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CHILDREN AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY: ANALYSIS OF THE MUSEUM NARRATIVE AT THE YAD VASHEM INSTITUTE

DZIECI I POLITYKA PAMIĘCI. ANALIZA NARRACJI MUZEALNEJ INSTYTUTU JAD WASZEM

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ABSTRACT

How does Yad Vashem Institute presents the stories of the youngest participants in the war? What role do children play in its narrative? Do the authors of the exhibition devote separate exhibition to them – or are the children's fates 'inscribed' in the overall message about history? Is the death of victims or the death of heroes at the centre of the message? Is the museum presentation dedicated to specific, individual figures or rather to communities of anonymous participants in wartime events? The author of the article addresses those questions by analysing the narrative line of the Holocaust History Museum (Yad Vashem) in Jerusalem. The research conducted show that the Holocaust story presented in this place focuses on the loss and suffering that resulted in interrupted lives. The perspective of the victims dominates the exhibition analysed. The civilian victims of occupation and Genocide are at the centre of the exhibition.

ABSTRAKT

W jaki sposób Jad Waszem eksponuje historie najmłodszych uczestników wojny? Jaką rolę odgrywają dzieci w prezentowanej ekspozycji? Czy jest im poświęcona odrębna wystawa, czy ich losy są wpisane w ogólną narrację? Czy w centrum przekazu znajduje się śmierć ofiar, czy może śmierć bohaterów? I wreszcie – czy mamy tu do czynienia z dziecięcym bohaterem zbiorowym, czy raczej ze zbiorem indywidualnych historii i biografii młodych osób znanych z imienia i nazwiska? Autor poszukuje odpowiedzi na te pytania, analizując linię narracyjną Muzeum Historii Holokaustu w Instytucie Jad Waszem w Jerozolimie. Stwierdza, że zorganizowana tu wystawa stała koncentruje się na utraconym i przerwanym życiu. Dominuje w niej perspektywa ofiar wojennego dramatu rozpętanego przez nazistowskie Niemcy, a głos oddano tu przede wszystkim – żyjącym i nieżyjącym – cywilnym ofiarom okupacji, wojny i Zagłady.

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Keywords: politics of memory; Holocaust; World War II; social communication; communication system

Słowa kluczowe: polityka pamięci; Holokaust; II wojna światowa; komunikacja społeczna; system komunikacji

“Men and women of all nations, recognizing that mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give, declare and accept it as their duty that, beyond and above all considerations of race, nationality or creed: […] The child that is hungry must be fed; the child that is sick must be nursed; the child that is backward must be helped; the delinquent child must be reclaimed; and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succored; The child must be the first to receive relief in times of distress; The child must be put in a position to earn a livelihood, and must be protected against every form of exploitation” (*Geneva Declaration…*, 1924). Such provisions were included in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, drafted in 1923. This document, also known as the Geneva Declaration, originated from an initiative of the International Children's Aid Union UISE. The following year it was adopted by the League of Nations (Kubica, 2021). The proposals agreed and proclaimed by the international community at the time were brutally verified a dozen or so years later by the events of the Second World War. As in every armed conflict, this time too children became its tragic victims. Their childhood was dramatically interrupted. For many it was the definitive end of their lives, for others it was the beginning of a years-long and painful struggle with the effects of traumatic experiences, related both to direct warfare and to mass executions, displacements, ghettos created and exterminations carried out in prisons and camps. Describing the terrible stigma carried by children from those places, Helena Kubica enumerates: “ruined health, often the loss of the ability to study, work or even the ability to function normally in society. Images of bestiality and cruelty, hunger, death and smoking crematoria remained under the eyelids forever and haunted in dreams” (Kubica, 2020, p. 13).

Between 1940 and 1945 alone, some 232,000 children and adolescents under the age of 18 were sent to KL Auschwitz. The vast majority died there in the gas chambers. Most were brought to the camp with their families as part of actions targeting different social and national groups. However, there were also children who were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Germans for collaboration with the resistance movement, for trafficking, smuggling or stealing food, or for escaping from forced labour. And finally – there were also children born behind the camp wires of this mass extermination centre. Its fragmentary preserved

documentation does not make it possible to indicate precisely the full number of underage prisoners registered there and the number of children who were killed and died there (Kubica, 2002, p. 19).

The same is true for the general statistics relating to child victims of the Holocaust. There is a lack of complete records here, and the systematic destruction of archives and the obliteration of traces by German Nazi criminals has further increased the gaps in our knowledge. It is estimated that the total of almost six million Jewish victims who died at the hands of the Nazis or their collaborators includes one and a half million Jewish children (*Brief History of Holocaust…*, 2012, p. 25). Like the elderly, the youngest prisoners had the lowest survival rates in concentration camps and extermination centres (*Children during the Holocaust*, 2021). While before the war Jewish children under the age of 15 accounted for 25 per cent of the total Jewish population in Europe, after the war they numbered less than 10 per cent of the survivor community (Cohen, 2018, pp. 2–3).

