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Searching for a Nonexistent Childhood

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Searching for a Nonexistent Childhood

Writing Process

When I started this writing process, I knew that I wanted it to be as personal as possible. I remember a wave of relief coming over me when the topic of Anti-semitism was revealed because, being Jewish with a grandfather who survived the holocaust, it is something that I am very familiar with and comfortable discussing. This was the first major research project I had been assigned, but I found that I had a knack for researching (and even found it enjoyable). While much of the research was particularly painstaking because of the tragic nature of it and its closeness to my loved ones, I realized its importance and knew that I wanted to present as much of the information as I could to, as I speak about in my conclusion, prevent something like the Holocaust from ever happening again. In the end, I believe that I was produced a paper that was both educational and impactful.

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Searching for a Nonexistent Childhood*

Luba Bromberg, 5 years old, Ukraine. Valdemar Feigeman, 13 years old, Germany. Rahkel Hus, 11 years old, Romania. Israel Veglop, 6 years old, The Netherlands. An ominous voice coming from above recited name after name like this as I walked through the Children's Memorial at *Yad Vashem*, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. The one room exhibit resembles a hall of mirrors, emulating the feeling of confusion, sadness, fearfulness, frustration, and desperation that many Jewish children felt during the Holocaust. The few candles in the center of the room, which are the only sources of light, reflect off each pane giving the impression of millions of candles, one for each of the estimated 1.5 million Jewish children that perished because they "represented the continuation of Jewishness" (Saxon 316). Jewish children were in all the same situations as Jewish adults, whether that was in hiding, in ghettos, or in concentration camps. However, children often had decidedly different experiences from adults because they were not only striving towards life, but also towards a childhood worth living for.

During the Holocaust, many Jews sought to escape ghettos and concentration camps by hiding. This was always precarious and filled with uncertainty, but hiding as a family magnified the risk. As the war escalated, families realized the dangers of hiding as a unit and began to split, sending their children to safer locations in hopes of increasing chances of survival (Bluglass 15). In *Children with a Star*, Deborah Dwork outlines three ways children hid: informally with a friend or family member, which was the most common; with the help of an organization; or with

no help and completely upon their own accord, which was by far the least common and assumed the most risk. Children had to pass in their new role by learning new customs, cultures, and even religious practices, sometimes forcing complete abandonment of their previous identity (Bluglass 19). Even if arrangements were made, it was difficult to tell what situations would be presented to the child when they arrived. Havens had the possibility of being almost as dangerous for children as not being hidden at all because they could be “frequently harshly treated and emotionally, physically, and sometimes appallingly sexually abused” (Bluglass 16). Dwork also notes that many children were forced to move several times to new locations, resulting in constant forming and breaking of attachments. “There were no living conditions [when in hiding],” says Ira Segalewitz, my grandfather and a child survivor. He notes that “you did the best you could. Sometimes you slept in a bombed out house, sometimes in a barn, but you had to keep moving ahead of [the Nazis] at all times.” All of this and more was occurring in early formative years, a time when children search for role models, explore what it means to be a part of society, and begin to develop their own personality.

Ghettos became the center of relocation early in the war for Jewish families that did not separate to go into hiding. Nazi forces utilized ghettos through Europe during the Holocaust for similar purposes as throughout history: to keep Jews in their own walled-in communities, separated from the rest of the country. They almost always consisted of “poor, cramped, rundown sections of town” (Gilbert 71). According to Martin Gilbert, hunger and disease ran rampant throughout, there were strictly enforced curfews, and there were even laws against owning something as simple as a radio. Life in a ghetto was generally strenuous for all; however, children typically had a very different experience from adults. A pervasive sense of boredom accompanied daily life of childhood in ghettos because adults left children at home all day when

they went to work (Sliwa 184). Joanna Sliwa notes that families did not bring non-necessities, like toys, into the ghetto; other forms of entertainment, like radios, were banned; and due to violence and rampant disease, children were often not allowed to leave the house without a parent. The highlight of many kids' days was simply staring out a small window for hours on end. Some children found hobbies to pass time but they "were limited in choice and resources" (Sliwa 191). Additionally, a fundamental part of any childhood should be the opportunity to make friends and play with them. However, "children were careful about becoming emotionally attached" (to other children because people were constantly moving in and out of the ghetto Sliwa 186). Overall, while life in a ghetto meant that families could stay together (unlike in hiding), children were still deprived of characteristics of a modern childhood like forms of entertainment and opportunities to develop social skills and interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps the most tragic of all situations a child could experience during the Holocaust was living in a labor or extermination camp. The sad reality of children sent to an extermination camp was that most of them did not get to live for exceptionally long. The documentary *I'm Still Here* recounts the story of Yitskhok Rudashevski, a young Lithuanian boy who kept a journal during his childhood. He describes being forced into a ghetto, where he lived for two years, constantly writing "We will not go to Ponar," an extermination site near Vilna, the city in which he lived (*I'm Still Here*). The documentary describes the day that he and his family unfortunately went to Ponar, where they died shortly after. The fate of Yitskhok was not uncommon among children or adults; the sad fact is that most Jews sent to extermination camps could be considered deceased from the moment they stepped foot on the train. Many camps, like Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, had "no route to life, and certainly no child life" (Dwork, 210). Others, like the notorious Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center, had guards that sorted people from the trains into a

