

Jewish Children on the Aryan Side

From Emmanuel Ringelblum's Historical Essay –
"Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War"
(Written in Warsaw, 1943)

Jewish families rarely crossed to the Aryan side together. First the children went, while the parents stayed in the Ghetto in order to mobilize the necessary funds for staying on the Aryan side. Very often the parents gave up the idea of going across to the Aryan side, as they did not have the money to fix up the whole family. The cost of keeping a child on the Aryan side in the summer of 1942, when the number of children being sent over was at its peak, was very high, about 100 zloty a day. A sum was demanded for six months or a year in advance, for fear that the parents might be deported in the interim. Thus, a sum of several tens of thousands of zloty was required to fix up a child on the Aryan side and only very wealthy people could afford to do so. Parents of limited means and especially working intellectuals were forced to see their children taken as the first victims in the various "selections" and "actions". Not all Jewish parents wanted to send their children to the Aryan side. There were those who weighed the question of survival for the children, especially the youngest ones, when no one knew what would happen to the parents at the next "selection". Some parents argued that a child deprived of its parents' care will wither like a flower without the sun. There were children who strongly opposed being sent to the Aryan side. They did not want to go to the other side alone, but preferred to die together with their parents. It took me a long time to convince my son that it is in the interest of our people that as many children as possible should survive the war. I know ten-year-old twins, who put up stiff opposition for several months and refused to go over to the Aryan side, despite the fact that there was a worker's family which was to keep the children at the cost of a workers' organization. The children declared emphatically that they would not go over to the Aryan side without their mother, as they did not want to survive the war on their own, alone. After a long period of conflict, the mother won, and the children went across to the Aryan side, where they are to this day. The mother died in a sewer trying to get through to her children during the "action" of April 1943.

The majority of children, however, agreed to go across to the Aryan side, as living conditions in the Ghetto were terrible. They were not allowed to leave their flats, they stayed for whole weeks in stuffy, uncomfortable hide-outs, they did not see daylight for long months. No wonder then that they let themselves be tempted by the promise of going out into the street, of walking in a garden, etc., and agreed to go to the Aryan side by themselves.

I knew a twelve-year-old boy who jumped with joy at the Ghetto wall, which he was about to cross to get to the Aryan side, and shouted, "I'll survive the war". This boy has suffered greatly on the Aryan side. Far away from his parents, whom he did not see for months, he did not go out into the street at all. He stayed in a one-room flat belonging to very noble people; if somebody came, he had to hide in a cupboard, behind a sofa, in the toilet, etc., and stay there for hours without moving until the guests departed. Though the boy was very much liked, he had to leave this flat, since the landlord's anti-Semitic relatives did not acquiesce in hiding a Jew, and considered it a sin against the Polish people. The boy had been there throughout the "hottest" time for the Jews, the April "action". When the Ghetto where his father lived was burning and the explosions reverberated as walls were dynamited, the boy had to listen to anti-Semitic conversations, with the talkers frankly expressing their great satisfaction at the Nazi solution of the Jewish problem. This boy is clever and understands political problems, and he had to listen to this anti-Semitic drivel without being able to react. The boy is now together with his parents and they are staying in a hide-out on the Aryan side. He has again been confined there for many months, among nervous people exhausted by their experiences. He is losing ground physically, but for all that he is lucky to have his parents with him.

I know an eight-year-old boy who stayed for eight months on the Aryan side without his parents. The boy was hiding with friends of his father's, who treated him like their own child. The child spoke in whispers and moved as silently as a cat, so that the neighbors should not become aware of the presence of a Jewish child. He often had to listen to the anti-Semitic talk of young Poles who came to visit the landlord's daughters. Then he would pretend not to listen to the conversation and become engrossed in reading one of the books which he devoured in quantities. On one

occasion he was present when the young visitors boasted that Hitler had taught the Poles how to deal with the Jews and that the remnant that survived the Nazi slaughter would be dealt with likewise. The boy was choking with tears; so that no one would notice he was upset, he hid in the kitchen and there burst out crying. He is now staying in a narrow, stuffy hide-out, but he is happy because he is with his parents.

