

Echoes from Hell: Jewish Child Forced Laborers and the Holocaust

When Soviet soldiers liberated the three main camps of Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, they found around seven thousand Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners, most of whom were seriously ill.¹ Approximately five hundred were younger than fifteen years old.² Piero Terracina, born in Rome in November 1928, was part of the small group of Jewish child forced laborers liberated in Auschwitz.³ He had been deported to Birkenau in May 1944, where he first had to dig ditches outside the camp, and later worked on dismantling crashed airplanes in a workshop. A few days before liberation, Piero was sent on a death march, but the prisoners made it only from Birkenau to the Stammlager (Auschwitz I). When they arrived, the SS had already left the camp, and now the guards who had marched Piero's group to Auschwitz also fled. The survivors thus looked after themselves. Exhausted, ill, and surrounded by corpses, they ate whatever they could find. They melted snow to quench their thirst as the sounds of the battle came closer. On January 27, when it was Piero's turn to collect snow outside the building, he was surprised by a Soviet soldier dressed in white, who initially drew his weapon but then quickly understood the situation.

Piero remembered that there was no buzz of excitement but instead total apathy among the liberated prisoners. Nobody was able to cheer, and it took some time before the survivors realized they were free, and they began to weep. When he was liberated, Piero weighed only thirty-eight

1 Andrzej Strzelecki, "Evacuation, Liquidation, and Liberation of the Camp," in *Auschwitz: Nazi Death Camp*, ed. Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2002), 269–89, here 280 and the following pages.

2 See: <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/fate-of-children/the-fate-of-the-children/>.

3 On the following, see: Forced Labor 1939–1945. <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en/index.html> (henceforth Forced Labor), ZA127, Interview with Piero Terracina.

kilograms. Feeding by the Soviet soldiers started in an “uncontrolled” way, and many died from consuming the far too rich food proffered. Piero also recalled that he had to carry corpses into a cellar room before he was taken to a hospital.

The corpses were in and outside the barracks. [...] We brought them into these huge rooms that were packed with corpses. How can you forget this? That ... was my... story, then a new story started ... And I was taken by the ... Russians into a hospital. They treated me. My way back, it took me nearly a year, before I returned home. But that is a completely different story. Today they say: “Well, it happened but life goes on.” No. [distressed voice]. Life stops. Then it starts again ... a new life begins; it is no longer the same. A different life that too ... can be happy. However, it is a different life ..., that all of us can live by taking all the pain from the previous life with us. I think, I have finished.

With this remark, Piero completed his story about Auschwitz.

We do not know exactly how many Jews survived the Holocaust in Europe. It has been estimated that ninety thousand Jewish prisoners were liberated from concentration camps, of whom twenty thousand to thirty thousand died shortly afterward. Equally high was the number of Jews who survived in labor camps, in hiding, or with partisans, while two hundred and fifty thousand had found refuge in the Soviet Union.⁴ Unknown is also the number of child survivors. A contemporary estimate suggests that one hundred and fifty thousand Jewish children survived in Europe (outside the Soviet Union), whereas 1.5 million children were among the six million murdered Jews.⁵

The total number of Jewish child forced laborers remains unknown too; the statistics do not exist. Estimates depend on the definition of childhood, the boundaries of which are set anywhere between twelve and eighteen years in the academic literature. Most recent research tends to follow the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that “a child means every human being below the age of 18 years” (Art. 1). Using this criterion, it is safe to say that several hundred thousand Jewish children—most probably more than one million—had to endure longer

4 Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 19.

5 Leon Shapiro, *Jewish Children in Liberated Europe: Their Needs and the J. D. C. Child Care Work* (New York: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1946), 1.

or shorter periods of forced labor before being liberated or—more likely—murdered.

The survivors of the Shoah were shaped by external and internal wounds, scars, disabilities, and traumatic experiences. They had lost parents, family members, and friends. Child survivors had often lost trust in adults as well. Over months and years, their lives had been characterized by their proximity to death, forced labor, hunger, thirst, and humiliation. Many had been sexually abused, and some had to endure forced sterilization and medical experiments. In general, only the children the Germans had regarded as useful laborers had a chance of surviving the camps.

Jewish children worked in all branches of industry, in mining, agriculture, and construction work during the war and Holocaust. They were forced to build production plants, bridges, roads, railway tracks, barracks, airfields, defensive positions, and trenches. Over weeks, months, and years, they had to carry out exhausting work often far beyond their physical strength.

This article is based on the research project “Jewish Child Forced Laborers, 1938–1945.”⁶ Three areas of research are of particular interest: first, the experience of war, forced labor, and the Holocaust as constructed and narrated in former child forced laborers’ testimonies; second, the participation of German civil and military institutions in employing Jewish children; third, the various interdependencies between Jewish child forced labor and National Socialist ideology, occupation policies, and the Holocaust. The analysis focuses on issues such as the children’s living and working conditions in and outside the ghettos and camps; their contacts with other slave and forced laborers as well as with the perpetrators; sexual and sexualized violence; and forms of active and passive resistance.

After some remarks about children’s testimonies, this article will examine children’s “work in the vicinity of death” and their involvement in “clean-up work.” The final section will briefly analyze “survival” as a topic in children’s accounts.

