Zofia Trębacz

"Dear Daddy, you ask me how I spend the whole day, from morning to evening I think about you …": Children's Letters and the Emotions Hidden Within Them[1]

Letters as a Source

The role of ego documents in contemporary Holocaust research is steadily growing. As Joanna Michlic rightly points out, "There are multiple and interlinked developments responsible for this shift, the 'rediscovery' and reevaluation of personal testimonies for historical writings."[2] Over the past few years, more and more researchers are turning to various types of documentation: diaries, letters, and even court testimonies. These are supplemented by postwar sources: video testimonies, memoirs, and testimonies before various kinds of committees. Historians recognize personal testimonies as essential for the historical reconstruction of the past. The picture created with their help expands our knowledge of the war years, adding a unique individual perspective. They allow us to take a fresh look at the survival strategies of Jews destined to be murdered, differentiating the behavior of women, men, and children.

1 Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, ed., … *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba … Korespondencja wojenna rodziny Finkelsztejnów (1939–1941)* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2012), 105.

2 Joanna Michlic points to factors that contributed to this, such as access to archival collections in Eastern Europe, many memoirs' publications and oral testimonies and increasing interest in "previously understudied topics" – among others, the history of children during the second world war. See: Joanna Beata Michlic, "The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources: Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. Sara R. Horowitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 145–46.

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At the same time, this approach faces strong criticism from researchers skeptical of unitary sources. Using ego documents requires a critical approach which allows for extracting interesting information and, primarily, the separation of facts from views and opinions. In historical research, correspondence has been used for many years.[3] Consequently, it is hard to imagine Holocaust Studies without letters and postcards sent and received by the victims. During the Second World War, this correspondence played a unique role. As Jacek Leociak describes:

> A letter is a particular concentration of words. They are intimate words because they are intended for the one and only person to whom one writes. They are fleeting words because this peculiar intimate conversation between the sender and the addressee is written down on a piece of paper and carried—quite literally—from one place to another. These words are fleeting also because they are immersed in the transience of the moment in which they were written. They refer to situations and circumstances often known only to the addressee and the sender. Thus, only in this context are they understandable, only in this context are they relevant.[4]

However, children's correspondence remains an underused source in research on the Holocaust. Although hard to analyze, such correspondence is valuable material and, therefore, I will highlight some key points in this source commentary regarding such analysis by focusing on children's letters.[5] Firstly, I will present ways to critically investigate the sources—letters and postcards written by children during the war. What impact do linguistic, financial, and gender constraints have on how and why a child decides to write a message? Secondly, based on the selected sources, I will analyze how the correspondence of the youngest victims of the war allows us to understand their emotions, not only those that accompanied the writing of the letter, but perhaps, above all, those that accompanied them

3 Their significance for historical research is particularly highlighted by Dalia Ofer; see: "Personal Letters in Research and Education on the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 3 (1989): 341–55.

4 Jacek Leociak, *Tekst wobec Zagłady (O relacjach z getta warszawskiego)* (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997), 145.

5 On Jewish children and childhood in the Holocaust, see: Debóra Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991); Nicholas Stargardt, *Witness of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Joanna Beata Michlic (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis Univeristy Press, 2017).

in their everyday lives. Did they try to hide feelings? Additionally, I will examine which, often unconscious, strategies were used to deal with pain, fear, and suffering. How did they influence the relations with family? Looking closer at how victims of the Nazi persecution reacted could add a new viewpoint to the history of the Holocaust.

One of the crucial source collections is the correspondence held at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, as well as other collections in the Ringelblum Archive. The first volume of the edition of documents from the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto is devoted to the letters. These documents were edited by Ruta Sakowska, who wrote in the introduction that: "Letters about the Holocaust are probably the most dramatic documents of the ARG [Ringelblum Archive]."[6] Another noteworthy correspondence is the collection of postcards from the Łódź (Litzmannstadt) ghetto, kept in the State Archive in Łódź. However, the letters are often scattered among various archival collections in Poland, Israel, the USA, and other countries, including not only those from urban centers but also from smaller towns and villages, such as Będzin, Kałuszyn, or Zamość. There are also many editions of wartime correspondence between people remaining in close relationships (family, friends, love), and also correspondence anthologies.[7] One must not forget about the letters remaining in the private collections of the survivors; perhaps, some of these are still waiting to be discovered.

