



Holocaust Day 5769 Devoted to Children in the Holocaust

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(IsraelNN.com) The Central Theme of Holocaust Martyrs" and Heroes" Remembrance Day on April 21, 2009 is "Children in the Holocaust." One and a half million Jewish children were murdered in the holocaust and were thus prevented from growing up and fulfilling their basic rights: to live, dream, love, play and laugh. Some faded photographs of children under the Nazi regime remain, and their questioning, accusing eyes cry out.

A group of teenagers in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Photo: Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs" and Heroes" Remembrance Authority

From the day the Nazis came to power, Jewish children became acquainted with cruelty, first in Germany and, as time passed, in every other country the Germans conquered or forged an

alliance. The parents and families of these children were unable to grant them the security and protection they needed. Jewish children were separated from their non-Jewish playmates and expelled from state-sponsored schools. They saw their parents lose the right to support their families, and often witnessed the descent of the family unit into an abyss of despair.

As war broke out and antisemitic policies worsened, the suffering of Jewish children increased: many were doomed to the horrific suffering of life in the ghetto - the bitter cold, the never-ending hunger and a multitude of dangerous diseases. There, cut off from the world, they lived in the shadow of endless terror and violence. As smuggling was central to survival in the ghettos, they were often forced to assume the new role of breadwinner for their disintegrating families. Henrika Lazobert, a Jewish poet, wrote a paean to a daring young smuggler who, despite the risks, persevered in finding food for his family. The poem ends:

I shall no longer come back to you [mother]

... and only on my lips

will one worry freeze fast:

My beloved mother, tomorrow who'll bring you

your piece of bread as in the past?

Still, children in the Holocaust remained children, desiring only to partake in activities beloved by all their contemporaries. In August 1940 David Rabinowitz, a young boy from a village near Kielce, Poland, wrote in his diary: "During the war, I've been studying by myself, at home. When I remember that I used to go to school, I feel like crying."

Jewish refugee children from Germany deported in December 1938 to a demilitarized zone

Photo: Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs" and Heroes" Remembrance Authority

When the deportations to the extermination camps began, a chasm opened up in the lives of Jewish children. Throughout Nazi Europe, they fled and hid, separated from their parents and loved ones. Some of them found refuge in the homes of decent people whose conscience would not allow them to remain passive; several were hidden in convents and monasteries and boarding schools; others were forced to roam through forests and villages, hunting for food like wild animals and relying entirely on their own ingenuity and resourcefulness. Many were forced to live under assumed identities, longingly anticipating the return of their father and mother. Some were so young when separated from their parents that they forgot their real names and Jewish identity. Many were forced to train themselves not to move, laugh or cry, or even talk. Upon liberation, one little girl asked her mother, "Mommy, may I cry now?"

Of course, not all Jewish children were lucky enough to find a place of refuge, and many tens of thousands of children were caught and sent to the death camps. Their young age made most the first prey of the Nazi killing machine.

Yet wherever they were - in the ghettos, in hiding and even in the camps - they did not surrender moments of childish playfulness. A short break in a daily routine of hunger and dread was enough to summon gales of joyous laughter, childish brawls, and games with toys made of rags and scraps of paper. Together with their beloved dolls, the children could dream of a better world, of returning to their family and lost childhood; and only to these dolls could they open their aching hearts.

At the end of the war, a new chapter began, one of both hope and pain for the life that was gone, never to return. Many children were lost to their families and their Jewish heritage forever. For others, the war's end marked a beginning of their return to their real selves, a process filled with difficulties and torment. Very slowly, they emerged from hiding, from the forests and the camps, and began the long and painful process of rehabilitation. Despite the scars, they sought to rebuild their lives anew.

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