STARS WITHOUT A HEAVEN

Children in the Holocaust
During the Holocaust, Jewish communities underwent brutal upheavals, experiencing social and familial breakdowns of the greatest severity. Children living in this reality essentially lost their daily childhood routines. Their hardships became even more numerous once they were forced to move into ghettos, where they faced overcrowding, hunger, infectious disease, terror and violence. Those children had to adapt very quickly to their new harsh conditions, with many of them effectively transforming into “child-adults” as a result. The children who were forcefully separated from their families and sent into hiding or transported to concentration camps, struggled further to survive without their parents. Their childhood was lost.

Despite their appalling situations and living conditions, children still engaged in imaginative play, sketching and writing, expressing their hopes, dreams and fears. In this exhibition, a selection of these drawings, poems, letters and toys offer a moving and fascinating window into the lives of Jewish children during the Holocaust. This display of optimism, positivity, creativity and imagination demonstrate the unique capacity of children to hold on to the forces of life despite living in unspeakable circumstances.

Rosa Wurman Wolf, children’s home in Wezembeek, Belgium, during the war.

Yad Vashem’s Collections

Rosa was only two years old when her parents were deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp. Rosa survived the Holocaust.
The Holocaust (Shoa) was an unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people, culture and traditions from the face of the Earth. The primary motivation for the Holocaust was the Nazis’ antisemitic racist ideology. Between 1933 and 1941, Nazi Germany pursued a policy of increasing persecution that dispossessed the Jews of their rights and property, and later branded and concentrated the Jewish populations under their rule into designated areas. By the end of 1941, the policy had developed into an overall comprehensive, systematic operation that the Nazis called "The Final Solution to the Jewish Question." These policies gained broad support in Germany and across much of the European continent. Nazi Germany designated the Jews of Europe, and eventually the rest of the world Jewry, for total extermination. Alongside the mass extermination of millions by shooting, millions of Jews from all over Europe were rounded up and deported on freight trains to extermination camps—industrial facilities in which they were gassed to death.

By the end of WWII in 1945, some six million Jews had been murdered, among them approximately one-and-a-half million children.

Only a small percentage of Jewish children survived the Holocaust.

Yad Vashem was established in 1953 as the world center for Holocaust commemoration, documentation, research and education. As the Jewish people’s living memorial to the Shoah, Yad Vashem safeguards the memory of the past and imparts its meanings for future generations.

This exhibition is an adaptation of "Children in the Holocaust: Stars without a Heaven," curated by Yehudit Inbar and exhibited at Yad Vashem.

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In the ghetto, I ran around with the other kids searching for food, stealing food; we would dig under the wall. We were kids, they didn’t catch me, and that’s how I used to bring home food. That was my childhood.

Yosef (Alterwein) Tirosh

The Holocaust period witnessed the crumbling of the family unit, the shattering of the sources of security and support that parents had always provided for their children. This reality required each Jewish child to create their own world: a fragile balance of their new enforced reality, their parents’ limited abilities to provide support, and their individual strengths in facing the many challenges that befell them.

In the war years, many children found themselves responsible for their own fates, as well as the fates of their parents, siblings and extended family. Many were required to work in order to support their families. Some drew from resourcefulness and bravery to smuggle food at great personal risk, while others were forced to steal. Throughout this period, family members were often separated; parents and siblings were deported or murdered. Some children remained alone, forced to survive on their own instincts. This enforced separation rendered them with no choice but to become wholly responsible for their own independence and survival.

The Czengery twins, Yehudit and Leah, age six, Romania, 1943

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC, USA

"Everyone remembers us, but we don’t remember anyone... Mother wasn’t always with us, but we had each other, and it was sufficient to just hold hands."

Yehudit and Leah Czengery

In 1944, Yehudit and Leah Czengery and their mother, Rosi, were deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp. The girls, whom Dr. Mengele labelled “the beautiful twins,” were taken directly to his experimental block. Rosi would sneak into their block and feed them with bread she had managed to obtain. After the war, mother and daughters were reunited with their father, who had also survived. The twins were the only surviving children from their extended family.
Vera and Eva Silberstein, Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, 1939

Paintings by Vera Silberstein created in Bratislava in 1943, before she was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and murdered. Vera expresses her longing to reach Eretz Israel (Mandatory Palestine) by placing her self-portrait in the group picture of pioneer girls in Eretz Israel, painted from her imagination.