6 *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 1 *Listy o Zagładzie*, ed. Ruta Sakowska (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1997), XXIV. See also: Tadeusz Epsztein, Justyna Majewska, and Aleksandra Bańkowska, eds., *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 15 *Wrzesień 1939. Listy kaliskie. Listy płockie* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2014).

7 See: Wanda Lubelska, *Listy z getta* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2000); Barbara Engelking-Boni, "Sześć listów z warszawskiego getta. 9 VII 1941–25 VI 1942," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, no. 198 (2001): 229–40; Ann Kirschner, ed., *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Barbara Engelking, "Miłość i cierpienie w Tomaszowie Mazowieckim," in *Zagłada Żydów. Pamięć narodowa a pisanie historii w Polsce i we Francji*, eds. Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, and Anna Ziębińska-Witek (Lublin: UMCS Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie 2006); Hanka Goldszajd, *Listy z getta/Letters from the Ghetto* (Kielce: Charaktery, 2007); Jan Gelbart, *Adresat nieznany*, ed. Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak (Warsaw: Baobab, 2009); Charlotte Goldberszt, *Correspondance du ghetto. Varsovie – Liège, 1940-1942* (Brussels: Édition du Centre d'Études et de Documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz ASBL, 2016). In addition to the volume of Ringelblum Archive already mentioned, see: Reuven Dafni and Yehudit Kleiman, eds., *Final Letters from Victims of the Holocaust* (London: Weidenfeld, and Nicolson, 1991); Zvi Bacharach, ed., *Last Letters from the Shoah* (Jerusalem: Devora Publishing 2004).

Analysis Limitations

Undoubtedly, like any other source, the letters are not free from limitations. Fear of repression meant that authors, who were also children, often tried to conceal the truth in their writing. Awareness of the existence of censorship in correspondence, that they were aware a third party could read their words, caused authors to encrypt some information. This often happened in the case of family correspondence when authors used crypto-information (for example, when they called mass murder "a disease" or "holding a wedding party").[8] Although the letters were censored and written without the intention of publication, to never be shown to anyone except the addressee, they were frank. Significantly, they were treated as a means to express suppressed emotions. As Dalia Ofer notes: "The perspective of those writing at the time is influenced both by immediate, local events and the overwhelming emotions of fear, pain, anger and impending loss."[9] Moreover, letters captured the inner world of thinking and feeling, similar to diaries, which, conversely, were rarely written by young children. Their intimate emotions found their best expression in correspondence.

Frequently, the form of correspondence was dictated by the writing material. Not every person had paper or the time and strength to write. And yet, the need to convey a few sentences to share feelings with another person was strong; people often reached for postcards on which they only had to write a few words. A serious limitation in analyzing correspondence is its fragmentation. It is hard to find fully preserved correspondence along with the lists of senders and addressees. This is even more complicated in the case of children's letters. As a result, scholars are dealing with messages that are often incomprehensible because their context remains unknown to us. The authors of the letters provide information that is not clear to the present-day reader or a wider audience as it was aimed at a specific individual. It is often impossible to establish even the personal details of the letter authors.

However, sometimes the situation differs and scholars have a significant collection of relatives' correspondence from the Holocaust, which is unusual and remarkable at the same time. This allows historians to write the history of a separated family based on letters written to each other.

8 See: Marcin Urynowicz, "Listy o Zagładzie. Kryptoinformacja," *Pamięć i Sprawé iedliwość* 1 (2002): 121–31.

9 Dalia Ofer, "Cohesion and Rupture: The Jewish Family in the East European Ghettos during the Holocaust," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* XIV (1998): 146.

For this source commentary, I have chosen two of these families who were separated during the war and maintained correspondence for a significant amount of time. The authors came from similar backgrounds—intelligentsia circles—and, in both cases, the fathers were social and political activists, although the Zygielbojms were Bundists and Finkelsztejn's Zionists.[10] They lived in two major cities—Warsaw and Łódź—and their economic situation was quite good. They were part of the middle class and had contacts with the surrounding non-Jewish milieu. When the war broke out, the children, alongside their mothers, were in Warsaw, and then moved to the ghetto, while their fathers left Poland in 1939. However, their experience of German occupation and the moments when they began to write differ.[11]