The situation is much worse for the children who have lost their parents, who were taken away to Treblinka. Some of their Aryan protectors have meanwhile taken a liking to the children and keep them and look after them. But these are only a small percentage of the protectors, generally people of limited means in whom *Mammon* has not yet killed all human feeling. People like these have to suffer on account of the Jewish children but they do not throw them out into the street. The more energetic among them know how to fix themselves up and receive money subsidies from suitable social organizations. We know of cases where the governesses of wealthy children took care of them after their parents had been taken away to Treblinka. They keep these children out of their beggarly wages and don't want to leave them to their fate. Some of these Jewish orphans were fixed up in institutions, registered as having come from places affected by the displacement of the Polish population (Zamosc, Hrubieszow, Poznan, Lublin, etc.). A considerable percentage of the orphans returned to the Ghetto, where the Jewish Council fixed them up in boarding schools; they were taken away in the "resettlement actions". There were frequent instances when the "protectors", after receiving a large sum of money, simply turned the child out into the street. There were even worse cases where the "protectors" turned Jewish children over to the uniformed police or the Germans, who sent them back to the Ghetto while it was still in existence.

There were also cases of Jewish children, especially very small children, who were adopted by childless couples, or by noble individuals who wanted to manifest their attitude to the tragedy of the Jews. A few Jewish children were rescued by being placed in foundling homes, where they arrive as Christian children; they are brought by Polish Police, who, for remuneration of course, report them as having been found in staircase-wells, inside the entrances to blocks of flats, etc.

There were no problems with Jewish children as far as the need for keeping their Jewish origin secret. In the Ghetto Jewish children went through stern schooling for life. They experienced a *Gehenna* (hell) without equal in world history. They knew and felt that the sharp edge of Nazi hatred was aimed at them. The Jewish children went through the hard school of round-ups and "selections". They learned to control themselves, even outdoing adults in this respect. They learned to keep silent for hours at a time and even to hold their breath when the enemy was approaching. They learned to sit motionless for hours at a time since the slightest movement might be heard by a Ukrainian or an S.S. man during a search and this could bring disaster to the whole hide-out. They learned to stay in the hide-out for months at a time and not see daylight, for fear of S.S. torturers. They ceased to be children and grew up fast, surpassing their elders in many things. So when they were sent to the Aryan side, their parents could assure their Aryan friends and acquaintances that their little daughter or son would never breathe a word about his Jewish origin and would keep the secret to the grave. I know of a young girl who was dying in an Aryan hospital, far from her parents. She kept the secret of her origin till her death. Even in those moments of the death agony, when earthly ties are loosed and people no longer master themselves, she did not betray herself by a word or the least movement. When the nurse who was present at her death-bed called her by her Jewish name, Dorka, she would not reply, for she remembered that she was only allowed to respond to the sound of the Aryan name, Ewa.

Even the youngest children were able to carry out their parents' instructions and conceal their Jewish origin expertly. I remember a four-year-old tot who replied to my asking him treacherously what he was called before - a question often put to children by police agents - by giving his Aryan name and surname and declaring emphatically that he never had any other name.

In spite of this, "give-aways" by children do occur, for several reasons. I know of a case of a five-year-old Jewish child, who had been living on the Aryan side for a long time and had been playing the part of a Christian very well indeed. One day there was a conversation at table about horse-drawn trams. The grandfather related that in his youth there were trams like these in the streets of the capital. The Jewish child present

at the table said suddenly that he too had seen a horse-drawn tram, in... Zamenhoff Street. After this "give-away", the parents had to take the child away and fix him up somewhere else.

A "give-away" of a seven-year-old girl with a "good" appearance, who had been living in a village for a long time, happened because of nonsensical rumors spread by unknown persons to the effect that every Jew possesses enormous fortunes in gold, valuables, dollars, etc. All of a sudden a rumor spread through the village by word of mouth that the little girl from Warsaw was Jewish and that kilograms of gold had been handed over for keeping her. For fear of denunciation, the girl had to be sent quickly to her parents in Warsaw.

A "give-away" can sometimes occur with a Jewish child because of so innocent a question as, "Are you going to school?" A Jewish child, deprived of systematic schooling since the beginning of the war, has large gaps in his education and has difficulty in extricating himself when asked questions like this by a visitor or acquaintance.

I have heard of a case of a four-year-old Jewish child who secured his return to his parents... through blackmail sui generis. The child was longing for his parents, from whom he had been separated for a long time, and one day he declared that if he were not allowed to return to his parents, he would go to a German and tell him he was from the Ghetto. The blackmail succeeded and the parents had to take the child back.