“life” line and a “death” line, but kids, Dwork notes, who Nazis thought could not perform the labor necessary of them, almost always perished immediately.

Labor camps had living conditions similar to extermination camps, with the exception that people lived in them for extended periods of time and performed back breaking labor for hours each day. My grandfather describes his time in a Russian work camp as cramped, dirty, and generally difficult. “My mother,” says Ira, “Worked for at least ten hours a day. When she came home, she tried to make a meal from the meager rations we were given.” He notes that his job in the camp was to empty the toilet buckets each morning before going to school, which was required for all kids in the camp. Each Labor camp had its own unique character, so while my grandfather’s experiences were tragic and should not be wished upon any child, many other children had very different experiences. In the infamous Sakrzysko-Kamienna work camp, children did not go to school; rather they were required to work a minimum of eleven hours a day producing ammunition for the war efforts (Gilbert 135). In *The Boys*, tragic stories from this camp describe children who were given only half a ladle of soup for the day, working through an illness to the point that they fainted on the job, and being beaten for not meeting a quota so badly they could barely walk. This is an existence no human being deserves, especially a child whose only wrongdoing was being born a Jew.

Acknowledging what happened to these children is just scraping the surface of what they went through because of the Holocaust. Only after the horrors ceased could survivors begin to “feel the extent of the physical and psychological devastation wrought on them,” and that devastation would haunt them for the rest of their lives (Ansilewska 357). The list of losses and hardships for these children is seemingly unending: homes destroyed, parents lost, and beatings and deaths witnessed, just to name a few (Bluglass). Aside from these more tangible traumatic

events, child survivors also had to deal with internal struggles. Children had to search for their identity because of a lack of foundation developed before the war. In Poland, many Jewish children chose to abandon already weakened ties to Judaism motivated by fear of “exclusion from Polish Society, or even fear of further persecutions” (Ansilewska 359), because they simply thought their Jewish heritage was “synonymous with humiliation, suffering, and death” (Ansilewska 361), or because they did not want to be distinguished as “‘Jewish Orphans...,’ deprived and unpopular as they were” (Bluglass 23). *Hidden from the Holocaust* acknowledges that psychological trauma was common among all survivors but children faced a greater battle because of a lack of validation of their experiences and a lack of those who would listen to what they had to say. Overall, while all survivors did struggle during the post-war time, child survivors had a particularly difficult time coping with the atrocities they experienced.

It was simply impossible for a Jewish child living through the Holocaust to ever find the childhood that they sought. In a recent conversation I shared, we came to the conclusion that Jews in the holocaust didn't even have lives, let alone a childhood for which to search (Krummel). The experiences forced upon these children were atrocious and often “troublesome [even] for adults to make sense of”, so why make the effort to fully comprehend such a dark time in history (Goldberg 8)? The answer lies in the fact that education can (and must) become a preventative measure. Martin Goldberg, the head librarian at Pennsylvania State University, notes that “in a world of increasing racial, ethnic and religious hostility, education [is] the most powerful tool to help... perceive victimization and to fight intolerance” (Goldberg 8). I admit, my childhood was somewhat privileged. I do not mean this in a bad way because I was in no means just given everything I asked for, but I always knew that I had a fridge and pantry full of food if I ever got hungry, I had toys and friends to play with, and there was never a point at

which I actually feared for my life. A childhood like this is the norm in the United States, and we must learn about the horrors of childhood in the Holocaust to keep it that way. Learning about the atrocities that can happen in life reinforces a desire to ensure that they never do. We must remember the stories of Ira Segalewitz, Yitskhok Rudashevski, Luba Bromberg, Valdemar Feigeman, Rahkel Hus, Israel Veglop, and the 1.5 million other children to safeguard the future of our kids and all generations to come.

*This essay received the Barbara Farrelly Award for Best Writing of the Issue

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