Collective Writing

Many letters are collective endeavors; many children write together with other family members. They add short notes to the longer messages from their parents or elder siblings. This was also the case for Artur Zygielbojm (born in 1929), son of Szmul Zygielbojm, a Bundist politician. In January 1940, because of fear of arrest, Szmul left Poland while his second wife Maria and their son stayed in Poland. For as long as they could, Maria and Artur tried to write to Szmul. Artur often added a few lines to his mother's letters. The family corresponded for almost two years, from January 1940 to November 1941. The preserved documents are held in the YIVO Archives in New York and include twelve letters

10 For a more comprehensive description of the Jewish population in interwar Poland, see: Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Warsaw* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 11–83. For more information about Warsaw Jews, see: Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet, eds., Warsaw: *The Jewish Metropolis. Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

11 Despite numerous restrictions introduced by the occupant, the post office in the ghettos functioned until the liquidation operations began. The correspondence was in Polish or German. For more on the functioning of the post office in the Warsaw Ghetto, see: Ruta Sakowska, "Łączność pocztowa warszawskiego getta," *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 1–2 (1963): 94–109; Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, "List należy do życia … Listy prywatne jako źródło badań nad Zagładą", *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 2 (2014): 325–33. For information on the post office in the Łódź Ghetto, where the situation was different, see: Adriana Bryk, "'Najlepsze dziecko Prezesa' – poczta w getcie łódzkim (1939–1944)," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 16 (2020): 523–53.

and twenty-eight postcards. Unfortunately, Szmul's messages sent to Poland are missing.[12]

Rywka Zygielbojm, Szmul's daughter from his first marriage with a woman named Gołda Sperling, also corresponded with him. In the Warsaw ghetto, she worked at the Jewish Social Self-Aid (*Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna*, ŻSS). In her letters, Rywka described the family situation, the fate of friends and family (including her older brother), living conditions in the ghetto, and the contents of food packages received from her father. Her financial situation was very difficult, and it continually worsened. Along with her mother, who did not work, Rywka was selling off their belongings. On July 24, 1941, she desperately asked for help:

> Mom doesn't work yet. I work only three days a week. We have lost a lot of weight, and you probably understand what we feel in our souls. Dear Daddy! Save whatever you can. At least let your conscience be clear that you have done everything you could.[13]

The girl clearly missed her father very much; however, such open appeals were rare. Children frequently tried not to worry their loved ones with the details of their situation.

For at least several months, the Zygielbojm family took steps to allow Maria and Artur to join Szmul—unsuccessfully. They both died during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in early May 1943. Rywka Zygielbojm probably died in the Treblinka death camp in the summer of 1942.[14]

A similar situation occurred in the case of the second family. In August 1939, Chaim Finkelsztejn, a journalist and the director of the press publishing house "Haynt," left for the twenty-first World Jewish Congress in Geneva (August 16–26, 1939) and did not return to Poland.[15] His wife Rywka and his two daughters—Estera, known as Tusia (born in 1925), and Awiwa (born in 1930 or 1931)—stayed in Warsaw. They corresponded with Chaim for two years, from December 1939 to November 1941. Approximately one hundred and forty letters and cards, now kept

12 Michał Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje.' Listy rodziny do Szmula Zygielbojma, 1940–1941," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 4 (2018): 790–91.

13 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 808.

14 Vladka Meed, *On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1993), 110.

15 See his monograph about this daily newspaper published in Yiddish in Warsaw: Chaim Finkelstein, "*Hajnt": A Jewish Newspaper 1908–1939* (Tel Aviv: The World Federation of Polish Jews, 1978).

at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, have survived. However, the collection is not complete as copies of letters from New York from the first eight months of correspondence are missing.[16]

Like Szmul Zygielbojm, Chaim Finkelsztejn applied for visas for his wife and children, first from Paris and then from New York. Initially, he tried to get entry visas to Palestine and later attempted to bring his family to the United States. He managed to have their names included on a list of people who could enter America. Unfortunately, this came too late. Rywka and her older daughter Estera were murdered in April 1943 in unknown circumstances. Only the younger daughter Awiwa survived the war. She came to New York, via Stockholm, where in 1945 she met her father, who had located her with the help of his friend Adolf Berman. Awiwa decided to stay in the United States.[17]

Moment of Writing

A crucial question when examining letters is why people wrote during the Holocaust. Was it a natural form of continuation of the lost contact? Or was it a specific event that made them begin writing? If so, which event was it—the closing of the ghetto, encountering death, rumors about the actual purpose of the deportations, or the deportations themselves?[18]

16 See more: Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba …*, 27–28.

17 She lived with her father, but their relationship was not close. The process of finding each other was not easy; it took a long time and was emotionally exhausting. It was also associated with high costs and time-consuming procedures. During the meeting, it turned out that both the parents and the children, after years of separation, had become estranged from each other, and it was difficult for them to communicate. This was often disappointing for those reunited. For more on this, see: Joanna Beata Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady. Wojenna i powojenna historia oraz pamięć żydowskich dzieci ocalałych w Polsce* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2020).