Unfortunately Jewish children were not spared real blackmail either. There have been cases where they were kidnapped by blackmailers and held until the parents bought them out of the hands of the worst type of criminal.

The circumcision of Jewish children is an important obstacle to fixing them up on the Aryan side. The number of uncircumcised is very small. Pressure from religious parents and relations, together with the judicial difficulties presented by the Jewish Community and municipal authorities, were so great that very few parents, even the most progressive ones, could manage not to have their children circumcised. One

simply was not given a birth certificate, and the child was exposed to humiliations and difficulties in school.

I know an uncircumcised Jewish boy who has suffered a great deal on the Aryan side. He has been living there for ten months and has already moved to his fifteenth place. Something always goes wrong. He complains that anti-Semites harass him. He has had to listen to more than one Jew-devouring lecture from his "protectors", who were not informed of his Jewish origin.

Children of parents who are not well off are also to be found on the Aryan side. This dates from the first moment the Ghetto was formed. Many poor parents managed to live on the smuggling done by their four- to five-year-old children, who went across en masse to the Aryan side. Every day one could see hundreds of Jewish children hanging around the exit gates in masses in order to get through to the Aryan side. The children would wait for a "good" guard so as to get through to the "other" side. Some went through holes in the walls or fences. To hide the things they were smuggling, the children would wear jackets or dresses with a double lining; after these had been studied with potatoes or other produce, they looked like crinolines. These children went through several times a day, laden with goods that often weighed more than they did. Smuggling was the only source of subsistence for these children and their parents, who would otherwise have died of starvation. Nothing could discourage the children from smuggling, not even blows by the Jewish Order-men. The children were not frightened off by shots from gendarmes vexed by their importunity, by their wanting to get to the Aryan side at any cost. Even when the gendarme on guard was shooting into the crowd and the pavements were wet with the blood, the children would only hide inside the entrances of the neighboring blocks of flats for a short while in order to attack the Ghetto exit a moment later. Only a Frankenstein-type criminal, a mate of the Duesseldorf murderer, could pass indifferently by the bodies of innocent children. Pitiless gendarmes would often stop the little smugglers and bring them to the sentry-posts, where they would take everything away from them and beat them mercilessly. The screams and pitiful cries of these innocent children could be heard all around, but this had no effect on the German gendarmes, who were utterly brutalized and devoid of all human feeling.

The children who were smuggling had the most extraordinary and fantastic courage, which I often admired at the Ghetto exits. Once, at the corner of Zelazna and Chlodna Streets, I saw how a gendarme took smuggled wares away from a six-year-old boy. The boy was choking with tears and, despite the blows falling on his small shoulders, kept going back to the sentry-box where his treasure lay, treasure probably bought with his last pennies. The Aryan mob that gathered on the other side of the exit was watching the fight between the gendarme and the Jewish boy with satisfaction. The laughter of the street ruffians heartened the gendarme and encouraged him to drive the boy off more and more energetically. With everyone turned against him—the gendarme, the uniformed police, the Aryan mob and even the Jewish Order Service, the boy did not give up the fight, and kept renewing his efforts to retrieve the confiscated wares. I watched the uneven struggle for quite a long time and saw in it the energy and endurance of the Jewish masses, who persist in the obstinate defense of their rights even when they know that excessive importunity may mean a bullet put through their heads.

The hard life of the smuggler children is reflected in this poem by a young Polish-Jewish poetess, Henryka Lazowert, who was taken to Treblinka during the "resettlement action" of July 1942:

The Little Smuggler

Past walls, past guards
Through holes, ruins, wires, fences
Impudent, hungry, obstinate
I slip by, I run like a cat
At noon, at night, at dawn
In foul weather, a blizzard, the heat of the sun
A hundred times I risk my life
I risk my childish neck.

Under my arm a sack-cloth bag
On my back a torn rag

My young feet are nimble
In my heart constant fear
But all must be endured
All must be borne
So that you, ladies and gentlemen,
May have your fill of bread tomorrow.

Through walls, through holes, through brick
At night, at dawn, by day
Daring hungry, cunning
I move silently like a shad
if suddenly the hand of fate
Reaches me at this game
It will be the usual trap life sets.

You, mother
Don't wait for me any longer
I won't come back to you
My voice won't reach that far
Dust of the street will cover
The lost child's fate.
Only one grim question
The still face asks-
Mummy, who will bring you bread Tomorrow?

