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. These 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, to be 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.
The Holocaust (Shoah) 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, 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.
FAMILY

SIBLINGS

EVA SILBERSTEIN, B. 1929, BRATISLAVA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA
VERA SILBERSTEIN, B. 1931, BRATISLAVA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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

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.

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
What’s more important?
The identity I was born with,
or what I feel now?”

Sara (Warszawiak) Avinun

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 Szulc, a family friend. During the Polish Uprising, the Szulc family was forced out of their home. Marta and the Sculz'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

"At the children's home... that's where I heard about the kibbutz, and the dream to create a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. With time, I became more comfortable with the idea that I was Jewish, and that my friends and I would be going to Eretz Israel. Even so, my name was still Krysia."

Marta, during the war

Pendant depicting the Madonna and Jesus, worn by Marta (Winter) Goren. Yad Vashem's Collections, Gift of Marta (Winter) Goren, Rehovot, Israel
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.
Each of us had heroes and generals in his army. The first one to read a book could invite its 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)

Henryk “Yurek” Orlowski and his younger brother Kazimierz “Kazek” lived in Warsaw with their parents Zofia and Maximilian. When the war began, Maximilian was drafted into the Polish army; Zofia and the children were forced to move into Warsaw Ghetto, where Zofia was later murdered. Their aunt, Stefania Rosenzweig, took it upon herself to care for the young boys. She sent them into hiding, and later obtained “certificates” (visas) allowing them to immigrate to Eretz Israel. These documents provided them with a status potentially useful to the Nazis, their and living conditions in their section of the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp were slightly improved. All three survived.

Yad Vashem’s collections, Gift of Uri Orlev, Jerusalem, Israel.
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.
"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)

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.
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.
Dear Papa!

I'm playing nicely with my friends, and feel good. Are you feeling well? I'm third in a class of eight. Received 64.5 in arithmetic. We study writing, grammar, French history, geography and nature. I sleep well. Every Sunday and Thursday, we take a walk if it’s nice outside. They shaved my head. I’m ending this letter with a whole lot of kisses ...10000000000000000000000000000

Your son, who thinks about you a lot, and a thousand kisses to Maman and Papa

Letter written by Georgie Halpern, one of the children of the Izieu children's home, to his father

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 fulfil 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.

*In 1940, the Reginiano family was deported from Tripoli, Libya, to the Villa Olivato Internment Camp in Italy. There, a Jewish shochet (ritual slaughterer) gave 13-year-old Vittorio a set of Tefillin (phylacteries) and a High Holyday prayer book to mark his bar mitzvah. The Tefillin remained with Vittorio during the entire war.
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

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.
In the storeroom to which I was assigned I saw a familiar figure...

‘Benek!’ He turned around as if bitten by a snake. ‘Mula!’ We hugged each other and patted each other’s backs. Later, we began asking each other simultaneously, ‘But how—?’ then stopped abruptly and burst out laughing… Together, we were more than two young lads, but more than one adult, in terms of our chances of survival. We swore to each other that we would share everything, to remain together, and ‘hang on.’ We made the Benek-Mula Pact—the pact of the will to survive!”

Samuel Pisar

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 benefitting 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 friends 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.
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

After liberation, dozens of abandoned Jewish orphan children gathered at the Jewish Council building in Krakow, 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.”

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 1943, 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.