Their fate is documented in many places – centres, institutions – operating in different parts of the world. Not only do they take care to disseminate knowledge about the Holocaust, but they also restore and nurture the memory of Jewish history and culture. They offer a chance to confront history and work through the traumas of war. They are a kind of "form of compensation", articulating the collective memory from the perspective of the victims and highlighting their suffering (Oztig, 2023, p. 63). They pose important questions and initiate important social debates. They become mediators in the space of memory. They provide civic education that draws on the experiences of the past but is future-oriented. They aspire to be centres of dialogue, referring to universal human rights.

The Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem is undoubtedly one of the key institutions – clearly part of this very concept. The Holocaust History Museum, which operates there, presents the origins, course and consequences of the Holocaust. It showcases them through an exhibition organised over four thousand square metres, including original artefacts, survivor testimonies and personal belongings of many prisoners of camps and ghettos created by the Germans (*The Holocaust History Museum*, n.d.). "The museum is a monument to those who were murdered – attempting to preserve their names, faces and identities for future generations. This museum is the authentic, personal, cry of the generation of those who can tell the story. It is their Jewish story and ours, and it is the story of the rupture and the universal eclipse of an entire world in which the perpetrator committed murder, the neighbour silently stood idly by and only the very few chose to save

their fellow human beings". This is how Avner Shalev, a representative of Yad Vashem's authorities, described the museum at the opening ceremony. But this site does not only document the fate of the victims of war and the destroyed cities and cultures. It is meant to be a testimony and an inspiration to fight injustice in the modern world, "as long as the darkest dark stalks the face of the earth" – as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan put it (*The Inauguration Ceremony…*, 2005).

How does depicting the fate of children affected by the drama of the Holocaust help to achieve these objectives? What is their place in the museum's exhibition space? What role do they play in building its narrative line? These questions about the youngest victims of the Shoah are the starting point for our reflections and research into the permanent exhibition of the Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem. An analysis of the content, visual elements, objects and spaces that make up the exhibition will make it possible to determine whether children's fates are given a separate place here or whether they are "inscribed" in the overall exhibition space. Another issue of interest will be whether the authors of the museum narrative chose to place the death of the victims or the death of the heroes at its centre. The idea is to see whether they foregrounded the tragic dimension of the fate of children during the Second World War or rather focused on the heroic deeds of the youngest participants in those events. And finally – we will ask the question of how the hero of the exhibition can be described? Is it a collective or individual hero? It is therefore necessary to find out whether we meet here a collection of anonymous members of the Jewish community or whether, however, the picture is built up by individual figures, known by name, with specific experiences from the war period (and also from the time before the war)[1].

In approaching the analysis in this way, we treat the museum as a kind of communication system. We see it as a kind of medium, allowing us to create, send and receive certain messages, and therefore also to influence the recipients of this content. As Astrid Erll puts it – it is the place where mediation between the individual and collective levels of memory takes place. This is made possible by means of communication (speech, writing, image, or sound) and various media technologies that allow the dissemination and storage of memory content. What is important, however, is that the offer thus created can be accepted or rejected

[1] The basis for the analysis is a search carried out during a study visit to Yad Vashem as part of the project "The Child as a Hero of the Museum Narrative at the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Institute – Yad Vashem" (SWPS University, 2022).

by the audience – individuals, social groups, or societies as a whole. It can also be modified, i.e., treated in a selective manner or used for a purpose that differs from what the authors of the message intended. Thus, we are dealing here with a social process, the results of which do not necessarily coincide with the objectives planned by its initiators. Therefore, we can say that interactivity is a key element to understand the work of memory taking place in and through the space of museums. "Producers and recipients of the medium of memory do active work in the construction of memory: they decide which phenomena will be assigned media qualities, they encode and decode what is (or will be) remembered. The media and their users create and form memory, doing so in a specific cultural and historical context" (Erll, 2018, p. 198). As Anna Ziębińska-Witek puts it, "museums as places of history, memory and heritage are complex spaces, socially constructed by visitors' interactions and perceptions with the museum environment" (2014, p. 250). So there is no question here of a one-sided message being received unreflectively and uncritically. The decoding and interpretation of the individual fragments of the exhibition are influenced by the viewer's personal experience, prior knowledge, and individual sensitivity. Each visitor is therefore able to form separate opinions, draw different conclusions and present differing assessments. So, on the one hand, it is clear that the creators of the museum exhibition are trying to channel the emotions of the audience in some way. On the other hand – it becomes equally obvious that the museum is not able to fully control the process of reception of the content presented there. Awareness of those interrelationships leads us to note that the analyses carried out for this study, and their results – however covered by an attempt at objectivity – must be marked by the author's subjective view.