18 Like in the case of the almost anonymous Fela, whose letter was preserved in the Ringelblum Archive and who decided to send a short message after April 1942, or with the Gips sisters (and their two letters), for whom impending extermination could be the decisive moment. They wanted to inform their loved ones and obtain information about them. It is unknown if there were more. In the Ringelblum Archive, many such individual letters and postcards have been preserved. Their senders are often almost anonymous; we know their names and surnames, but often that is all we have been able to determine. Perhaps the upcoming deportations were a single impulse to reach for the pen, but it could also be that only a fragment of the correspondence has survived. *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 1 *Listy o Zagładzie*, ed. Ruta Sakowska, 17–18, 65–70.

From the potential reasons, it is possible to determine which one was most likely. For the Finkelsztejn family, writing letters seemed to be a natural form of contact. The girls were skilled at it, and they felt confident. One can assume that the family corresponded with each other during earlier periods of separation. For the Zygielbojm family, their letters and postcards were usually connected with parcels sent to the ghetto. Szmul Zygielbojm's wife and children often requested something and thanked him for the items they received. Undoubtedly, this was not the only reason for writing. The family members who remained in the Warsaw ghetto wanted to know more about Szmul's life; yet, they still formulated specific requests for him. Sometimes, they were serious ones, such as obtaining passports for them, but they also concerned smaller things, like stamps. Writing seemed to be a new experience for them, especially for Artur. He was definitely not used to it and wrote short sentences, more or less repetitive and using the same words. His notes were characterized by schematic content. He did not hide his feelings, but he also did not dwell on them, like the daughters of Chaim Finkelsztejn.

Longing

Longing is present in a particular way in personal correspondence; similarly, it is the primary emotion that shines through the children's letters. Usually, they wrote about it directly: "Dear Daddy! How are you? I am healthy and I miss you very much. I'd like us to meet soon," wrote Artur Zygielbojm on June 24, 1941.[19] A month earlier, on May 15, 1941, the boy asked: "Dear Daddy! I miss you so much... How are you feeling? What do you do? I am healthy and I feel well. I'd like to see you right now. Do you still have your mustache? Kisses. Be well."[20]

A few months later, on September 8, 1941, his half-sister Rywka wrote to the same addressee: "I would love to get your photo. Can I send you photos? I really miss you! Write to me precisely about everything, mostly about your life! […] Kisses! Your daughter."[21]

Finkelsztejn's daughters were much more effusive in their letters. "Dear Daddy!!! I miss you so much. Every day I [dream] that a letter came, I am terribly sad when I remember that you are not with me. I

19 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje.'" 806.
20 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje.'" 805.
21 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje.'" 810.

wish we were all together. I kiss you strongly," wrote Awiwa on February 15, 1940."[22] On March 9, 1940, she confessed: "My dearest daddy!!! I am so terribly sad when there is no letter from you. How are you, how are you feeling? We have everything okay, just one thing not right that you are not with us [sic]. Your loving Bibek Sribek."[23]

A few months later, on September 16, 1940, she wrote touchingly: "Dear Daddy, you ask me how I spend the whole day, from morning to evening, I think about you if I forget for a moment, all the words are addressed to you."[24] The exchange of correspondence eased the longing and provided a substitute for a meeting or at least a conversation.

Although Finkelsztejn's daughters wrote little about their situation and were rather restrained, emotions often come to the fore in their letters. The girls did not hide their feelings and wrote simply and honestly: "Dear!!! How are you doing? We are healthy and we miss you. I kiss You, Tusia; Dear Daddy. I miss you very much, Awiwa."[25] The lines show a huge longing for their father, whom they had not seen for a long time and whom they missed very much. They tried to calm their desperate father, simultaneously reassuring him of the strength of the bond that bound all the family members. On October 11, 1940, Awiwa tried to calm down her father:

> My dear papa. How can you write that we have forgotten you? Papa, my heart, I miss you and expect this moment to be together. I cry out of longing for you, and you write, papa, that I forgot about you. Papa, do everything you can to get us together as soon as possible. So you don't need to think like that. We are all healthy, [and] we look good. I have a new coat and shoes.[26]

During the Holocaust, a certain reversal of roles can be observed as children took on the roles of the parents, not only providing means of subsistence or food for the family but also protecting them and becoming their emotional support. When the adults were unable to perform these roles, the children felt responsible for the family and became prematurely mature without having the opportunity or time to prepare for this

22 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 54.
23 It was one of Awiwa's terms of endearment, used in the family before the war. Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 55.
24 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 105.
25 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 100.
26 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 130.

change.[27] Such a change is noticeable in the example of Chaim Finkelsztejn's daughters, who wanted to protect their father from hearing sad news. The extreme stress that Chaim was subjected to, primarily related to caring for his loved ones, reduced his parenting skills. His fears, anxiety, and guilt, which he also showed in letters, were felt by Awiwa and Estera, who started to feel responsible for his emotions despite being in very difficult living conditions themselves. It seems that their father was not aware of this. The elder daughter Estera, together with her mother, especially tried to calm him down, comfort him, and lift his spirits.

Anxiety—Lack of Information

Not every letter reached the addressee. As a result, the lack of information intensified the longing and loneliness of the imprisoned. Those confined in the ghetto interpreted the silence as bad news. Contact with people from outside the walls gave hope—it showed that there was a safe place somewhere, free from hunger, violence, and death. At the same time, it was a substitute for the social contacts lost with the outbreak of the war that allowed them to "break out" outside the world of the ghetto. This contact was therapeutic.

Artur Zygielbojm wrote on January 19, 1940:[28]

> Dear Daddy, it's been so long since you left, and yet we've had so little news from you. Why did we receive so few letters? What's going on with you? Where are you? I miss you so much and do not even know your address. [...] How are you feeling? And when will you send us the arrival papers? Stay healthy and hold on tight. I kiss you by the sea,

On February 15, 1940, Tusia Finkelsztejn asked similar questions to her father:

27 See: Dan Bar On and Julia Chaitin, "Parenthood and the Holocaust," *Search and Research Papers* 1 (2001): 1–65; Lenore J. Weitzman, "Resistance in Everyday Life: Family Strategies Role Reversals, and Role Sharing in the Holocaust," in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present. History, Representation, and Memory*, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 46–66; Maria Ferenc Piotrowska, "'Ma ono na twarzy grymas dojrzałego i gorycz pokrzywdzonego […] – nie ma dzieciństwa'. Przemiany ról dzieci w rodzinie w getcie warszawskim," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, no. 11 (2015): 347–76.

28 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 795–96.

> My dearest!!! We are all surprised by such a long break in your correspondence. What happened? Don't you realize that your letters are our only consolation? Daddy, are you working? How are you doing? Write back quickly.[29]

A few months later, on November 18, 1940, she wrote: "My dear, we have not received a letter from you for three weeks now, and for this reason, we are very worried, with us everything is the same as before, your Sweet Lady."[30]

The children greatly desired contact with their relatives remaining outside the ghetto walls. The omnipresent fear reinforced the need for contact and every break in correspondence caused additional anxiety which accompanied the writers throughout their stay in the ghetto. Complaints about letters not arriving, the lack of responses, and reproaches about too infrequent contact constitute the leitmotif of correspondence from the closed ghetto. This often led to conjecture about the reasons for the lack of communication.[31]

Hope

As Jacek Leociak has emphasized:

> The letter is based on the foundation of hope. Those who know their letter has no chance of reaching the addressee do not write. The hope for communication is, therefore, a prerequisite for an empty page to be filled with writing. And although many letters have never been read by the addressee, without such hope, no letter could ever be written.[32]

It was no different for the Zygielbojm and Finkelsztejn families. Both of them not only hoped for a continuation of correspondence but also for a reunion. They believed that they would receive a reply to their letter.

On September 8, 1941, Rywka promised her father: "When we meet someday (I wish as soon as possible), I will tell you exactly about everything."[33] In turn, on June 9, 1941, Awiwa advised Chaim Finkelsztejn:

29 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba …*, 53.
30 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba …*, 158.
31 Maria Ferenc, "*Każdy pyta, co z nami będzie". Mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2021), 266–67, 272–75.
32 Leociak, *Tekst wobec Zagłady*, 146.
33 Trębacz,"'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 810.

