3, 2002, pp. 277-295.

5 See: Verena Buser: »Displaced Children 1945 and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration«, *The Holocaust in History and Memory*, 7, 2014, pp. 109-123.

6 The perception of the children as prematurely aged is mentioned in many places. See, for

*Chronology – defining the beginning and end of the post-war years:* The aftermath of the war or the Holocaust is also a variable category. When did this period start? There was no single moment of liberation: communities and individuals were liberated from 1943 onwards, contingent on geographical locations. Therefore, the experience of liberation and post-liberation was not only varied chronologically, but also occurred in different historical situations: while the war was still ongoing for some; and after Germany's surrender for others.

Determining the end of the aftermath or post-war period is no less complicated. Again, does it depend on the personal experience of Child Survivors or their specific group, or are there definitive historical dates such as the establishment of the state of Israel for Jewish survivors, or the American DP Act of 1950.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, are there unique criteria for the end of this period, such as when children reached adulthood? In 1947, Zerach Warhaftig claimed that »as long as thousands of Nazi victims move from one refugee camp to the other«, and the survivors have yet to find a home the Holocaust cannot be considered a closed case.<sup>8</sup> Does this definition also apply to the children?

The aftermath is usually treated as a single monolithic period, but is this accurate? Should it not be divided into several sub-periods according to political changes, such as the onset of the Cold War, regime changes, and the economic situation? If such a conceptualization is in place, is there a way to make it relevant to the research on children?

*Children's Status, Familial status<sup>9</sup> and Gender:* Surviving children represent a wide spectrum of familial, personal and official statuses. Organizations and institutions working with children made use of several categories: unaccompanied children, refugees, and *kinder* (e.g., for *Kindertransport* children). What were the implications of using these definitions?

Some children survived with their entire or part of their families. Others survived alone and then reconnected with their family after the war. Some children were full orphans, without any family members, or part of it, left at all.

example: Nechama Tec: *Jewish Children: Between Protectors and Murderers*, Washington 2005, pp. 3; Boaz Cohen: »The Children's Voice: Postwar Collection of Testimonies from Child Survivors of the Holocaust«, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 21/1, 2007, pp. 73-95, here p. 75.

7 See: Beth B. Cohen: *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America*, New Brunswick 2007.

8 Zerach Warhaftig, quoted in Boaz Cohen: »The Difficulties of Creating a Holocaust Archive: Yad Vashem and Israel Kastner 1947-1948«, *Journal of Jewish Culture and History*, 15/3, 2014, pp. 173-187, here p. 177.

9 See: Joanna Beata Michlic (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe 1939-Present: History, Representation, and Memory*, Lebanon 2017.

Others had surviving relatives, or even one or both parents. However, not all went back to living with their relatives, and even those, in many cases, placed them in children's homes, with the hope that they would receive better care there, and have a chance of getting out of Europe. Research has begun into the problems Holocaust survivors had in rebuilding their families and the place of children in them but there is still much to do.<sup>10</sup> However, a cursory glance shows that children living with survivors or other family members did not have it easy.

Gender was also an important characteristic, both in determining the child's war experiences and their post-war self-perception, and the policies for dealing with them. How did the children perceive themselves gender-wise? What role did gender play in their education, vocational training, and future gender roles. Many counsellors and caretakers, as well as the UNRRA staff working with them were women. How did this influence the children's gender perceptions, if at all?

#### The children's war and Holocaust experiences

This is, no doubt, the central issue that influenced post-war children. The war or Holocaust experience they underwent is crucial to understanding the children's post-war development, education, and rehabilitation, since they clearly carried the weight of those scars into the post-war world.

*Experiences during the war:* All these children experienced the Second World War and/or the Holocaust, yet in very different ways, going through a broad range of experiences. The effects of these harrowing and traumatic experiences did not disappear after liberation. Determining the emotional, physical and existential »baggage« should be a part of the research on this topic, using an interdisciplinary approach combining history and trauma studies. It should also be noted that many, if not most, of the surviving Jewish children in Eastern Europe and the DP camps spent the war years in the inner reaches of the Soviet Union, where their experiences differed from those who survived under Nazi rule.<sup>11</sup>

10 See: Daniella Doron: *Jewish Youth and Identity in Postwar France: Rebuilding Family and Nation*, Bloomington 2015; Beth Cohen: »Starting Over: Reconstituted Families after the Holocaust«, in: Eva Fogelman, Sharon Kangisser Cohen and Dalia Ofer (eds.), *Children in the Holocaust and its Aftermath: Historical and Psychological Studies of the Kestenberg Archive*, New York, Oxford, Forthcoming.