"LIVING LANDSCAPE"

The first encounter with the children acting as heroes of the exhibition presented in the museum space of Yad Vashem takes place in the very first moments of visiting the exhibition. A multimedia installation entitled "Living Landscape"[2],

[2] The installation is displayed on the museum's 13-metre-high and 11-metre-wide triangular wall in such a way that it not only opens up the exhibition, but is also visible at later stages of the tour. What we have here is a "spatial montage" that creates multiple coexisting images displayed simultaneously. They overlap, creating a vivid landscape of a lost past (Perry, 2016, p. 94; Gutterman & Shalev,

created by Israeli artist Michal Rovner, is on display in a room located just inside the entrance. It is a film and photographic mosaic woven from "crumbs of life". It uses material from the 1920s, presenting scenes of pre-war daily life of European Jews – both in provincial shtetls and in metropolitan communities. Here, the scenes at the centre of which are young people are an essential part of the whole of this multi-generational portrait. Among these images, we see a group of children studying in a religious school, singing in a choir and playing in an orchestra. There are also young people skating, dancing in large groups and running through the streets, equipped with shopping baskets. When we observe life in Jewish dwellings, for example, we see children surrounded by toys and children learning to play the violin. We also observe them enjoying summer, sunshine and freedom. We can not only see their faces, but also hear their voices – individually and collectively. Among other things, an excerpt from a choral performance of the song is used here: "Our hope is not yet lost". With their smiles, enthusiasm and singing, the children bring an extremely important emotional weight to the material. There is plenty of life in them. Particularly telling are the scenes in which the children face the camera and make friendly gestures (the viewer may get the impression that they are being directly addressed). They smile, say hello, send someone a kiss. And finally – they make hand gestures inviting you to come towards them. They invite you into a world that no longer exists. They are reminiscent of lives that have been interrupted. They help viewers to realise the extent of the losses brought about by the Holocaust.

CHILDREN IN A NAZI HELL

The museum's narrative, which features children's stories, has been constructed using a range of materials – including textual ones. So here we have extracts from diaries, memoirs, letters, official documents, but also short notes created for the exhibition. What emerges is a picture in which children are an immanent part of the story of the fate of many Jewish families: "The Matsa Family: Bechov Matsa, a widower and father of five, ran a music store in Preveza. In 1944, he was

2005, p. 32). The brief information prepared for visitors reads: "Hundreds of life fragments were woven to become a human tapestry, longing for a life and a landscape that no longer exists. The Jewish world that was lost".

deported with his family to Auschwitz. Bechor, his daughter Anna, and his granddaughter were murdered immediately. His son Moshe and his son-in-law were killed in the *Sonderkommando* Rebellion. His twin daughters, Elpida and Loula, were taken to Mengele's experimentation barrack, and then were sent with their sister Elvira, to a labor camp. The three sisters survived"; "Marisha (Miriam) was nine when her parents, Henya and Shmuel Perlberger, from Wieliczka, in Poland, entrusted her to Christian friends on the eve of their deportation. Marisha's parents perished and she survived, hidden by Christian families".

Children's fates appear in many contexts and in many themes of the museum's exhibition. For example, when reference is made to Jewish emigration in the 1930s, the activities of organisations supporting Jews during the war, cultural life organised in the ghettos, or laws restricting the rights of the Jewish community. In each of those areas, children are active participants in the events described.

As in many historical exhibitions, photography is one of the primary tools used to build the narrative at the Jerusalem Holocaust History Museum. On the one hand, there are pre-war portraits of individual children and photographs of multi-generation families, where children appear surrounded by their parents and grandparents. There are also many group photographs of children in kindergartens or schools. On the other hand – we see children's experience of war in different countries – such as Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, Hungary, Italy, for example. Children appear in photographs of groups being transported to the concentration camps. We pick them out with our eyes from the crowd of prisoners crowded into carriages or train stations. They are also in the photographs of the prisoners who made it to Auschwitz. They stand in a crowd of adults next to women and men or are held in their arms by their mothers and grandmothers. Sometimes we do not see the faces of those children, only their silhouettes. They then become symbolic, archetypal.

