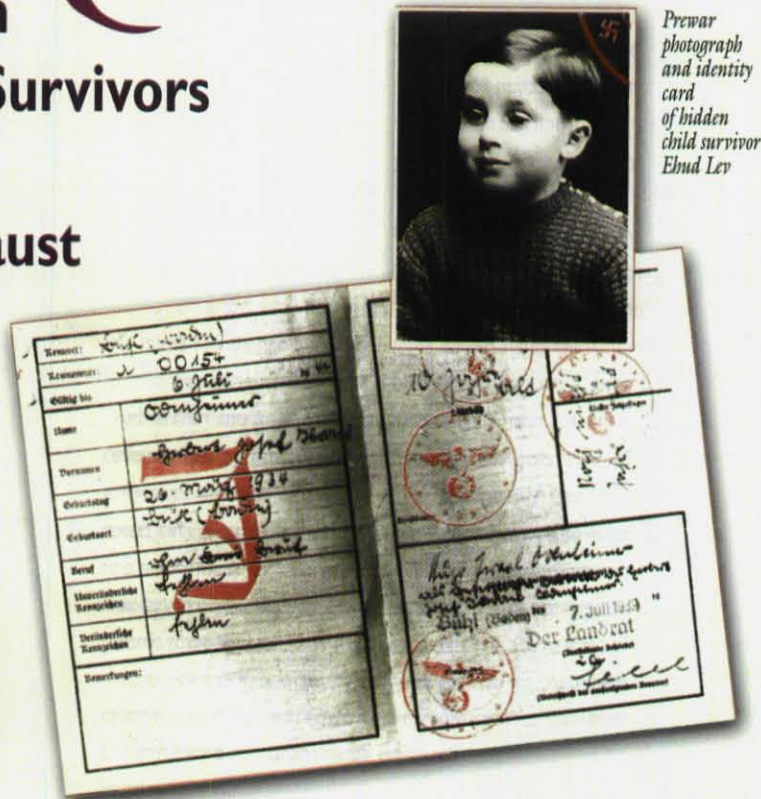


# Their Silent Cries

## Hidden Child Survivors of the Holocaust



Prewar photograph and identity card of hidden child survivor Ehud Lev

by Leah Goldstein

“ Our daily existence was tied to two components: giving up our Jewish identity and silence... Silence became deeply ingrained in all hidden children.”  
*Nechama Tec, a hidden child survivor*

From the Nazi perspective, Jewish children were useless as slave laborers, yet represented a threat of Jewish continuity. The fate of some 1.5 million Jewish children under Nazi rule, therefore, was automatic death. Yet miraculously, some children managed to defeat their foes by going into hiding: either under assumed identities with non-Jewish caretakers, or with their parents, in camps, ghettos, and forests. For the entire period, these children were forced to remain silent, either to conceal themselves, or at least so as not to reveal their true identities.

Long after their liberation, however, silence continued to dominate the emotional and cognitive world of child survivors, a phenomenon that psychiatrist and child survivor Robert Krell calls “secondary silencing.” In new research featured in the upcoming *Yad Vashem Studies* (Vol. 33),

Sharon Kangisser Cohen, adjunct professor in the School of History at the University of New South Wales, interviews child survivors of the Holocaust about their experiences, and asks why—for most of their adult lives—they remained silent about their pasts. Kangisser Cohen concludes that the silence of hidden child survivors in their postwar environment is based on four main issues: learned silence, a hierarchy of suffering, a conspiracy of silence, and elected silence.

During the war, to hide their Jewish identity, children learned silence as a survival technique, a behavior difficult to unlearn even in the postwar environment. More significantly, many of them felt that after the war their experiences did not merit an audience because of the hierarchy of suffering, which validated—to a greater or lesser degree—the traumatic nature of different types of experience. The hidden children were not usually perceived as Holocaust “survivors,” and so they ceased to identify themselves as such.

Ariala was six years old when the war broke out, and went into hiding, alone. After returning

home following liberation, she found that adult survivors, including her own father, were not willing to listen to her experiences during the war: “I wanted to speak with my father about it, to tell him that even if I had not been in the camps, I was beaten and that it had been difficult for me too,” she explains. “But my father said: ‘Keep quiet, you could have been like Elianne [Ariala’s cousin]. You also could have been in a camp, in a crematorium and everything.’ Therefore, I kept quiet. I understood that I had been lucky.”

For those children who immigrated to Israel after the war, a further challenge awaited them. Collective memory of the Holocaust in Israel dictated that certain narratives of survival were heard, while others were silenced. Ruth, a child survivor who spent the war years in hiding with her family, recalls: “I didn’t feel that I was a... ‘survivor.’ I always thought that a survivor was somebody who had been in Auschwitz. I didn’t consider myself a survivor of the Holocaust.” Consequently, their stories were notably absent from public discourse. Particularly powerful in this conspiracy of silence were the many well-meaning adults who felt that by “forgetting” the past, the children in their care would adjust more easily to their new lives.

Indeed, some child survivors themselves welcomed silence as it enabled them to become part of the “normal world” and pour their energies into rebuilding a new life. Thus, they themselves elected silence, in order to aid their own absorption and integration. Ehud, a hidden child survivor, explains that the hidden children “had the need to deny, to forget what once was, and to become a new person, in a new period.”

Kangisser Cohen concludes that for most hidden child survivors of the Holocaust, their identity as survivors and their relationships to their pasts were largely constructed in response to the values, judgments, and guidance of their postwar environment. As the prevalent response of both the adult survivor community and the adult community at large was not to recognize, validate, or legitimize their suffering, it would take the majority of hidden children more than half a century to give voice to their traumatic past, and for them to identify publicly as Holocaust survivors.



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