6 Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit. Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938–1945* (Essen: Klartext, 2018). The project was generously supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, British Academy, Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future, Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the Vienna Wieselth Institute for Holocaust Studies.

Children's Testimonies

In his path-breaking book *The Death of the Shtetl* published in 2009, Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer informs the reader in the very first lines that “this book was written as a contribution to the victims’ side of Holocaust history. [...] The events happened to real people, whose stories must be heard and analyzed.”⁷ Memory and remembrance are central categories that characterize and define Jewish life and Jewish identity, which explains the important role of testimonies in documenting the Holocaust for future generations.⁸ This, however, has not always been the case because the role of survivors and the role of their testimonies have changed dramatically since the end of the war. While the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was marked by the recording of testimonies—work that was done mainly by Jewish Historical Commissions in Poland and in the Displaced Persons camps in Europe—the 1950s and early 1960s can be seen as years of silence, or as Henry Greenspan put it, the “years of silencing.”⁹ Survivors stopped talking about their experiences, and hardly anybody wanted to listen to them, not even in Israel. It was only when Adolf Eichmann was put on trial in Jerusalem in 1961 that the world slowly began to listen to those who had survived the Holocaust.¹⁰

Fritzie Weiss Fritzhall, born in 1929, who after the war had emigrated to the United States, reported during an interview that for many years, she had kept her memories to herself because she wanted to live as a “normal” young woman. It was her son who finally forced her to talk: “And this is when the memories started to fall back into place. This is when I went back into the camp and started to relive all of this. The reason I’m telling you this is because many things are blocked out in my mind. One of the things is, crossing the threshold from the train station into the camp itself.”¹¹

7 Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 7.

8 For a more detailed discussion about survivors’ testimonies and its methodological implications see, for example: Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*, 15–22. Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-labor Camp* (New York: Norton, 2010), 8–12.

9 Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon, 2010), 48 and the following pages.

10 See, in particular: David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist, eds, *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (London: Routledge, 2012).

11 US Holocaust Memorial Museum (henceforth USHMM), RG-50.030*0075, Interview with Fritzie Weiss Fritzhall.

Such memory gaps—caused by trauma—are quite common in children’s testimonies. Fritzie was not the only survivor who simply could not remember what happened between leaving the train and entering the camp. Historian Joanna Michlic spoke in this context about a “lack of precise references to time, space, and social actors.”¹² The degree of traumatization was influenced by a series of factors, including the circumstances of deportation, the age, and the personality of the child. Although adults and children had to endure the same living and working conditions in the camps, some psychologists assume that teenagers and young adults were less traumatized and could recover more quickly after the war than older prisoners.¹³ On the one hand, younger prisoners could adapt better to the realities of the camps and the conditions of forced labor. Some could even “prove” themselves and present themselves as “model workers.” On the other hand, children appear to have suffered more than adults when they lost a relative.¹⁴ In a 1999 article, literary scholar Andrea Reiter states that “children not only experienced the camps in a different way, but they also remember them differently.” She characterized the children’s perception as “naïve but exact.”¹⁵ Social scientists and psychologists agree that children had a much longer-lasting memory of cruelty but also of friendliness and support received during their time in the camps and experience of forced labor.¹⁶

When analyzing testimonies, it soon became obvious that only a few child survivors centered their story around forced labor.¹⁷ This undoubtedly had to do with the fact that most interview projects focused on the Holocaust in general and not on forced labor. In such Holocaust-centered

12 Joanna Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as reflected in Early Postwar Recollections* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 15–16.

13 Shamaï Davidson, *Holding on to Humanity: The Message of Holocaust Survivors. The Shamaï Davidson Papers* (New York, 1992), 145–46.

14 Sara Ghitis and Ruth Weinberger, “Jüdische Sklavenarbeit. Lebensgeschichten aus den USA,” in *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh and Christoph Thonfeld, eds. (Vienna: Böhlau, 2008), 324–35, here 332–34.

15 Andrea Reiter, “Die Funktion der Kinderperspektive in der Darstellung des Holocaust,” in *Für ein Kind war das anders: Traumatische Erfahrungen jüdischer Kinder und Jugendlicher im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, ed. Barbara Bauer and Waltraud Strickhausen (Berlin: Metropol, 1999), 215–29, here 216–17.

16 Barbara Bauer and Waltraud Strickhausen, eds., *Für ein Kind war das anders: Traumatische Erfahrungen jüdischer Kinder und Jugendlicher im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Berlin: Metropol, 1999), 15.

17 For the following, see: Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*, 394–98.

interviews, the fate of the family was most important, as was the question of how the interviewee had survived the omnipresence of death.

Several child survivors placed their accounts of forced labor in the context of physical mistreatment, inadequate clothing, and a lack of protection against injuries and toxic substances. This lack of protection caused not only blisters but also mutilations, internal injuries like burns to the lungs, and other lifelong injuries. This happened, for example, in the ammunition factories near Auschwitz and in other German-occupied areas.

But there are also stories about work inside the camps and the often life-saving function of such labor. Children obtained these coveted positions through their own initiative or with the help of well-meaning or not-well-meaning adults, as was sometimes the case. Work inside the camps better protected the children against the weather; they did not have to endure the often-long marches to external workplaces and the beatings that occurred along the way. Work inside the camps made it easier to acquire additional food and clothing, and sometimes it enabled them to meet family members in other parts of the camp. Most popular was work in the kitchens, the transport of food, the mobile cart commands, and the position of runner. Runners were positioned at the gates of the camp and delivered official messages.