"Don't worry, maybe we will see each other again soon, so don't lose hope, just as we don't lose it."[34] A year earlier, on August 14, 1940, both daughters, wishing him well, wrote: "Daddy!!! We wish you a good year and an imminent reunion on your birthday."[35] Such phrases do not often appear in correspondence. It is probable that both parties realized, at least at a certain moment, that a joint meeting would be neither easy nor quick. Consequently, letter-written conversations were crucial to maintaining family and emotional ties.

The Joy of Contact

For most, if not all, of those imprisoned in the ghetto, contact with the outside world was a consolation and shelter from the horrors of war. Both children and adults closed in the ghetto were waiting for letters and postcards, for any message from their loved ones—a sign of life. As I have already mentioned, it is probable that they did not receive all of them, as in the preserved correspondence, one can find frequent complaints about the lack of some information and responses. However, even a short message made them happy—for a while, at least.

On September 18, 1940, Rywka Zygielbojm wrote to her father Szmul: "Dear Dad, if something has caused me joy and pleasure lately, it's probably just your card. You can't imagine how delighted I was to read that you are already in Lisbon and will soon be at Emanuel's place" [in the United States].[36]

For the imprisoned children, the messages from the parents from whom they were separated were very important.

> Daddy!!! How are you? What are you doing? I imagine you are not well either. We are fine. We remember you all the time. Daddy, if possible, send us your photo. Write frequently and extensively. Remember that your letters are one of our most important foods.[37]

34 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 315.
35 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 91.
36 Rywka is referring to Emanuel Nowogródzki, the secretary general of the Bund in interwar Poland, a member of the Central Committee of the Bund and the Warsaw City Council, who left for the USA in February 1939 and then was an activist for the American Representation of Bund in Poland. Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 796.
37 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 59.

Estera Finkelsztejn asked on April 2, 1940. Almost a year later, on January 8, 1941, she wrote:

> My beloved dearest father! Thank you very much for your loving notes. You don't know how much spirit they give me. As Mom has already written to you, I am eagerly awaiting your letters, which have been coming less regularly lately. [...] Daddy, are you still working? How are you doing? Write about everything: where do you go, what are you doing, you're not at home all day, are you? Write a lot because your letters act like injections for a sick person. Be healthy, take care of your health, and take care of yourself.[38]

Rywka Zygielbojm used a similar "medical" metaphor. On July 24, 1941, she wrote:

> I have received your letter [...]. It came very quickly. I am glad at least we can communicate by letter. You ask me to write to you often. I have the same request for you. Your letters are our medicine. We miss a word from our loved ones so much that it is beyond human comprehension. [...] Dear Dad, you write very little about yourself. I would like to know exactly how you are doing. I miss you and all loved ones. Now, as I write, I have tears in my eyes, and I feel like crying, but we are tough and not only made of iron but iron-concrete as well. We must persevere. Maybe we'll see each other again. Write right away![39]

Care

Although the sentences may seem trivial sometimes, describing the daily routine, the maturity of the child authors can often be detected. Children often cared for their parents and sympathized with them, even when they felt lost and helpless. They asked about their absent parents' state of health, their well-being, and work.

"Dear Daddy! How are you? Are you healthy? I am healthy, and I feel well. Write to me about what you do. I'm kissing you," Artur Zygielbojm wrote to his father on March 8, 1941.[40] A few months later, on November 1,

38 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba …*, 196.
39 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 808.
40 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 801.

1941, he asked: "Are you healthy? Write to me about what colleagues you have at work. Do you receive letters from your brother? Write to me about what's up with him?"[41]

Apart from longing, children's letters show special care for their parents, resulting from a strong emotional bond. In the letters of Finkelsztejn's daughters, their maturity draws the reader's attention. The girls cared for their parents, and they especially sympathized with their distant father, realizing that even though he was in a much better situation, it must have been very difficult for him. On March 30, 1941, Awiwa wrote:

> Dear Daddy, what are you doing? You ask me so many questions in your last letter of February 23 that I cannot answer them, and I will only answer some of them for you. So we are healthy, we have enough to eat and clothes, in a word, we have everything. A thousand kisses.[42]

Estera told her father many times during her two-year correspondence to take care of himself, to "hold on." The instructions to take care of his well-being and the "pieces of advice" given by the girl in such a difficult situation are moving. At the beginning of August 1941, she wrote:

> I am very glad that you take care of yourself, dress appropriately, please, dear, if you stop receiving letters from us, do not lose heart. Know that mummy looks after us and herself and that we will surely meet 100% healthy and strong.[43]

A few months later, on October 15, 1941, she reassured her father again:

> My sweetheart, how you dare to doubt that we love you, be sure that our separation not only did not weaken our love but quite the opposite. You can't even imagine how much longing is hidden under the cover of these words. As a task, you must be healthy and remember that somewhere in the distance your wise wife and children who love you, superhuman miss you, now we must hold on, and when we connect, we will definitely make up the time of separation. Be healthy because this is the most important thing. Your truly loving, Tusia.[44]

41 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 812.
42 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 251–52.
43 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 352.
44 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 400.

Artur Zygielbojm's letter from October 11, 1941, is similar in tone. He writes more childishly because of his age; however, concern for his father and fear for his workaholism is clearly visible here: "Dear Daddy! I received your letter, which made me very happy. [...] How are you? Are you healthy? I am asking you not to work 28 h[ours] a day, as you did here, but 8, 10 h[ours], humanly."[45]

As Dalia Ofer notices, "In an atmosphere of dread, the family could be either a support or a burden."[46] In the case of the Zygielbojms and the Finkelsztejns, one can definitely speak of the first. Letters were a form of support for the separated family, providing encouragement and consolation in difficult moments. Certainly, it would have been much more difficult for them without the exchange of the correspondence.

Self-censorship

It is impossible to escape the question of how truthful the children were to their fathers about the conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto. Their letters brought up only a tiny fraction of the knowledge about the realities of the time, which we know well from other sources, including personal documents. Indeed, both the daughters of Chaim Finkelsztejn and the children of Szmul Zygielbojm wrote about their everyday lives, and it does not seem that they hid sad events from them. "I'm doing well. I am in Miedzeszyn, in the Sanatorium. It's almost like before the war here. Only with firewood and food worse. I am as healthy as a horse," wrote Artur on January 19, 1940.[47] In turn, on May 15, 1941, Rywka reported: "As for how we manage, we sell from the apartment, different things. Dear Daddy, there is no other advice, but let's hope."[48] However, it is obvious they did not write about everything. Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, who was in contact with the younger daughter of Finkelsztejn, wrote: "Regardless of everything, as Awiwa recalled years later, she constantly felt hungry. However, in her letters, the question of hunger does not appear."[49]

One can wonder why there was a certain reticence in the letters. An awareness of correspondence censorship may have had some influence. Hence, the authors did not write about everything directly and used specific phrases or terms. For example, Zygielbojm's daughter, who,

45 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 812.
46 Ofer, "Cohesion and Rupture," 151.
47 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 795–796.
48 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 805.
49 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba …*, 19.

unable to mention the high mortality rate in the ghetto, used the name of a well-known funeral home owner: "Also, our only dream is to be with you. You can imagine the extent of this dream. Here Mr. Pinkiert has a lot of work to do."[50] It seems, however, that it was much more important to spare their loved ones' pain and suffering. In a situation where loving family members experienced such different circumstances, the exception is letters in which they write directly about their tragic situation. Rather, they try to avoid such descriptions, thereby avoiding the worries of loved ones.

Obviously, the children were unable to convey the horror of the ghetto reality. They were also undoubtedly protected by their mothers and other adults. The requests for food parcels, especially for their specific content, reflected their situation. On the other hand, probably even very detailed information would not bring the nightmare of the occupation nor the ghetto conditions closer to people who had not experienced them and would not be able to fully visualize what was happening there, or even believe it. Perhaps the children, especially the older ones, were aware of this. On May 12, 1940, Estera confessed:

> Dear Daddy!!! I would kiss you to death for joy that you send letters so often. Maybe someday you will understand what your letters mean to us, although I doubt it. Papciu, nothing new with us, don't be nervous about anything, nothing will happen to us. You gotta hold on! We understand that you are doing what you can, don't blame yourself for leaving because you are sinning, you don't know what you are talking about, and you couldn't help us anyway.[51]

At the same time, the children write about glimpses of "normal" life, moments that make them temporarily happy. Artur Zygielbojm bragged about his school successes and activities. On October 11, 1941, he wrote:

> We are all fine. We are preparing for sports, geographical and literary competitions, between the 3rd and 4th groups. […] Recently, we had a Nature Day with a performance that we managed quite well. It was a day dedicated to nature. A newspaper was then hung on the wall. Praise to Nature and "Baba" made of crops from our field. The day passed in a festive mood.[52]

50 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 805.
51 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka choroba* …, 74.
52 Trębacz, "'Ręka pisze zupełnie co innego, niż serce czuje,'" 812.