We also observe children in photographs showing scenes of everyday life in the camps (e.g., children among the participants of mass celebrated in the camp). The exhibition also documents overcrowding and hunger, problems that children also had to face. In the pictures, for example, we see scenes from the Łódź ghetto. Crowded and waiting for a meal, the young prisoners hold tin pots and spoons in their hands. In the following pictures, we see the children eating a meal in the street and feeding their younger siblings. Elsewhere, photographs of newborns and older children illustrate information about the ban on new births in the ghettos and the order to perform abortions there. The photographs

also document the child victims of the concentration camps where Jews were killed. In Auschwitz for instance: Blumel Mekler (11) – Poland; H. Wassermann (8) – Poland; Sergio de Simone (7) – Naples; Mania Altman (5) – Radom; Marek James (6) – Radom; Eleonora Witońska (5) – Radom; Alexander Hornemann (8) – Eindhoven.

The portraits of the victims are presented both in the successive stages of the exhibition as well as in its final part – "The Hall of Names". It is a place where the names of Holocaust victims are to be preserved. They are therefore kept here along with information on their fate. Some of those messages were also included in the short notes accompanying the photographs in the exhibition: "Five-year-old, Avram Rosenthal and his two-year-old brother Emanuel, who was born in the Ghetto. In March 1944, they were sent with their father and grandmother to Majdanek where they were murdered"; "Józef Gar, his wife Rachel and their daughter Ghettale, who was called that because she was born in the Ghetto. The parents survived. Ghettale perished in a DP Camp after the liberation".

When the exhibition talks about the Nazi camp Klooga in Estonia, photographs found next to the victims, in the pockets of their clothes, are shown. Whole families and groups of friends – including children – can be seen here. Importantly – the photographs are attributed to specific individuals. They do not refer to anonymous communities of victims. They are a reminder of the lives of people known by name. The publication of their photographs serves not only to describe the tragic finale of their lives, but also to recall selected episodes from the pre-war period. This highlights that each of the victims had plans, ambitions, dreams. Their traces can be found in the descriptions with which the photographs are labelled: "The youths Izak Srebnik, Meir Mackiewicz and Ruben Arotzker from the town of Soly dedicated a photograph and a poem to their rabbi, 1938. All the three were murdered in Ponary in April 1943".

The photographs collected in the museum document a world that has passed away and show the scale of the drama caused by the Nazis. This is particularly evident in the case of photographs identifying later victims of the Holocaust. For example, a photograph of some 150 Jewish students and teachers from Amsterdam is presented here. Some of them were described by first and last name. And – as we can learn thanks to the creators of the exhibition – most of those immortalised in the photograph died in 1941 at Sobibór and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Among the many materials that make up the narrative of the exhibition are photographs considered iconic in presenting the drama of the Holocaust. One

of them is an extremely telling photograph showing exceptional bestiality – it is the scene of the execution of a mother and her child. In the picture, we see a soldier taking aim from close range at a woman protecting a child cuddled up to her. During the war, the photo was intercepted by Polish soldiers working in the underground when a German soldier sent it in a letter to family or friends. On the back he wrote: "Action against the Jews. Ivanogrod, Ukraine. 1942".

As Susan Sontag points out, the photographs presented here, which show the suffering and martyrdom of the Jewish people, are not only a reminder of death, defeat and victimisation. They are also on display to highlight the miracle of survival (Sontag, 2010, p. 105). We can also see it when images documenting not only tragic scenes of wartime life are on display: "Little girls who were among the guests at Bertha Levy and Mauritz Kleerekoper's wedding party. The Hague, summer 1942".

Finally, there are also photographs showing the post-war fate of children rescued from the Holocaust. These are photographs of individuals or whole groups surrounded by those who hid them during the war and helped them survive. In this case, the authors of the exhibition draw attention to the problem of the complex identity of the rescued children. Raised first in Jewish communities, hidden during the war and growing up in Christian families and monasteries, they later returned to Jewish environments. They struggled not only with the absence of parents, siblings and other relatives who had not survived the war. Some did not reconcile with their origin and refused to remove the crosses worn around their necks. For some children, abandoning the false identity created to hide from the Germans proved to be a problem. Other children did not want to abandon the families who took them in and raised them as their own offspring[3].

It is important to note another theme documented through the photographs presented in the exhibition. In a room dedicated to the history of the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler's rule, the racial theory on which the Nazi state was founded is invoked. In this case, children play a very important role. This is because the authors of the exhibition used archive photographs showing children undergoing medical examinations (skull width, eye and hair colour) to prove the superiority of the Aryan race. In photographs from the mid-1930s, we also see German children taking part in ideological classes, indoctrinated with the concept of

[3] This, incidentally, is not the only time the exhibition shows the problem of the complex identity of Jews in 20th-century Europe. The exhibition also shows, for example, the life of Jews living in Nazi Germany before the war, treating the country as their homeland.

a "pure race". Children involved in the process of supporting the authorities and integrated into the cult of the individual in Nazi Germany – cheering Hitler and handing him flowers – are also presented.