Surviving the camps was often a matter of pure luck. However, some children tried to manipulate their physical appearance and their age to survive. This had to do with the fact that in general, younger children were immediately sent to the gas chambers. In many cases, parents or other adults advised and supported the children in this endeavor. Official documents and birth certificates could be falsified, personal details in camp registries could be changed. It is unknown how many lives were saved through bribery and document falsification, but the testimonies are full of such episodes. Some children acted on their own, driven by instinct, others on advice from adults or other prisoners at the ramp of Auschwitz, who—risking their own lives—urged incoming children to declare a higher age or a specific profession when asked during selection. The style of clothes and haircut also helped youngsters look older. Some parents tried to place their children between smaller adults during selections and pinched their child's cheeks to get some fresh color into their pale faces. There are also reports that boys were dressed in girl's clothing and vice versa to survive a specific situation.

Many testimonies clearly demonstrate that child survivors cannot be regarded as passive objects but as active individuals. Nevertheless, for most children, adults played a vital role in their survival. When adults

close to the children disappeared—whether they had been deported or murdered—children were often left without any protection in the camps. Some quickly became apathetic and mutated to *Muselmen* (walking skeletons), while others could recover from this loss once they found a new close contact, be it adult or child. Psychologists talk about “pairing and grouping” in the camps and regard this as essential for survival.¹⁸ Surviving without the help and support of others was rarely possible. However, although there are mentions of such close contact persons in many testimonies, it would be wrong to conclude from this that the camps were generally characterized by solidarity.

Children and adults alike were confronted with daily violence in the camps. Children’s testimonies contain numerous examples of what children witnessed and what they had to endure themselves. This included hangings and shootings, beatings, homo- and heterosexual abuse of boys and girls by adult Jews and non-Jews of both sexes, to name just a few such experiences. Most testimonies reflect the humiliation and desperation of children’s circumstances. Primarily girls remember their enforced public nakedness, body searches, delousing procedures, and the loss of their hair as most embarrassing. The same feelings accompanied the reduction of prisoners to a number without any rights.

Work in the Vicinity of Genocide

Jewish children were not only forcibly deployed in individual sectors of the economy and by the military; they also had to perform work that supported German crimes. This applies to the theft of Jewish property before and after deportations to ghettos, labor, and murder camps, as well as to all forced labor performed in the context of violence, murder, and genocide.

From the beginning to the end of the war, Jewish children were exposed to corpses. Children had to carry and transport corpses; some had to bury or burn them. In this context, most testimonies focus on the facts only—generally communicated without great emotion. Sixteen-year-old Abe Manik, for example, concluded his remarks about his traumatic experiences in the Kovno ghetto, where he had to help bury the dead bodies of Jews who had been shot when the ghetto was liquidated

18 Elmer Luchterhand, “Prisoner Behavior and Social System in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* (1967): 245–64; Davidson, *Holding on to Humanity*.

in 1943, with the simple remark: “You get used to it.”¹⁹ A year later, when Abe was imprisoned in a sub-camp of Dachau concentration camp, every day he had to go from hut to hut collecting the corpses of those who had died during the night and loading them onto a handcart. During an interview, he described this as a “good job” that allowed him to stay inside the camp, where he received a little more soup than his fellow prisoners who worked outside the camp.²⁰

In Birkenau, Sam Smilovic and Shony Braun worked for a while in a corpse unit (*Leichenkommando*). At that time, Sam was sixteen years old. In his memoirs, he named beatings, hunger, and broken hearts as the predominant causes of death in Birkenau (outside the gas chambers).²¹ Thirteen-year-old Shony, born in Romania, who after the war made a career as a composer and actor, remembered that his unit had to bring corpses from the huts to the crematorium daily. He also recalled that prisoners lay on the ground nearly starved to death, dehydrated, or because they had given up. When loading them onto the cart, he sometimes realized that some were not dead. When he wanted to save one of his fellow prisoners who was still alive, he received a terrible slap in the face from the *Kapo* of the crematorium.²² In his interview, Shony did not explicitly mention that the fellow prisoner was burned alive, but the context made it more than obvious. Similar remarks can be found in other testimonies.

Children were also forced to work in the direct vicinity of German atrocities. In Płaszów, children had to work at the mass graves. They had to dig the graves, put the corpses of executed Jews or Poles into them, cover the bodies with lime, and finally close the graves.²³ Some children had to search corpses for valuables and extract gold teeth and fillings. This happened before burying or burning but also after the mass graves had been unearthed to remove the traces of German atrocities.²⁴

Although most of those who were members of such work groups were killed after they had finished their work, there are a few testimonies from children who had been forced to do this labor in Płaszów concentration

19 USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (hereafter Shoah Foundation), 2259, Interview with Abe Malnik.

20 USHMM, RG-50.030*0145, Interview with Abraham Malnik.

21 Concordia University Montreal, Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors in Canada, Sam Smilovic, Buchenwald 56466, 2001.

22 USHMM, RG-50.030*0036, Interview with Shony Alex Braun.

23 For example, Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, B 162/1127, Zeugenaussagen Mike Staner, 3194–98, 3207–34.