Yad Vashem’s Collections, Gift of Eva (Silberstein) Grinstone, Cremorne, New South Wales, Australia

Just before the Bratislava Ghetto was to be liquidated, Elizabeth Silberstein managed to arrange a hiding place for her daughters, Vera (13) and Eva (15), while she was hiding in another location. However, as a result of being informed upon, the girls were deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp, where they were separated—one would live and the other die. Vera was sent to the gas chambers; Eva was sent to forced labor, and survived.

We arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau...
My mother’s words were ringing in my ears—how I was the big sister and had to watch over her [Vera] in all situations. Then we were standing in front of a man who signaled me to go to the right, and told my sister to go to the left... I wouldn’t budge an inch without my sister. She was struggling with me, and I needed a great deal of strength. I asked him, ‘Can I stay here with my sister?’ He responded, ‘No, she has to go to school, and you have to go to work.’ She turned around and said to me, ‘See?’ In a split second, she broke free from me and ran. She ran away happy.”

Eva (Silberstein) Grinstone
Towards the end of WWII, only a few Jewish children remained alive. Some survived using false Christian identities while living with Christian families, or in monasteries. They came to understand that being Jewish meant death; thus, when the war ended, many refused to relinquish their wartime non-Jewish identity or return to their Jewish origins. There were occasions when surviving relatives eventually came to reclaim the child from the host family, and the child would refuse to leave. Many young children whose parents had been murdered had no idea of their real name or that of their parents, their birthplace or their birth date.
When Marta Winter was eight years old, her mother smuggled her from the Czortkow Ghetto to the "Aryan" side of Warsaw with false papers identifying her as Krystyna (Krysia) Griniewicz. She placed her with Jozef Szuc, a family friend. During the Polish Uprising, the Szuc family was forced out of their home. Marta and the Szuc's family nanny, Mrs. Czaplinska, were sent to a concentration camp. They survived and returned to Warsaw after the war. Marta's grandfather and uncle succeeded in locating her, and came to take her back. But Marta, who had become a devout Christian, adamantly refused to go with them and reunite with the surviving members of her family. Despite her objections, Marta was taken to her grandfather's house, all the while maintaining her Christian faith. She was finally transferred to a Jewish children's home, and immigrated with the other children to Eretz Israel.

"I erased Marta. I was entirely Krysia."

Marta (Winter) Goren
"Could they imagine that, after I lost my teddy bear one of the times we ran away, I played with hairpins? Any pin, a simple bent piece of metal became a doll. Matchboxes became beds... Whenever there were candles, I chewed the lard until it became soft and shaped it into kitchen utensils, little cups, plates... My fingers, sometimes with a face painted on them, became my dolls, and that was enough."

Ruth (Yurgrau) Lavie

Play and the Holocaust might appear to be conflicting concepts. If, under normative circumstances, play reflects the imagination and creativity of children, enabling them to build a world in which they make the rules, then, during the Holocaust, play not only provided children with some comfort, it also afforded them a means of emotional survival—a lifeline.

The games that children played in the Holocaust were obtained by them in different manners. There were games they took with them during their expulsion from their homes. Other games were prepared especially for them by adults who lived with them in hiding, or were acquired for them by their rescuers. Children who lived in ghettos sometimes found games in abandoned homes after aktionen, during which Jews were deported. Those who did not find readymade games or toys created them by themselves from materials they found, displaying talent and creativity.

Children forced to survive without games managed to play too— in their own imaginations.
Each of us had heroes and generals in his army. The first one to read a book could invite his hero into his army. Of course, my army had the most famous heroes. Then once, when Mother told us the tale of Robin Hood, my brother jumped up and invited Robin Hood to be in his army before I could. From that point on, his army had General Robin Hood; there was nothing I could do about it, much to my dismay.

In Mrs. Mieleszka’s cellar, I built us a palace where we lived with our wives. I was Tarzan Commander of the World, and my brother was Richard Grenadier.”

Uri Orlev (Henryk “Yurek” Orlowski)

“During the six years of the real war, we conducted our own war game... Whether it was in the cellar, in the dark, or in a dark hiding place, we would just talk. What I was doing in my army and what my brother was doing in his...”

DO NOT COPY
There are no children in the ghetto—only little Jews... the children of the ghetto must work. If not, they are faced with the danger of being uprooted from their parents and sent to an unknown destination.