They especially treasure those situations that remind them of the happy moments spent with their loved ones. But even these moments are marked by longing. "Dear papa!"—Estera wrote to her father in May 1940—

> I arranged the birthday in such a way that now it is possible to celebrate a birthday nicely. Kitty! You can understand that even for a moment I have not forgotten you, even more so today. I saw you dancing awkwardly, joking with girls, and I felt your protective gaze on me.[53]

Conclusion

The preserved Holocaust children's correspondence is noteworthy for many reasons. Its content, apart from the factual layer, reveals human experiences in an extreme, abnormal situation. It was impossible to write about everything in a short letter. However, despite the condensed form of correspondence, the emotions find an outlet and resonate. I presume these young authors did not think strangers would read what they wrote. Therefore, they openly wrote about their feelings. They mention the good old days. The letters are mostly focused on the authors' emotions. They rarely discuss daily routines, as diaries do.[54]

The realities of the war changed relations with loved ones, sometimes causing mutual distance. Conflicts arose among relatives living in the same place. Although they are a very small sample, the analyzed letters, however, show that the outbreak of war did not always detrimentally change family relations. In the Finkelsztejn family, one can observe through their correspondence how close the relationship bonds were between the mother and daughters during the entire period. Mutual love and tenderness for each other are reflected in the paper. Their attitude towards their father, who was far away, does not change either. Their correspondence is filled with feelings, openly expressed longing and love, shared memories, and tender expressions. Their situation is similar to the Zygielbojm family. The letters are filled with great concern for their father and sincere interest in his fate. Both Artur and Rywka miss him very much, but neither of them reproaches him for his departure or the undoubtedly difficult decision.

53 Koźmińska-Frejlak, *Tęsknota nachodzi nas jak ciężka* choroba …, 80.

54 For example, see: Susan Lee Shneiderman, ed., *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing up in the Warsaw Ghetto* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); Renia Knoll, *Dziennik* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2012); Rywka Lipszyc, *Dziennik z getta łódzkn iego*, ed. Ewa Wiatr (Crakow and Budapest: Austeria, 2017).

The children's testimonies are a significant source showing how they coped with everyday life during war and mass murder. It seems that, unlike diaries, they are devoid of artistic elements. Children write without special care for linguistic correctness or literary style. They do not attach importance to these factors. Simple short sentences, sometimes just a few words, and the same questions, which display the tragedy of their situation even more. This does not mean that they show the fullness of their emotional state. The censorship (external and internal) already mentioned forced restrictions. Nevertheless, the correspondence shows many details of their life not available in other sources, such as terms of endearment. It documents the strength of family bonds and captures the inner world of thinking and feeling. How much poorer history would be without these, even short letters, without the messages and emotions contained in them?

Of course, children's letters reveal only part of their wartime experience, and their correspondence should not be expected to provide the same kind of information as official documents. They cannot be regarded as sufficient evidence, but juxtaposed with other sources, they let us see another dimension of the stories told. Sometimes children's letters are a source that is hard to analyze because they are often written in a language understandable only to their authors. However, they provide an exceptional insight into the everyday life of the young. Their greatest advantage is the ability to capture the child's world of being, thinking, and feeling. Letters, like other ego documents, allow the researcher to focus on emotions and the dynamics of their change. They do not pretend to show the whole scope of events happening in their surroundings but rather a very intimate, individual view of one's life in an abnormal situation. They also contain observations about the wartime social world, the adult world in which the children grew up prematurely. As Michlic rightly points out: "For a historian who wants to understand and reconstruct Jewish society on the level of the family unit as it emerged from extreme persecution, child survivors' testimonies are indispensable. Moreover, they are important data in the analysis of how individual self-perception and perceptions of the war and genocide change over age, time, and maturation."[55] It is crucial to consider the subjectivity of children's view of reality and to recognize children's agency.[56] Their letters are essential for the history of childhood but also the everyday history of the Second World War. Therefore, the children's correspondence from the Holocaust is a valuable and irreplaceable source in historical investigations.

55 Michlic, *The Aftermath and After*, 148.
56 Michlic, *Piętno Zagłady*, 35.