24 For example, Shoah Foundation, 695, Interview with Elizabeth Franklin.

camp. Whereas some child survivors described their work in great detail, fifteen-year-old Harriet Solz restricted herself to short remarks only, but she mentioned the “incredibly terrible stench” when the decomposing corpses were taken out of the graves and burned.²⁵ The most traumatic response was from twelve-year-old Renee, who during an interview, distanced herself from the event: “Let me explain something to you, as I’m talking to you about it, it did not happen to me. It happened to a different person. I’m like at a movie. I don’t associate myself with it at all. It’s the funniest thing. It happened to a child. It had nothing to do with me. Not me, nothing.”²⁶

In Birkenau, Jewish children also had to work at the ramp when the trains arrived. Sam Pivnik was sixteen years old when he was deported to Auschwitz in 1943. “The people themselves were so crammed in that they had no room to relieve themselves,” he remembered.

The lavatory was a bucket in one corner if they were lucky and most of them, even the tolerably well-dressed, arrived caked in shit and piss, horribly embarrassed about the whole experience. The stench in those trucks when they’d gone was indescribable. I’d try to hold my breath as I went in with the others, hauling out luggage—a battered suitcase, a child’s teddy bear, spectacles, false teeth. In the summer, with no water on boards the trains, people died of suffocation and dehydration—I knew what it was like to go without water. In the winter, they just froze to death.

Sam had to pile up the luggage of the arrivals next to the train cars. This was done to avoid any unrest among the deportees. Only after the end of selection did Sam and his unit load the bags and suitcases onto carts and bring them to the so-called Canada section, where they were sorted and packed by fellow prisoners.²⁷

It is not impossible that Sam met fourteen-year-old Henry Kanner while working at the ramp. Henry remembered that he too had to empty and clean the train cars before they left again. He also recalled that the Jews arriving from the Łódź ghetto were poor and brought no food with them, while Jews from Hungary had a lot of food, including roasted meat and chicken. When the guards did not watch him, he could eat a

25 Shoah Foundation, 1491, Interview with Harriet Solz.

26 The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Kestenberg Archive (hereafter Hebrew University), (257)22–17, Interview with RS [Renee].

27 Sam Pivnik, *Survivor: Auschwitz, The Death March and My Fight for Freedom* (London: Hodder, 2012), 122, 127–28.

bit and satisfy his constant hunger for a short while. Hungarian Jews also brought clothes and candles that could be pocketed and later swapped for food.²⁸

The so-called White House with its gas chambers, which had already been used from summer 1942 to spring 1943, was reactivated in May 1944 for the murder of the Hungarian Jews. After gassing, prisoners of the *Sonderkommando* had to take the corpses out of the gas chambers. According to historian Gideon Greif, pits about twenty meters long, four meters wide, and three meters deep were dug about thirty meters away from the place of murder and in these pits, the corpses, stacked between layers of wood, were doused with methanol and burned. Before burning, prisoners had to examine them for gold teeth and hidden valuables and had to cut off their hair.²⁹

Seventeen-year-old Roman Mayer had to bring in the wood needed for the burnings, surreptitiously appropriating the shoes of a dead man.³⁰ Zalman Finkelstein, about the same age, was part of a group that was responsible for cleaning up the area around the gas chambers and removing all traces that might have alerted newly arriving Jews.³¹ For two “endless” days and nights, Morris Kesselman, also seventeen years old, had to carry corpses out of the gas chambers. When he saw small children being thrown alive into the incineration pit, he collapsed. Morris was then transferred to the *Sonderkommando* and housed in the attic of a crematorium where he worked as a runner, kept the guards’ quarters clean, polished their boots, darned their socks, and was rewarded with plenty of food, which enabled him to participate in the camp’s black market.³²

David Faber, born in 1927 had to examine the corpses for gold teeth. He remembered the horrific screams from the gas chambers—which still haunted his nightmares decades later—as well as the sight of the corpses when the doors of the gas chambers were opened, and the fate of a baby who had survived gassing.

There were eight of us to pull out the gold from the mouths, to open up with a clamp and pull out the gold, and whatever gold anybody had on it. [. . .] There was a woman, and a baby was laying on top of her,

28 Shoah Foundation, 48193, Interview with Henry Kanner.

29 Gideon Greif, “Wir weinten tränenlos . . .”: *Augenzeugenberichte des jüdischen “Sonderkommandos” in Auschwitz* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1999), 29–30.