Josef Zelkowicz

During the Holocaust, Jewish children were also forced to work at hard labor, sometimes alongside adults. They worked in ghettos, camps and other settings. The Nazis considered those who worked to be more essential, and the children internalized the message that work meant life. As such, children could be found working at any task assigned to them, even the most backbreaking labor.
In 1939, the Cohn family moved to Berlin. When the Jewish schools were closed down, Stefan was forced to work in the Jewish cemetery. In June 1943, Stefan and his mother Bertha were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp, where Bertha was murdered. Stefan was assigned to the bricklaying factory. In January 1945, he was evacuated on a death march to Germany. He was liberated by US troops in April 1945. It was then that he drew 79 drawings depicting life in the camps.

“I quickly became a laborer like all the others—with large wooden clogs, a hoe and dustpan, and a regular minimum output…”

Thomas Geve (Stefan Cohn)
The Jewish leadership in Kovno took action to enable the children in the ghetto to continue their schooling and Jewish studies, despite the many challenges and limitations involved. Studies were held in underground schools in small groups, as well as in teachers’ private apartments. The children were delighted to attend school and maintain a routine.

My only consolation throughout this long, dark period was books… Jadwiga [the daughter of the family who hid him], who attended school, used to exchange books from the library each day for me... If it wasn’t for my incessant reading, there is no doubt I would have become ‘brain dead’ or even worse. I read books constantly. Each day, I read a new book. What else could I have done in that moldy attic? My incessant reading of books was my elementary school, high school and university.*

Jakov Goldstein

For over two years, Jakov Goldstein was stowed in a narrow space in the attic of the house of the family who hid him. During the Holocaust, despite difficult living conditions and severe restrictions on education, Jewish organizations attempted to provide pedagogical solutions for children in their communities. Through the establishment of alternative educational and social frameworks such as libraries, children’s theaters, classrooms and art lessons, children were provided with organized education, knowledge about Jewish traditions, and moral values. These frameworks played a very important role in their lives and instilled a sense of stability. Some children, however, lived in hiding without any options of benefiting from educational frameworks. These children would learn from books that came into their possession, and from adults who hid with them.

Many children, engaged in a daily war of survival during the Holocaust, did not study at all.
Prior to WWII, children’s homes provided a warm environment and met the educational needs of orphans, or children whose parents were unable to care for them. During the Holocaust, these homes also took in many unattended children whose parents worked at forced labor during the day, or had been deported to camps. There were many children’s homes throughout Europe. In the Warsaw Ghetto alone, 30,000 out of the 100,000 children lived in children’s homes. The caregivers in these homes were completely devoted to the young residents, attempting to maintain as normal a life as possible. Despite efforts to prevent their liquidation, many children’s homes were purged, with children deported to extermination camps along with their teachers and caregivers.
I eagerly awaited the day I would celebrate my bar mitzvah...
and that day did come...
My synagogue was the tunnel I dug myself. I dug a circle into the earth with my own hands, and stuck a great many twigs into it. After I finished, I raised my head a bit and looked around me... all the twigs spoke to me, as if they were living gravestones.

It was as if they were celebrating all around me. I looked some more at those little gravestones, that same crowd that used to be around but was no more, with only their memory remaining."

Eliyahu (Rozdzial) Raziel

A bar mitzvah, marked by Jewish boys upon reaching the age of 13, signifies the transition from childhood to adulthood. When he reaches this age, the boy becomes responsible for his actions, and is obligated to fulfill all the mitzvot (Jewish commandments). This milestone is considered one of the most important events in the life of a child, his family and his community, and is normally marked by a special ceremony in a synagogue or at a location with special Jewish meaning.

In the years under Nazi rule, very few Jewish boys managed to celebrate their bar mitzvah properly, or even partially. The ceremony took on different meanings during the Holocaust period, as did all the life-cycle events that followed it.

Arranging such a ceremony or marking any birthday during the Holocaust created a message of love and companionship, of maintaining values from another world, and of the hope for better days for the children deprived of the very right to exist.

A birthday served as a holding point in a crumbling world, where all markers of time and place were fast disappearing.
Shlomo and Mina Muhlbaum had four children, including Meir and Bilha. In 1935, the family fled Berlin for Amsterdam. In 1941, Shlomo was deported to the Westerbork Transit Camp, followed two years later by the entire family. They were then sent to Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp. In 1944, under the unique prisoner exchange program of Jews for German Templers residing in Eretz Israel (Mandatory Palestine), the family arrived Eretz Israel through Turkey, and settled in Tel Aviv.