The image of children also appears frequently in the footage presented at the exhibition. Those include images documenting the German invasion of Poland. In them, we see children among the ruins of Warsaw and among people fleeing military action. Elsewhere, we see very young Jews deported to ghetto districts – in Kutno and Kraków. Their faces are indifferent, unsure, distrustful (although there are also pictures where the children are smiling – naturally reacting to the camera lens). The films also document daily life in other ghettos. There, too, we see emaciated, starved and hopeless children on the streets. Those scenes are accompanied by a commentary presented in an audio guide: "The sight of people, including children, dying of starvation was unbearable". In November 1941, historian and political activist Dr Emanuel Ringelblum wrote: "The hardest part for me is seeing the children frozen. Their feet and knees are bare and their clothes are in shreds. The children stand still, silently sobbing. Tonight I heard the sobbing of a 3–4 year old boy who will freeze in a few hours. Death and crying is part of life in the ghetto. People cover their bodies with colourful posters proclaiming: 'Children's Month'. Children must live because they are the most sacred of us".

However, the exhibition contains another important type of footage in which children appear. Those are Nazi-created propaganda productions, such as the film created in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. With the film, the Germans built up a false image of the place. They argued that the children there lived in fantastic conditions, were able to learn and play, spent time with their families, were well cared for, had medical care, participated in cultural and sporting activities and enjoyed the attractions offered by the parks and squares.

"IN A JUNGLE ONLY PREDATORS SURVIVE"

An important element of the narrative at the Holocaust History Museum is the statements of witnesses to history presented in the form of film footage. Many screens feature Holocaust survivors sharing their memories recalled several decades after the dark time of World War II. And – even though they are now adults – they build up a picture of a child's world. At the time, they were a few years old or teenagers. They therefore help us to understand what the

youngest participants in those events experienced. Among other things, they tell of shootings, pits filled with dead people, death marches, escapes from railway transports carrying people to concentration camps, and selections of prisoners by the Germans.

Among those testimonies are stories of events in the Kraków ghetto. Shmuel Rothbard got into it when he was eight years old: "It was the first time in my life, that I'd seen dead people. I saw a number of people who were killed in the street. I was frightened. First of all I was scared because I was a child. Mother kept trying – not to hide me, but to conceal me between herself and Father, so I wouldn't stand out. It was not good to be a child".

How children were killed in the streets is described by Alisa Lusia Avnon, who was sent behind the walls of the Kraków ghetto as a teenage girl: "Lots and lots of Germans came into the Ghetto led by Amon Göth. They simply… either separated the children from their mothers, threw them down and shot them or, if mothers wouldn't give their children, shot the mothers as well. There were bodies scattered everywhere, mainly of children – small children, babies. They would take children, babies, hold them by their hands or feet and smash them against the wall. Literally smash them against the wall, kill them. Of course I saw it, I saw it a lot".

What happened in the ghettos and camps is what former prisoners call hell. The children not only saw this hell, they experienced it. Sinai Adler recalls such a scene in her memoirs: "When I was in the camp, in Birkenau, I was a camp runner, an SS servant. Transports arrived from Hungary, and for some reason, the Germans decided to have another Selection in the camp, for children only. […] They drove a stoke into the ground and put a stick on it, a sort a ruler at a certain height. They took hundreds of boys and ordered them to walk by the stick. Whoever's head reached the height of the stick stayed, anyone shorter was sent to a barrack. The boys were locked in, about 500 of them – the Germans knew exactly how many there were – and they were guarded to prevent their escape, because everyone in the barrack was doomed to be murdered. In my position, you see, I could go into the barrack, and I saw the boys there. It was horrible, they knew what was in store for them. They prayed and cried. It was horrendous".

Despite the passage of many decades, the tellers of those stories are still clearly moved when they describe the cruelty they experienced during their childhood and adolescence. They recall their school days and their classmates "disappearing" day after day, being taken away to concentration camps. They say that school in

the ghetto allowed them to forget – about the Germans and the hunger. Survivors also return to their last encounters with their parents – the last hours or even minutes spent with their mother or father, who were later sent to the camps and never returned from them. They recall the moment when they were separated from their parents during the selection made upon arrival at the concentration camp. Witnesses also speak of their childish naivety – they expected to see their parents, from whom they had been separated, outside the camp gates. Then they were confronted with the information that their mother or father "was already in heaven". Although some heard more blunt messages – they were told directly that people were being burned in the camps.

Witnesses also tell of women who defended children in the ghettos and camps and shielded them with their own bodies. They also talk about how children were murdered. Eliahu Rosenberg, for example, recalls his memories of Treblinka, where he was in charge of cleaning up the bodies of the camp's gassed victims. He recalls as something extremely difficult to bear the screams of children calling out at the time: "Mum! Dad!". In turn, Shimon Srebrnik and Tola Walach Melzer describe their fear for their parents in the ghetto. They speak of the death of their loved ones and recall the sight of people falling of hunger and dying in the streets. They explain how they procured food for their families. So we see that it was not only the parents who cared about their children. Roles were swapped here – children cared for their parents and their families.