30 Shoah Foundation, 18279, Interview with Roman Mayer.

31 Shoah Foundation, 18520, Interview with Zalman Finkelstein.

32 Shoah Foundation, 14715, Interview with Morris Kesselman.

and I took off that baby to see if she has any gold teeth in her mouth, we were supposed to take that gold out, the baby was crying, the baby was alive because the baby was sucking the breast from the mother. And so the baby was alive, and I tried to hide that baby because not far, about half a block away, there was a women's camp, there were many, many camps, one next to the other, and the other guys were warning me, don't do it, you are going to be in trouble, and they will kill you. And I didn't listen. I tried to take that baby and smuggle it to the women, and what happened, I got caught, one of the Kapos caught me. He pulled me back inside the crematorium and he grabbed the baby, and he threw it into the fire.³³

Babies at their mothers' breasts were also present in the memories of Sándor Ländler-Losonci, born in Budapest in 1931, who had to hand out soap to those being murdered and collect it from the dead afterward. He described the sight of the corpses in the gas chambers and the difficulty of opening hands that had become entangled with the soap during the agonizing murder.³⁴

Additionally, children had to remove the ashes of the cremated bodies from the crematoria. Among them was Jehuda Bacon, born in 1929, who after the war recalled in detail the undressing room and the gas chamber of a crematorium. He had memorized these details when he was allowed to warm up there together with the other children of his commando during a work break. Children also had to "sprinkle the frozen streets of Birkenau with ashes so that one did not slip."³⁵

There are even accounts of children who survived the most notorious extermination camps of the so-called *Aktion Reinhardt*. This includes some testimonies from children who had to work in Sobibór and Treblinka, where small groups of Jews had to sort and pack the possessions of the victims; but there is, so far, only one short mention of Bełżec,³⁶ where only a very small number of Jews survived. Nevertheless, the testimonies from Sobibór and Treblinka demonstrate that Jewish children had to work in all parts of these camps, such as the small railway station, where they helped incoming Jews who were often totally unaware

33 Shoah Foundation, 10416, Interview with David Faber.

34 Shoah Foundation, 51831, Interview with Sándor Ländler-Losonci.

35 Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes, 21.220, Erinnerungsbericht Jehuda Bacon, 22. 2. 1959; Forced Labour, ZA398, Interview with Yehuda Bacon.

36 Shoah Foundation, 13035, Interview with Adam Drewniak.

of their fate and sometimes even gave the “porters” tips.³⁷ In their testimonies, former child forced laborers reflected on their survival under such extreme conditions and how they adapted to the situation. Some were well-liked by the guards, acquired better positions, and even engaged in black market activities.³⁸

Children also had to work in the so-called tube, a camouflaged passageway that led to the gas chambers, where they had to cut the prisoners’ hair. The stories about cutting hair are part of the most shocking episodes recalled in the testimonies. Berek Freiberg wrote his account immediately after the war, in July 1945. At the age of fourteen, he was deported to Sobibór in 1942, where he managed to survive for eighteen months before he could escape during the uprising in October 1943. According to his report, he stayed alive by instinct and intuition. Upon arrival, he immediately realized that the guards selected craftsmen and healthy-looking boys, and he somehow managed to join this group despite his lack of any professional experience. During his time in Sobibór, Berek had to work many jobs, including cutting the hair of women before they were gassed. “It took half a minute to shear a head,” he remembered. “We took the long hair and cut it quickly, leaving spots with hair on the head.” He also recalled short talks with some of the women who knew their fate and asked him to take revenge. Some even told him where they had hidden valuables before leaving the ghetto or home. He remembered mothers who refused to be separated from their children. “If you cut the mother’s hair, she kept the child close to her, so that they could stay together to the last minute. And some women, you simply could not shear. Even when the guards started to shoot and beat, it didn’t help. They sat down and didn’t move; they didn’t let you cut their hair and refused to go to the bath [!]. They were shot or driven alive into the flames.”³⁹

Many testimonies contain the recollection of a particularly traumatic experience. For Philip Bialowitz, who was deported to Sobibór in April 1943 at the age of thirteen, it was a transport from Minsk that he remembered intensely, and which brought him to the brink of suicide. When the doors were opened, he saw that the wagons were full of decomposing and badly swollen corpses, including a child who had died in his mother’s arms. While Philip wanted to die at this sight, the SS man who had assigned him to this work enjoyed the “wonderful picture” that presented

37 Shoah Foundation, 2533, Interview with Regina Zielinski.

38 Berek Freiberg, “Sobibór,” in *Nach dem Untergang. Die ersten Zeugnisse der Shoah in Polen 1944–1947: Berichte der Zentralen Jüdischen Historischen Kommission*, ed. Frank Beer, Wolfgang Benz, and Barbara Distel (Berlin: Metropol, 2014), 617–52, 638.

39 Freiberg, “Sobibór,” 621–23.

itself to him. With blows, he made Philip drag the corpses out of the wagons, sometimes causing the skin to come off and stick to his hands. This experience, Philip explained, haunted him and gave him nightmares.⁴⁰ For seventeen-year-old Regina Zielinski, the most horrific experience was finding a piece of her mother's clothing with her wedding ring sewn into it.⁴¹

Despite the hardships, children learned to adapt. "We became used to the nature of the internal regime," Dov Freiberg recalled at the Eichmann trial: "In some way, we became accustomed to it. To some extent, we got used to the way of life. I must also point out that new victims were always arriving. These suffered more than those who were called old-timers. In certain cases, the old-timers obtained particular jobs. I also received such a job, afterwards. I worked as a cleaner of the living quarters of the Ukrainians."⁴² Those who managed to survive for some time had the possibility of earning the goodwill of individual guards and moving up the camp hierarchy, polishing the SS men's shoes every morning or working in the officers' mess dressed in a special uniform.⁴³ Berek Freiberg even traded with some Ukrainian SS men whose quarters he had to clean and boots he had to shine: "We were fine, we had food, while in the camp there was literally starvation. We smuggled food into the camp. We gave them gold, they brought us sausage, schnapps, everything from the village."⁴⁴