Bar Mitzvah
Meir Muhlbaum, b. 1930, Berlin, Germany

Then [in Westerbork] came the date that my second brother, Meir, reached the age of bar mitzvah. Father made sure that someone took the responsibility of teaching him what a boy needs to know for his bar mitzvah: how to be ‘called to the Torah’ and make the blessings on the Torah reading, even a bit of reading from the Torah scroll. I even succeeded in ‘organizing’ a present for my brother. A woman… had left behind her prayer book. I wrote a dedication in it for my brother, and that was my gift to him for his bar mitzvah. My brother was called to the Torah… people drank to his health, and ate the [bread] cake.”

Bilha Muhlbaum
During WWII, Jewish children were forced to withstand a dangerous and ominous reality. Strong friendships took on the form of a “replacement family,” in which children found comfort and refuge. The bonds formed between children were expressed through interpersonal connection, sharing secrets, dialogue, play and sometimes even survival. Friendships with an underpinning ethos of “all for one and one for all” helped children overcome the difficulties they were forced to face. For many children, youth movements were an additional source of comfort. In some of the ghettos, these movements continued to operate, with young people benefiting from their warm and supportive environments, as opposed to the cold and threatening reality. In cases where children had neither adults nor other children to confide in, unique bonds were sometimes formed between children and animals.
Maud Stecklmacher and Ruth Weiss lived in the town of Prostejov, Moravia, and became close friends in third grade. Together, the two young girls endured the difficulties following the Nazi occupation. In July 1942, they were deported with their families on the same transport from Prostejov to the Terezin Ghetto. In the ghetto, the two girls were housed together, sharing every experience. However Ruth was suddenly sent away on a transports to Poland, never to be seen again. Maud, her sister and her mother survived the Holocaust. Maud joined the Hachshara training farm run by the Gordonia Maccabi Hatzair youth movement, and in March 1949 she immigrated to Israel with her mother, sister, and a group from the youth movement.

"We became used to many things. We slept on the floor of a huge sour-smelling hall. A stinking latrine with no privacy, hunger, siege. Luckily for me, I went through all of this together with my friend Ruthy... After that, Ruthy disappeared, having been rapidly one after the other that we didn’t even have a chance to say goodbye. I often think of Ruthy, about what she would have said had she seen skyscrapers or a jet plane... she was not yet 13 when apparently they shot her."

Michal Beer (Maud Stecklmacher)
In the Debrecen Ghetto, Hungary, Leah Burnstein made a dollhouse with dolls in the image of her parents, as a souvenir of the home from which they were deported. Leah was sent to the Strasshof Concentration Camp in Austria. In the camp, Leah found a book cover with which she covered her cardboard “house.” Leah survived and immigrated to Eretz Israel, bringing her “childhood home” with her.

After liberation, dozens of abandoned Jewish orphan children gathered at the Jewish Council building in Kraków, Poland. They had no home or family to return to, and no one to look after them. Lena Küchler-Silberman gathered them up and established a children’s home. She cared for them, rehabilitated them and became their “mother.”

“Only a small handful of children remained… each was the remnant of a generation, and each of them testified to a generation.”

Lena Küchler-Silberman

Deportation from home, escape and going into hiding were significant life events, marking the loss of security and safety. For many Jewish children, this symbolized the onset of the war. They often took with them an object constituting a source of comfort or a precious memory from home.

The majority of child survivors lived in “alternative homes”—monasteries, gentile families who took them in, children’s homes or hiding places. There were also many children who wandered from place to place without any shelter.
Following the Kristallnacht pogrom, six-year-old Regina Zimet's parents decided to leave Germany for Eretz Israel. They fled their home in Leipzig and crossed the border into Italy in 1939. A year later, the family reached Benghazi, Libya, than under Italian rule. However, since Italy had allied itself with Germany in June 1940, they were deported back to Italy and incarcerated in the Ferramonti Detention Camp. Later, families with children, among them the Zimet family, were released, and allowed to live in villages nearby. The family wandered among the villages in northern Italy, initially in relative freedom. Following the German occupation of northern Italy in the fall of 1940, however, the family was forced into hiding, at times living under false identities. In April 1945, the region was liberated, and three months later, Regina and her family were able to travel to Eretz Israel.

Later that evening, we left our apartment. When the taxi drove away, we stared back with our eyes full of tears... I hugged my little doll... the only thing I was able to take with me, and I buried my head in my mother's arms. And then at the border, a security man wanted to confiscate my doll! He said, 'Give me that doll for my daughter!' I cried, 'Take anything, but leave me with the last remnant of my Leipzig!' He smiled and said he would let me keep the doll as a memento of my birthplace.'