The recordings of survivors' testimonies not only reconstruct the experiences of specific individuals, but also – and this seems particularly valuable – show the nature of the moral dilemmas that very young people faced in the wartime reality. As prisoners in ghettos or concentration camps, they wondered whether they had the right to flee, exposing the other members of the group to death – such, after all, could be the punishment meted out under collective responsibility. They also had to decide, for example, whether they would separate from their father, who no longer had the strength, during the deportation and leave him on his way to the mercy of hungry dogs.

Roman Frister, among others, who had to fight for his life in Auschwitz, talks about such dilemmas. He got there with his father: "Actually, I wasn't a man when I arrived at the camp. I was a boy. I was 14 and a half years old. I spent the next three and a half years in the camps concentrating all my thoughts on myself and my desire to survive. Morality was the last thing on my mind. For example, I felt that I was in a jungle and in a jungle only predators survive. Whoever doesn't devour small, helpless animals, usually ceases to exist. It was like a chain effect.

The Nazis devoured us and we, at least people like me, tried to devour those weaker than us. And the weak tried to devour those weaker than them. Not everyone was like that. There were heroes, there were people who gave up their lives for others. I didn't belong to that category. My motto was 'staying alive', it proved itself". Roman Frister shares with visitors to the exhibition a very personal experience to which he has returned over many decades in his memoirs: "There was one thing that I'm definitely ashamed of. We were standing in a line-up. My father was exhausted and collapsed. I suppose it is every son's duty at such a time, to kneel or bend down to help his father up. But usually the Kapos killed anyone who helped someone get up. I didn't bend down and I didn't help him up. I didn't do my duty as a son and in a way, it's been haunting me ever since. My father was moved to a shed that housed typhus patients and died a few days later".

The testimonies recorded and played back on screens are supported by the recollections of other participants in wartime events, previously written down in diaries and memoirs. Using selected excerpts from those accounts, the authors of the exhibition suggestively build a picture of a child's world totally ruined by the Nazis. Abraham Lewin wrote about their ruthlessness in his diary: "A sight that I will never forget as long as I live: 5 tiny children, two- and three-year old, sit on the cot in the open field on the night from Monday to Tuesday and cry. They scream without stopping: 'Mommy, mommy, I want to eat!'. The soldiers are shooting continually and the shots silence the children's crying for a moment".

All those witnesses' stories, collected and presented in the museum's exhibition, make it possible to show more bluntly the absurdity of a situation in which childhood sensitivity clashed with the heartless, cruel world of wartime. The testimonies also return to when the war ended, when the survivors did not understand why they had to go on living – alone, separated from their parents, without friends.

"THE JEWISH WORLD SHRANK TO THE CONTENTS OF THE VICTIMS' POCKETS"

During the Holocaust, "the Jewish world shrank to the contents of the victims' pockets", the authors of the exhibition argue as they present further sections to visitors. In doing so, they use mementos of the lives of those who found themselves at the epicentre of the cataclysm caused by Germany. The objects collected in the exhibition are often very personal mementos that evoke memories of

specific children and their families. Like the braids of Lili Hirsch stored here: "The hair of 12-year-old Lili had never been cut since her nearly childhood. On the day she and her family were forced to leave their home in Târgu-Mureş and enter the Ghetto, Lili's mother, Rivka, knew she would not be able to care properly for her daughter's hair. Chopping off Lili's two long, beautiful braids, she promised that they would be given to the neighbours for safekeeping. Within six weeks, Lili and her mother were murdered in Auschwitz".

The original objects on display in the museum build up a story about the many phenomena experienced by children in the ghettos or concentration camps. Among those artefacts, for example, is a brooch in the shape of a bread rationing card. It was made in the Łódź ghetto by 12-year-old Natan Stajnberg "Natusz". He wanted to gift this item to his parents on their wedding anniversary. A few days before this anniversary, however, the boy died of leukaemia. The brooch was therefore given to his mother by a neighbour who helped Natan make it. And the mother engraved the date of her son's death on the back. She later had the brooch with her in the concentration camp to which she was sent.

The objects on display thus become an inspiration to tell short stories of specific individuals, families, or groups. In this way, it manages to evoke difficult, often dramatic fates – including those of children and young people: "Accordion. Shabetai Shemi (1926–1945). After the occupation of Macedonia, Shabetai had to give a Muslim friend the accordion his parents had given him for his bar mitzvah. He then fled with his sister Gita to relatives in Greece. From there, the two were deported with the rest of the Jews to Birkenau, and then by death march to Bergen-Belsen. Shabetai perished there two days after the liberation. Gita, the only surviving member of the family, returned to Macedonia where she received back Shabetai's accordion".