Sixteen-year-old Regina Zielinski found herself in Sobibór in the knitting barrack, where socks and knee socks were made for the Wehrmacht in the winter of 1942/43. The material was obtained from the woolen clothes of those murdered. Regina received a pair of shoes that belonged to her murdered sister. Twelve women and girls worked in the heated barracks, she recalled, some preparing the wool, others knitting. The target was one pair a day. But there was solidarity: some were better with the heels, others with straight pieces. The group voluntarily made a sleeveless sweater for *SS-Oberscharführer* Gustav Wagner. At that time, Regina recalled, they did not yet know how bestial he could be.⁴⁵ Finally,

40 Shoah Foundation, 32788, Interview with Philip Bialowitz.

41 Shoah Foundation, 2533, Interview with Regina Zielinski.

42 Zeugenaussage Dov Freiberg, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 64, 15 June 1961. <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-064-01.html>.

43 Zeugenaussage Moshe Bahir, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 65, 5 June 1961. <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-065-01.html>.

44 Freiberg, "Sobibór," 638.

45 Shoah Foundation, 2533, Interview with Regina Zielinski.

reference should be made to fourteen-year-old Stan Szmajzner who survived because the camp commander Franz Stangl was impressed with his goldsmithing and had several pieces made by him.⁴⁶

Clean-up Work

Among the most common work related to the Holocaust was the sorting and packing of the possessions left by the victims. The theft of Jewish possessions had begun in Germany in 1933. In 1941, unemployed Jewish children had to gather at the deportation locations in Germany to help elderly and handicapped Jews with their luggage.⁴⁷ This also gave the deportees the illusion of normality. After the liquidation of ghettos, children had to help empty flats and houses. They had to carry furniture and household goods, sort the belongings, and load them onto trucks and railway cars. Sorting and packing accompanied the Holocaust from the very beginning to the very end, and Jewish child forced laborers could be found at all places where the belongings of the victims were being prepared and used to fill German state coffers as well as the pockets of guards and officials.

The exploitation of the victims continued even on their way to the gas chambers when the naked prisoners' hair was cut off to make industrial felts and hair-yarn footies for the crews of submarines and hair-felt stockings for employees of the *Reichsbahn* (German Reich Railways). Even the ashes of the burned corpses were sometimes used as fertilizer. In the ghettos and camps dissolved after the deportations, a clean-up squad remained behind; they were tasked with clearing out apartments and bringing furniture, household effects, and clothing to collection warehouses, where they were disinfected, washed, repaired, sorted, and prepared for shipment. Testimonies contain both sober and extremely emotional accounts of this work, which, for most of the survivors, offered an opportunity to remain longer in familiar surroundings and sometimes even with family members.

Among the less emotional narratives of this labor is that of Henry Kanner, who as a twelve-year-old was deported to the Sosnowitz labor

46 Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2013), 26.

47 Shoah Foundation, 18441, Interview with Kenneth Arkwright. Zeugenaussage Mordechai Ansbacher, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 38, 12 May 1961. <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-038-01.html>.

camp, where he remained for half a year, until the fall of 1943. In his account, Henry adopted contemporary German expressions when he reported that his group had “emptied the apartments of Jewish families who had been resettled [!]” and brought “the stuff” to a collection point. Only when asked during his interview did Henry become more specific, recalling that it was mainly furniture that he carried out and loaded onto a horse-drawn cart, and that no valuables, clothing, or linen were found in the apartments. He assumed “that someone had already been there before us to clear out the things or take them away.”⁴⁸

In contrast, Edith, who was born in Tomaszow in 1929 and who, together with her mother, was part of the clean-up squad after the dissolution of the local ghetto in October and November 1942, was highly emotional: “And then they put me to work, me and my mother and we had to go and clean up after they deported all the people. We had to clean out the houses after. So then we worked [...] where my grandmother used to live. It was so bad. We were crying and crying, touching things and, ugh, it was ... (crying).”⁴⁹

The clean-up squads did not always consist of local forced laborers. This became obvious in the memoirs of Vivian Chakin, born in Grodno in 1927, who was selected as a forced laborer in Treblinka in 1943 and was deported from there first to Majdanek, and then to the airport camp in Lublin. From there, she went via Milejow—where she worked in a food factory—to the forced labor camp Trawniki, where all Jews had been murdered under the codename “*Aktion Erntefest*.” When she arrived in Trawniki together with a group of girls and women in early November 1943, the camp was already deserted except for a group of Jewish forced laborers who had also just been deported to this camp. She recalled:

There wasn't a soul there. They put us into a barrack and then they brought the men that were working there, they brought also. And they put us together in the same barrack. And this we thought, well that's the end of all of us, because they never kept men and women together. [. . .] We came into the barrack. The bunks were all around the walls. And in the middle was a large table with benches. And there was still food on the table that people had started to eat and never finished. They did not put us to work right the first day. But the men were taken and they were divided up into three eight hour shifts. And they

48 Shoah Foundation, 48193, Interview with Henry Kanner.

49 Hebrew University, (257)19–44, Interview with EN [Edith].

were taken to burn the bodies of the [. . .] people [. . .] that were shot. [. . .] On this big heap of bodies, they worked for one week. And when they were all finished burning the bodies, the Ukrainians shot them and burned their bodies on the same flames.⁵⁰