11 For a broad spectrum of children's experiences during the war, see: Patria Heberer: *Children during the Holocaust*, Lanham 2011; Deborah Dwork: *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe*, New Haven 1991; Nicholas Stargardt: *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis*, London 2005; Johannes-Dieter Steinert: *Deportation und Zwang-*



*Immediate post-war experience:* Liberation did not solve the Child Survivors' problems, but rather accentuated them. Children woke up to the reality that they had nobody left in the world, and, at least in Eastern Europe, they were not really wanted. Some children were victims of post-war violence from local populations; and some were reluctant to forego the cover provided by their fake war-time identity. Some children wandered around Eastern Europe trying to locate their family homes and find surviving family members. While a few succeeded, most were frustrated in their search. Researchers should also consider the immediate post-war period as a source of the children's formative experiences.

#### Personal and official Identities

*Identity:* This was a key personal issue for Jewish children who survived under a fake Christian identity. It also posed a great challenge to their educators who aimed to help them regain their original Jewish one. It was also a major problem for *Lebensborn* children (East Europeans with »Aryan« appearance kidnapped and Germanized during the war), and those Germanized by the National People's Welfare Agency (*Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt*).<sup>12</sup>

Helping children reclaim their identities constituted a major challenge for educators and caretakers working with children who had adopted a non-Jewish identity in hiding. Much has been written about this, both with respect to the children's self-perceptions, and the educators' policies.<sup>13</sup> How was this issue addressed in the case of *Lebensborn* children?

Children's identities posed a challenge for the UNRRA and other aid agencies. Was rehabilitation impossible without acknowledging their national, ethnic or religious identities? Under UNRRA policy, groups of children were organized

*sarbeit. Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa 1939-1945*, Essen 2013.

12 Verena Buser: »Mass detective operation im befreiten Deutschland: UNRRA und die Suche nach den eingedeutschten Kindern nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg«, *HISTORIE. Jahrbuch des Zentrums für Historische Forschung Berlin der Polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 8, 2015, pp. 347-360.

13 For example, see: Joanna Michlic: »Who Am I?: The Identity of Jewish Children in Poland, 1945-1949«, *Polin*, 20, 2007, pp. 97-121; Emunah Nachmany Gafny: *Dividing Heart: The Removal of Jewish Children from Gentile Families in Poland in the Immediate Post-Holocaust Years*, Jerusalem 2009; 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 2016, pp. 257-275.

along ethnic or national lines. This was not always easy to accept for the US-American or British personnel, who had a more Universalist attitude to education, but they understood that it was necessary.<sup>14</sup>

*Adoption:* Identity issues called for further policy decisions. Would Allied personnel be allowed to adopt children and take them back home, discarding the children's original identities? Should *Lebensborn* children be taken away, possibly by force, from German families who adopted them and gave them loving and caring homes within their families and communities? Similarly, should Jewish children rescued and protected by Gentile families be taken out of them, possibly by force, and returned to their own people? While research has addressed the Jewish angle on this issue, there is need for comparative studies on reclamation procedures.<sup>15</sup>

Since searching for, locating and taking *Lebensborn* children out of German families led to unrest in occupied Germany, the US Army prohibited UNRRA from entering German homes and extracting more of these children. In many countries, the fate of Jewish children in these homes was contested in court, and the decisions had great implications for their future identities. This aspect should also be studied.

*Language:* Identity is also closely connected to language. In what language did the children speak, learn and dream? Was it their pre-war language, or that acquired during the war, or a new one learnt in their post-war world? This was a major problem for the Child Search Teams established to uncover the children's original languages before handing them over to National Liaison Officers, who determined their nationalities.<sup>16</sup> In UN Children's Centers, country-related educators, as well as unskilled staff, tried to re-nationalize children. What place did Yiddish and Hebrew play in fashioning the children's new Jewish identities? How was the language issue addressed in other national cases?