Clothing, hair clips, beads or pendants – all of those items on display – belonged to specific individuals. Not all of them could be attributed to the owners, but in many cases this objective was achieved. And – thanks to the narrative led by the exhibition's creators – those people are recalled here: "Pendant made for 13-year-old Rita Bejkovska by Dr. Karl Schleissner, a physician in the Ghetto's ward for tubercular children"; "Dress belonging to Gabbi Klipper, sent from Vienna to the Land of Israel with the rest of the family's belongings"; "Brooch made by Chaim Klieger for his little sister, Sarah. Part of the brooch is in the form of a bread ration card and part in the form of the tombstone of his father, Yidel Moshe Klieger. The date of the father's death in the Ghetto is engraved on the brooch".

The museum's exhibits also include objects that document the forced labour of children and young people in factories and workshops run by the Nazis. Visitors can see, for example, shoes that were made for the German army by young forced labourers in factories in the Łódź ghetto. In a note describing their situation written by Józef Zełkowicz – one of the ghetto prisoners – we read: "There are no children in the Ghetto, only small Jews… Small Jews aged ten and up who are already working… A child like this gets no breakfast before going to work. He must labor a few hours in the workshop before he receives a thin gruel".

We also learn about the children's world of the war and the years preceding it through objects such as textbooks used in the ghettos, postcards, a cradle from a Jewish home, a prayer book and pictures with images of saints (used by Jewish children hiding in Christian families). Also on display are the toys that children took with them on their journeys when they set off for the centres of enslavement and extermination, as well as toys that were already being made behind the walls of the concentration camps and ghettos. For instance dolls: "A doll that Maria Eisen received from her father in the Warsaw Ghetto when she was six years old. When Maria fled the Ghetto with her mother, she took along the doll hidden in her undergarments"; "In a cellar in the Warsaw Ghetto, Little Zosia played with her doll, Zuzia, which her mother, Natalia Zajczyk, had made for her. One day, her mother, who helped smuggle children out of the Ghetto, was injured. She sent a youth to the cellar to rescue her daughter. He put Zosia into a coal sack and carried her out on his back. Only when they were outside the Ghetto did she realize that she had left her doll in the cellar. Tearfully, she insisted that they go back, 'because a mother doesn't leave her little girl…' They went back into the Ghetto, retrieved the doll and managed to get out safely again. After the war mother and daughter immigrated to Israel. The mother died two weeks later".

Board games are also among the toys on display. One of them is a unique version of "Monopoly", created on the site of the Terezín ghetto. It was illustrated by the artist Oswald Poeck, who ended up in Terezín from Prague and was later sent to Auschwitz, where he died. He wanted not only to entertain the children, but also to provide them with information about life in the ghetto. Therefore, the game board refers to the reality of the ghetto. Its main locations became individual stations in the game – e.g., prison, warehouses, kitchen, assembly areas.

"SOFTLY, SOFTLY! LET'S BE SILENT!"

In addition to the material memorabilia gathered in the exhibition, the stories of specific individuals are also evoked by various types of artwork, such as drawings, graphics, or poems that were created during the war. The creators of the exhibition see them as an authentic testimony of immense power. So much so that it often seems to have more of an impact than verbal testimony. Those works complement the message contained in the diaries, letters, or notes. They allow us to grasp the extremely difficult and complex reality in which their creators, imprisoned in ghettos and concentration camps, functioned (Harel, 2019, p. 45). The simplicity – if not naivety – of the young artists' outlook allows us to see an additional dimension to this testimony.

One example is the "Legend of the Prince" created in the Łódź ghetto in 1943. It includes a rhyming text written by the teachers of the unofficial education provided behind the ghetto walls and illustrations to which the children contributed. The legend combines elements of children's fairy tales and events from wartime life (*Children in the Holocaust*…, 2015, p. 118). Also included in the museum's narrative is a collection of poems written during the war – in the Łódź ghetto – by the teenage Abram Koplowicz. He is the author of the poetic piece *A Dream*:

> When I'm grown up and twenty
> I'll set out into the marvelous world
> Sit in mechanical bird
> Rise up and take off into space, high above.
> I'll fly, cruise and soar
> Over the far-off beautiful world…
> Breathe in all the joys of the universe
> I'll rise to the sky and blossom,
> A cloud my sister, the wind my brother.

As Hanna Yablonka wrote – "this poem, ignoring the horror, illustrates one of the great minefields inherent in relating the story of the Holocaust as a prolonged, arduous concatenation of darkness and bereavement, there were circles of life where laughter, love, and creativity were present too, and most importantly, childhood, imagination and dreams were ever-present" (2019, p. 102).