Vivian and her group had to clean the barracks and sort the remains of those who had been murdered. Occasionally they came across corpses in the bunk beds; others were found in a factory where nine men had desperately tried to dig a hiding place. Vivian worked in fear for her life and with the certainty that she too would soon be murdered. She stayed a total of seven months in Trawniki. During this time, she performed a variety of tasks including sorting potatoes as well as auxiliary work in the bakery. At the beginning of June 1944, her group was deported to Majdanek concentration camp. There she worked as a seamstress before being sent on a death march a few weeks later. In the distance, she could already hear artillery.⁵¹

Frieda Feuer, who was born in 1929 and deported to Auschwitz in 1944, reported with great emotion that she and three fellow prisoners volunteered for the clean-up squad after the murder of the inhabitants of the Terezin family camp because she thought it would give them at least a temporary chance of survival. In the barracks, she found children's belongings scattered on the floor, including toys and shoes.⁵²

In 1944, the dismantling of Auschwitz-Birkenau began. Before the gas chambers and crematoria were blown up, special forced labor units searched for everything that could be transported to Germany. Children had to take part in this work, and groups of children were forced to pull the heavy handcarts. Born in June 1932, Izchak Reichenbaum, who was initially selected by Mengele for his experiments, worked in such a unit from October 1944 to January 1945. He helped dismantle storage buildings and even parts of the crematoria. He recalled that groups of ten children had to pull the handcarts loaded with construction materials to the railway station.⁵³ Andrew Burian, born in December 1930, helped remove the roof of the crematoria, handing down the roof tiles, which were carefully packed in straw.⁵⁴ They may still be on German roofs

50 Shoah Foundation, 7457, Interview with Vivian Chakin.

51 Shoah Foundation, 7457, Interview with Vivian Chakin.

52 Shoah Foundation, 3266, Interview with Frieda Feuer.

53 Auschwitz Archives, Wspomnienia, tom 203, Izchak Reichenbaum, Haifa, to Jerzy Wroblewski, Auschwitz, 3. 2. 1999.

54 Shoah Foundation, 38143, Interview with Andrew Burian.

today, just like the bricks from the crematoria and gas chambers that Arthur Brown broke down that were used for building construction in Germany.⁵⁵

Survival

In many testimonies, survivors reflected on the reasons they survived. Such individual thoughts can hardly be generalized, and it seems that so far, international research has produced more questions than answers about whether children or adults have greater resilience. Was it an advantage or disadvantage to be young? Can children adapt more easily to a specific situation than adults? Do children have greater willpower? Could children better cope with traumatic situations than adults? Or was it pure luck that some prisoners survived the ghettos and camps—a view that Abe Malnik, born in 1927, favored in his testimony?⁵⁶

From the day of liberation, child survivors became the object of psychological studies. However, it was extremely difficult to find coherence in the results, as Judith Hemmendinger and Robert Krell stated in their study about the children of Buchenwald, where some nine hundred children were liberated by the US army in April 1945. “For the most part, they were viewed as damaged beyond hope of repair, of recovery, of normality. [. . .] Some mental health workers considered them psychopaths, assuming they must have been selfish or manipulative or mean-spirited in order to survive when so many others died.” Yet, this group of children “have produced rabbis and scholars, physicists and physicians, businessmen and artists, as well as a Nobel Prize winner.”⁵⁷

Some children regarded their youth as the main reason for their survival. “I have overcome all this because I was young, but it is now a heavy price,” stated Lena Szeiner, born in 1931. She also stressed that she had worked in all circumstances, even when she had pneumonia and a high fever.⁵⁸ Others referred to their adaptability and the learning process necessary to survive a concentration camp. “By and by you get experienced,” explained Halina Birenbaum, born in 1929, reflecting on her time in Majdanek. “Your instinct sharpens, your vigilance increases, your reactions speed up. You had to learn that it is better not to be in the camp

55 Shoah Foundation, 497, Interview with Arthur Brown.

56 Shoah Foundation, 2259, Interview with Abe Malnik.

57 Judith Hemmendinger and Robert Krell. *The Children of Buchenwald: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Their Post-war Lives* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2000), 8.

58 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, B 162/20659, Zeugenaussage Lena Szeiner, 253–54.

at daytime, that even physical most exhausting work outside was safer than staying in the camp; you learned to distinguish between exhausting and less exhausting work units; you learned to bribe.”⁵⁹

As mentioned before, “pairing and grouping” are often used as central categories in psychology to explain how prisoners managed to overcome extreme situations in concentration camps. In the testimonies, however, the vital role of “pairing and grouping” is often not highly visible as survivors usually do not reflect on it when describing their individual survival.