14 Children contributed to the new Jewish national identity forged in the camps. See: Françoise Ouzan: »Rebuilding Jewish Identities in Displaced Persons Camps in Germany (1945-1957)«, *Bulletin du Centre de Recherche Français de Jérusalem*, 14, 2004, pp. 98-111.

15 For a graphic description of the forcible removal of Polish *Lebensborn* children from their adoptive family, see: Gitta Sereny: *The German Trauma: Experiences and Reflections, 1938-2001*, London 2000. For a discussion of the Jewish case, see: Nachmany Gafny: *Dividing Heart*.

16 Verena Buser: »Die Child Search and Registration Teams der UNRRA«, in: Jim G. Tobias and Nicola Schlichting (eds.), *Nurinst 2016. Beiträge zur deutschen und jüdischen Geschichte. Schwerpunktthema: Kinder*, Nürnberg 2016, pp. 75-88.

## The spatial approach and geography of post-war childhood

Where were the children located and how did this influence their situation?

*Locale:* The various types of spaces where the children were located should be studied and analyzed. The children's locales greatly influenced their state of mind and mental condition. Hostility from the surrounding population projected on children's sense of security, while friendly environments contributed to their rehabilitation. Educational work was also influenced by these settings.

*Movement:* The post-war period was characterized by great population fluidity, and children and children's groups moved around throughout Europe. Many children experienced multiple immigrations before they reached their final destinations. The journeys of these children and groups should be traced: from Eastern Europe, to Western Europe, within occupied Germany and Western Europe, and the last leg to their final destinations, sometimes including incarceration in the British detention camps in Cyprus.

*Macro-geography:* In which countries (if they still existed) did the children experience incarceration, escape, expulsion, or migration? Were they at home or uprooted?

*Micro-geography:* Where did they live: family homes, requisitioned houses, or as guests or boarders? If they were not at home or homeless, were they in DP camps, *Kinderlagern*, children's homes or children's Kibbutzim?<sup>17</sup> Research has yet to be done on children's camps who were reunited with their families in urban centers, and then went to regular schools, without having the benefit of sharing common experiences, culture, education, and DP or Survivor identities with their peers.<sup>18</sup> Research questions, strategies and guidelines should be developed for all these children's spaces and locales.

## Education and rehabilitation

Research on the children's education and rehabilitation, on both macro- and micro-levels, should be carried out.

<sup>17</sup> On the operation of children's homes and the educational challenges there, see: Boaz Cohen: »Survivor Caregivers and Child Survivors: Rebuilding Lives and the Home in the Postwar Period«, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (forthcoming). Some discussion of *Kinderlager* can be found in: Boaz Cohen and Rita Horvath: »Young Witnesses in the DP Camps: Children's Holocaust Testimony in Context«, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 11/1, 2012, pp. 103-125.

<sup>18</sup> Leora Auslander: »Coming Home? Jews in Postwar Paris«, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40/2, 2005, pp. 237-259.

*Macro-education:* These studies should cover: educational policies of UNRRA, and Jewish and other NGOs; staffing; budget allocations; and establishment of educational institutions (premises and funding). What provisions were made for special-needs and handicapped children?<sup>19</sup>

*Micro-education:* These studies should include: real and perceived problems and difficulties of children; goals and practices of educational work; national vs. internationalist approaches; profiles and educational background of educators; and rehabilitative work on a day-to-day basis.

### Psychology

How were the children's psychological states perceived at the time? What was the scope of mental health evaluation and treatment? How many children were seen by mental health specialists and how were they evaluated?

How did agencies and caretakers go about providing care in this field? What were the constrictions on such work? Who were the professionals available to do such work and how did they perceive their own role and the children? What were the theoretical and therapeutic principles underlying mental hygiene, rehabilitation, and re-education programs?<sup>20</sup> Which sources describe psychological or psychiatric work with children? What are the ethical constraints governing the use of various materials, such as personal evaluations?