Although, clearly, in the exhibition presented at Yad Vashem, the dominant image is that of a child's world full of drama, suffering, and injustice. Visitors have the chance to read, for example, the lyrics of a song entitled *Ponary* created in the Vilnius Ghetto in 1943. The words were written by Shmerl Kaczerginsky and the music by the then 11-year-old Alek Wolkowyski (Alexander Tamir):

Softly, softly! Let's be silent!
Graves are growing here.
They were sown by our tormentors,
Green they grow, and fair.
Toward Ponary run roads aplenty,
From Ponary not one.
Father's disappeared, and with him
All our joy is gone.

The poetry created by adults presented at Yad Vashem also refers to children's fates. One example is a poem celebrating the courage of anonymous young heroes who, at the risk of their own lives, were involved in acquiring and smuggling food for starving families in the ghetto. This is told in the song *The Little Smuggler*, which was written by the Polish poet Henryka Łazowert, who was murdered by the Germans in Treblinka. A fragment of the poem became part of the exhibition:

Over the wall, through holes, and past the guard,
Through the wires, ruins and fences:
Plucky, hungry and determined
I sneak through, dart like a cat...

And if the hand of destiny
Should size me in the game,
That's a common trick of life.
You, mother, do not wait up for me…

And only one request,
Will stiffen on my lips:
Who, mother mine, who
Will bring your bread tomorrow?

* * *

There are many reasons to cherish the memory of children's wartime abuse. One of the most important is the one highlighted by Wiesław Theiss when he writes that "the knowledge of a child's wartime suffering breaks the conventional and schematic image of war, which generally focuses on battles, heroism, crimes, liberation, enslavement" (2012, p. 79). This goal is clearly achieved in the exhibition prepared at the Holocaust History Museum at the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem.

The content presented here includes a multi-threaded story concerning the fate of children during the Second World War. The narrative relating to the youngest victims is clearly inscribed in the entire exhibition – just as the fate of the children was inscribed in the fate of the entire Jewish community during the Holocaust. It is therefore not a separate section of the exhibition, but an immanent part of it that recurs at many stages of the tour. This approach makes it possible to show the commonality of fates of the different generations that experienced the drama of war.

The death of the victims has been placed at the centre of the narrative of the Jerusalem exhibition. Even when the stories of the rescued are presented or the heroism of those who saved Jews is shown, these themes are strongly linked to the suffering of those who did not survive the war. The dominant message in this area is the story of the abruptly interrupted lives of many young people and the traumatic experience of having to grow up quickly and face the cruelty of the occupying forces under wartime conditions. So we see not only children who need adult care, but also children who care for adults. This reminds us that the reality of war often necessitates the swapping of social roles.

The protagonist of the exhibition is not only the Jewish community as a collective. What we have here is a narrative built on the stories of specific people, known by name. This way of building the exhibition is a conscious effort to reduce the distance and build a stronger emotional bond between visitors and the history presented to them. In specific biographies or memorabilia belonging to Holocaust victims, everyone can see a person similar to themselves. And by looking at the children – and observing their unrealised plans or dreams – we can read even more clearly the drama caused by the war. In it, childlike confidence is juxtaposed with the coldness and cruelty of a world in which the rules usually learnt at the socialisation stage no longer apply. After all, in relation to the years 1939–1945, we often speak of a childhood stolen, taken away, trampled, or ruined.

The message of the Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem is complemented and reinforced by the content presented around the facility. Indeed, in its immediate surroundings there are spaces, memorials and other objects that also nurture the memory of the youngest victims of the Holocaust: Garden and Amphitheatre in Memory of the Jewish Children, who perished in the Holocaust; Monument: Korczak and the Ghetto's Children; the Warsaw Ghetto's Square – Monument; Garden of the Righteous among the Nations (for example: Anne Frank's Chestnut Tree). The key site is the Children's Memorial, dedicated to all of the 1.5 million youngest victims of the Holocaust. With its form, it becomes a place for prayer, meditation, and reflection. In the small darkened space of the monument located in a rocky grotto, the names of Jewish children who lost their lives during the Second World War are continuously read out by lectors. Their memory is therefore still nurtured and maintained. Again, this is a remembrance not only of a collective, but also of specific individuals mentioned by name, which fits in with the general concept adopted by the founders of Yad Vashem.

It is clear that visitors to the various sites on the Jerusalem Memorial Hill and the Holocaust History Museum located there do not perceive and decode all the images and content collected here. They certainly choose certain films, photographs, objects and their descriptions to which they pay more attention. Some of these are omitted. They also succumb to the prompts of the guides who show them around the exhibition. In this way, each visitor can create different variants of the story, and in each of these variants the intensity of the presence of child-related themes can vary.

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