Many former child forced laborers talk about their will and their desire to survive. For example, for Moshe Avital, born in 1929, his mental strength and the hope to take revenge at the end of the experience were the most important factors.⁶⁰ Kate Bernath, born in 1927, always thought that it was impossible that she would die in the camps. She dreamed that the Germans would lose the war and she could return home. “Never to lose hope” was her credo. “If you lost hope that was the end of it.”⁶¹

Anita Schorr, who was fourteen when liberated in 1945, slaved away from one day to the next. She was determined to survive and had the feeling there was a strong will in her to succeed.⁶² Liliane Segre, who was the same age, compared herself to a “greedy she-wolf, emaciated and egoistic. I didn’t have a female body anymore, I was one of the ugliest women, really ugly, almost dead. But still alive, alive, alive and determined: A day has past again, and I am still alive. A night has passed again, and I am still alive. I do not want to see anything. I do not want to watch. I do not want to know. Egoistic, closed up, lonely, lonely, very lonely.”⁶³

For some, it was their faith that helped them survive. Others did not “deal with it” at all—an expression Sara Weinryb, born in 1929, used in her testimony. For her, it was important “to watch,” accompanied by the will “to tell” later about her experience and suffering.⁶⁴ The desire to talk about their experiences dominated many survivors’ accounts. Some told their story immediately after liberation; others told it later, when the “years of silence” had passed. Some were only able to talk to their grandchildren but not their children.⁶⁵

59 Halina Birenbaum, *Hope is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age under Nazi Terror* (New York: Sharpe, 1996), 86.

60 Moshe Avital, *Not to Forget: Impossible to Forgive* (Jerusalem: Mazo, 2004), 141.

61 USHMM, RG-50.030*0023, Interview with Kate Bernath.

62 FU Hagen, Interview with Anita Schorr.

63 Forced Labour, ZA124, Interview with Liliane Segre.

64 Shoah Foundation, 13881, Interview with Sara Weinryb.

65 Margalit Bejarano and Amija Boasson, “Sklavenarbeit und Shoah. Ein Blick aus Israel,” in *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im inter-*

Nowadays, textbooks describe the lifelong psychological consequences of months and years spent in concentration or forced labor camps. In their interviews, survivors talked mainly about physical disabilities, nightmares, and feelings of guilt. Sara Weinryb compared her nightmares to a movie that repeated again and again: “You cannot sleep; you cannot get rid of it; you hear the children, you hear ... the selections; you hear this—these ramps; and everything again and again.”⁶⁶

Some former child forced laborers suffered feelings of guilt for the rest of their lives. Nesse Godin, who cried continually when liberated, always cried in her nightmares and felt guilty that she had survived: “Was I better than my friends and my cousins and my buddies and my uncles and my aunts and my father? Was I better? And then I was sitting there. And maybe I cried for me because I was all alone.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

Although academic research on forced labor during the Second World War has significantly increased since the late 1980s, the subject of forced labor performed by children had remained untouched for many more years. It was only some fifteen years ago that I began my research project on child forced laborers, which has resulted so far in various articles as well as books on Polish, Soviet, and Jewish child forced laborers.⁶⁸

With respect to Jewish children, the neglect of forced labor undoubtedly had to do with the fact that Jewish survivors were, from a scholarly standpoint, primarily regarded as survivors of the Holocaust (and most of them perceived themselves as such) but not as survivors of forced labor. In contrast to the life-historical significance ascribed to forced labor by non-Jewish victims, the forced labor performed by Jews inside and outside ghettos and camps was mainly interpreted within the context

nationalen Vergleich, ed. Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh, and Christoph Thonfeld (Vienna: Böhlau, 2008), 311–23, here 319.

66 Shoah Foundation (Transkript FU Berlin), 13881, Interview with Sara Weinryb.

67 USHMM, RG-50.030*0080, Interview with Nesse Godin.

68 Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit: Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa* (Essen: Klartext, 2013); Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*; Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Deportacja i praca przymusowa. Dzieci z Polski i ZSRS w nazistowskich Niemczech i okupowanej Europie Wschodniej w latach 1939–1945* (Warsaw: Pilecki Institute, 2021). See also: Katarzyna Person and Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Przemysłowa Concentration Camp: The Camp, the Children, the Trials* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

of Holocaust survival and as one of the various means to survive the genocide. When analyzing early testimonies of Jewish children, historian Boaz Cohen, for example, noted that these accounts were thematically characterized above all by the central role of the family, encounters with death, and relationships with non-Jews.⁶⁹

This article has focused on two of the many harrowing aspects of child forced labor analyzed in the research on Jewish children: first, “work in the vicinity of genocide,” which included deployment in the so-called *Sonderkommandos*; and second, “clean-up work” in ghettos and camps after the deportation of the Jewish population. Analysis of children’s testimonies has shown that children were excellent observers who watched the German atrocities with great precision. Depending on their age, socialization, and personal background—but regardless of their gender—it has been demonstrated that by far, not all children can be regarded as passive objects of German oppression and persecution. Many were individuals who tried to cope with the situation and developed resilience and a strong will to survive.

The testimonies examined here also underscore that with the liberation, a new story began, one that was neither free of conflict nor always positive. When the troops moved on, an unknown number of girls and boys became victims of sexual and sexualized violence conducted by members of military forces on all sides.⁷⁰ Those who returned home were rarely able to reunite with members of their families, but they often faced renewed antisemitism and violence. Most survivors entered a world that for many years was unwilling to listen to their stories and looked at them with suspicion and incredulity.

69 Boaz Cohen, “Representing the Experiences of Children in the Holocaust: Children’s Survivors Testimonies Published in Fun Letsten Hurbn,” in “*We Are Here*”: *New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, ed. Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 74–97, here 86.

70 Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit*, 378–79.