I heard a report from a woman working in the Centos about the life of a group of young smugglers. There were more than 10 in this group, living at 28 Mila Street. They were full of energy and joie de vivre, and talked jokingly and with satisfaction about their life and its many thrills. In the beginning they made 200 to 400 zloty a day each. They engaged in "looting" in the "Little Ghetto" (the locality of Wielka, Ciepła, Twarda and Sienna Streets). In winter they lived by trading in wood, which they tore from the floors, attics, etc. of deserted houses. At that time they made 40 to 50 zloty a day each. The children shared between them the task of keeping house. Two of them

would stay at home to prepare the meals and clean the room. When the Centos worker proposed that they move into a boarding school, the children refused, declaring that they were managing very well by themselves. They said that the Centos should put starving children in the boarding schools.

Many homeless children, orphans whose parents had died at the so-called refugee "points" or in the "death houses" where the very poorest lived, used to go begging on the "other" side. They were well received there and were not refused alms or food. Even the Germans used to give them alms. Some children returned to the Ghetto for the night, others would spend the night in attics, back yards, etc. The Germans, with the help of the Blue Police and native anti-Semites, fought the swarms of Jewish children on the Aryan side. Every day they would drive them en masse to the Jewish gaol at Gesia Street. The prison director of "Gesiowka", Rudnianski, whom the Germans later shot, tried to ensure humane conditions for the children; he taught them gardening and trained them for productive work. When the "resettlement action" came in July 1942, "Gesiowka" was the first victim that fell to the S.S. bandits, who sent the children to Treblinka. When the daily round-ups for children did not help much, and the number of smuggler children increased from day to day, rigorous repressive measures were employed. Children were drowned in the Czerniakow lake - at least, so rumor had it.

"Looting", that is, stripping deserted houses of all their contents, done by the smuggler children, was a very dangerous occupation. The Germans considered the possessions of Jews taken to Treblinka their property, and looting was therefore punishable by death. S.S. men or gendarmes who caught people looting put them to death on the spot. Thus, looting was usually done at night or at daybreak. The children would afterwards sell the looted goods on the Aryan side for a few pence. Sometimes a homeless child like this would become adjusted to the Aryan side, which afforded him shelter. I knew a five-year-old orphan who had lost his parents in the "action". He lived on the Aryan side permanently and paid 5 zloty for a night's lodging. The boy sold newspapers, which he smuggled into the Ghetto from the Aryan side, making a profit of a few zloty on each copy. Some children earned their living by singing in the streets or courtyards. They assimilated to their environment to such an extent that they

even sang the anti-Semitic songs that came into being during the war. Some children were able to live on the Aryan side thanks to the Jewish work-posts, which used them as errand-boys, sent them to do shopping in the streets, etc.

Attempts were made to settle a certain number of children as wards in institutions, but this activity had to be suspended after a short time because of fear of denunciation from their staffs. A few girls were placed in these institutions. The clergy took some children in their institutions, generally the very young ones. These few cases did not help the general condition very much. Polish Fascists and anti-Semites were to blame for the prevailing atmosphere which was not favorable for rescuing the children or adults. Fear of the anti-Semitic hue-and-cry was even greater than fear of the Germans and this discouraged attempts to rescue the children. We accuse the Polish anti-Semites and Fascists of spilling the blood of the innocents who could have been saved from the Huns of our time.

For the sake of history, we mention a project to settle a few hundred Jewish children in convents, in accordance with the following principles: the children would be aged ten and upwards; the annual charge of 8,000 zloty would be paid in advance; a card-register would be kept of the children, recording their distribution throughout the country, so that they could be taken back after the war. This project was discussed in Jewish social spheres, where it met with opposition from Orthodox Jews and certain national groups. The objection was raised that the children would be converted and would be lost to the Jewish people for good. It was argued that future generations would blame us for not rising to the necessary heights and not teaching our children Kiddush Ha-Shem (martyrdom for the faith), for which our ancestors died at the stake during the Spanish Inquisition. The discussion on the matter among social workers reached no agreed conclusions, no resolutions were accepted, and Jewish parents were left to decide for themselves. The project was not carried out because of a variety of difficulties, but mainly because the Polish clergy was not very much interested in the question of saving Jewish children.

Source: Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War*, Yad Vashem, 1974, pp. 140-151.