### Religion

Religion or the absence of it played an important part in the children's personal rehabilitation and in their education and day to day life. All big DP camps had religious educational facilities and many children were educated in them. Research into the world of Holocaust survivors and Displaced Persons focused for many years on secular and left-oriented ideological groups. Today we are more aware of the existence of religious DPs and religious activities in the camps and it is time to develop research into the place of this activity *vis a vis* the children both in their private and public life.

19 See: Ruth Balint: »Children Left Behind: Family, Refugees and Immigration in Postwar Europe«, *History Workshop Journal*, 82/1, 2016, pp. 151-172.

20 See: Mary Fraser Kirsh: *The Lost Children of Europe: Narrating the Rehabilitation of Child Holocaust Survivors in Great Britain and Israel*, Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 2012.

## Personal and everyday life

*Pastimes:* How did the children spend their spare time? What games did they play? What place did sports, either as a spontaneous activity or in organized clubs, play in their lives?<sup>21</sup> What were their cultural interests and how did they develop as they grew up?

*Personal relations:* What sorts of relationships did these children establish? Did they create peer-group relations, close friendships, or, rather, were they less open to friends and peers? If children were in families or remnants of them, how were the relationships within these family units? Did the Holocaust experience bond families, or, rather, impair cohesiveness? Did role inversion between parents and children, which was common during the Holocaust, appear also in the post-war years?

*Sexuality and sexual relations:* The Holocaust Child Survivors entered the post-war period as young teenagers, and went on to become young adults. How was sexuality and gender experienced by the children and addressed by the adults?<sup>22</sup> We know that some girls and boys were victims of sexual abuse, often prolonged, and some took part in instrumental sex (an objectionable term). For obvious reasons, testimonies only hint at this issue. Of course, this was also relevant to adults. If there has been any comprehensive contemporary work on this topic, it has not yet surfaced in documents or recollections. How is this issue manifested in the children's post-war lives, particularly, considering that mothers' guidance to daughters was not usually available?<sup>23</sup>

*Adults:* The motivations, sensibilities and agendas of adults who influenced these children's lives should be explored: policy-makers, parents, relatives, siblings, aid-workers, teachers, caretakers, and counsellors.

## Institutional players

Which organizations took care of these children? What were their agendas? Did they cooperate, or work at cross-purposes? Research should be carried out on:

- 21 See: Philipp Grammes: »Sports in the DP Camps, 1945-1948«, in: Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni (eds.), *Emancipation through Muscles: Jews and Sports in Europe*, Lincoln 2006, pp. 187-212.
- 22 Atina Grossman: »Victims, Villains, and Survivors: Gendered Perceptions and Self-Perceptions of Jewish Displaced Persons in Occupied Postwar Germany«, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11, 2002, pp. 291-318.
- 23 See: Atina Grossmann: *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany*, Princeton 2006; Margarete Myers Feinstein: *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany 1945-1957*, New York 2010.

occupation armies and administrations; UNRRA's<sup>24</sup> Child Search Division and Children's Section;<sup>25</sup> JDC's Jewish Relief Unit; the Quakers; and national and other NGOs. Work done by national governments, organizations and political parties should be evaluated. Paradoxically, this research is challenged by the vast amount of documentation available.

### Conclusion

As shown by the references and footnotes, there is an important body of work on Child Holocaust Survivors and DPs; however, much remains to be done. As outlined in the rationale, in our violent and turbulent world where many children are victims of war and genocide, it is especially important to study children's lives during the post-Holocaust and Second World War periods. These findings should be shared with today's policy-makers and aid workers. Indeed, the current world situation imbues the Holocaust historians' work in this area with a strong sense of urgency.

24 Jessica Reinisch: »Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA«, *Past & Present*, 210, Suppl. 6, January 2011, pp. 258-289.

25 Susanne Urban: »Unaccompanied Children and the Allied Child Search: 'The right [...] a child has to his own heritage««, in: Simone Gigliotti and Monica Tempian (eds.), *The Young Victims of the Nazi Regime Migration, the Holocaust and Postwar Displacement*, London 2016, pp. 277-297.