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Holocaust Parenthood – The Transformation of Child-Parent Relationships as Perceived by the Survivors

The physical annihilation of the Jews was preceded by the gradual destruction of their life systems – on both the broadest, formal level and the most intimate. One of the stages in this process was the undermining of Jewish parenthood, which according to the Nazi doctrine represented the negation of German parenthood. Whereas racially fit German parenthood meant the continuation of the Aryan race and was promoted as such, Jewish parenthood represented the reproduction of a race that allegedly endangered Germany.

The damage to Jewish parenthood was one of the junctures in the dehumanization process devised by the Nazis and is an intrinsic part of the history of the Holocaust. While it was experienced by numerous victims, it has been largely neglected by Holocaust studies. There have, however, been several psychological studies on the postwar trauma of child survivors, including issues connected to parenthood, as well as studies on the parenting abilities of Holocaust survivors.[1] Survivors have addressed the problems of parenthood during the persecutions in testimonies and memoirs; however the number of child survivors' testimonies is much higher than that of surviving parents.[2] Furthermore, most of the extant parent testimonies are those of mothers. While the latter phenomenon can be partly explained by »objective« historical and social data,[3] the reason for the sparsity of parents' testimonies and the gaps in the research still need to be explained.

1 The works of Julia Chaitin and Dan Bar-On are exceptional in this respect. See Bar On/Chaitin, Parenthood and the Holocaust, Jerusalem 2001; and Chaitin/Bar-On, Emotional Memories of Family Relations during the Holocaust, in: *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 7/4 (2002), 299-326. See also Bloeme Evers-Emden, Hayim pegumim (Shattered Existence), translated from Dutch into Hebrew by Mechel Jamenfeld, Tel Aviv 2000 [Dutch original: Geschonden bestaan: Gesprekken met vervolgde Joden die hun kinderen moesten »wegdoen«, Kampen 1996]; Dalia Ofer, Cohesion and Rupture: The Jewish Family in East European Ghettos during the Holocaust, in: Peter Y. Medding (ed.), Coping with Life and Death: Jewish Families in the Twentieth Century, Washington 1998, 143-165. On the state of research see Chaitin/Bar-On, Emotional Memories, 300.

2 See also Bar-On/Chaitin, Parenthood and the Holocaust (fn. 1), 32; Evers-Emden, Hayim pegumim (fn. 1), 14.

3 Since it was generally assumed that men faced the greatest danger, they were the first to go into hiding or leave the country; they were also the first to be taken for

Dan Bar-On and Julia Chaitin offer several explanations for the lacuna in research on family relationships during the Holocaust. They suggest that the emergence of posttraumatic stress disorder in survivors resulted in research focused on the »aftereffects« of their experience. Furthermore, the quantitative methodology applied by non-clinical psychological research on Holocaust survivors was not appropriate for exploring the complexity of family relations during the Holocaust. Referring to the research of Yael Danieli they also imply that the issue of family relations during the Holocaust is too painful a memory for the victims to divulge and for the researchers to deal with.[4]

During the first years after the Holocaust, survivors' testimonies rarely addressed the issue of parent-child relations on the emotional level. This can be attributed to the overall suspicion towards survivors and their stories on the part of the surrounding society,[5] which was one of the reasons why survivors were reluctant to talk about their experiences. The first testimonies are rigidly structured reports focused on historical information and »objective« data in which the credibility of the survivor was sometimes evaluated by the interviewer.[6] The open interviews starting from the late 1970s that show respect for the survivors and allow various levels of reference to the events,[7] provided a framework for addressing issues such as parent-child relations during the Holocaust. Yet even in a tolerant, empathic environment, the numbers of parents' testimonies remained low.[8] It is possible that by the time society was ready to listen and survivors were willing to break their relative silence, many of those who had been parents during the Holocaust were either too old to testify or no longer alive. However, on the basis of the available parents' testimonies, it seems that their reluctance to narrate their experience might have prevailed in any circumstances since they had suffered a

forced labor. Later when the sexes were separated, the traditional role of mothers as the main caregivers determined the Nazi policy of grouping mothers together with their children under the age of 14. See Joan Ringelheim, Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research, in: Carol Rittner/John K. Roth (eds.), Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust, New York 1993, 378.

4 Chaitin/Bar-On, Emotional Memories (fn. 1), 300f.; Yael Danieli, Countertransference in the Treatment and Study of Nazi Holocaust Survivors and Their Children in: *Victimology* 5 (1981), 45-53, cited in: Chaitin/Bar-On, Emotional Memories, 301.

5 See Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, New York 1958, 439.

6 See Irith Dublon-Knebel, Transformationen im Laufe der Zeit. Re-Präsentationen des Holocaust in Zeugnissen der Überlebenden, in: Insa Eschebach/Sigrid Jacobeit/Silke Wenk (eds.), Gedächtnis und Geschlecht, Frankfurt/Main 2002, 327-342.

7 Ibid.

8 I base this finding on a search for parents' and children's testimonies in the Yad Vashem catalogue using the key words: parents, father, mother, children, child, son, daughter.

twofold trauma: not only had their own autonomy as adults been shattered,[9] but they had been unable to fulfill their responsibility towards those who depended on them. In contrast, the testimonies of child survivors, who by definition were dependent on their parents, have revealed in the last few decades their relations with their parents during and after the Holocaust. While children often assumed adults' responsibilities during the persecutions, they did not experience the double failure that their parents did.

The aim of this article is to explore the concept of parenthood during the Holocaust, from the perspective of both children and parents, in order to establish whether parenthood survived or was crushed under the extreme conditions of the Holocaust.

I have focused on twenty-nine testimonies, nine by parents and twenty by those who were children between the ages seven and seventeen at the time of liberation. One parent's and one child survivor's testimony are from the immediate postwar period taken from the Wiener Library, London;[10] the rest are testimonies based on interviews conducted in 1982-2003. Fifteen of the later testimonies were recorded by Yad Vashem; ten are interviews that my colleagues and I conducted in the framework of a research project on Jewish women in the concentration camp of Ravensbrück,[11] some of which were transcribed by Yad Vashem and included in its archive; and two interviews were conducted by the Jerome Riker International Study of Organized Persecution of Children.[12] In addition I have used documents from the Nazi era.

These testimonies represent only a tiny drop in the vast ocean of the victims' experiences, each victim being an individual with his/her particular stories and distinctive voice. Nevertheless, as Saul Friedländer has pointed out: »The only concrete history that can be retrieved remains that carried by personal stories. From the stage of collective disintegration to that of deportation and death, this history, in order to be written at all, has to be represented as the integrated narration of individual fates.«[13]

9 See Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Recovery, New York 1992, 84ff..

10 These testimonies are available online at <http://84.18.190.27/testaments/index.htm>.

11 The project was conducted in cooperation with the Freie Universität Berlin and Tel Aviv University, financed by the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development (hereafter Ravensbrück project).

12 Directed by Judith Kestenberg, New York, co-directed by Yolanda Gampel, Department of Psychology, Tel Aviv University. The testimonies are located at the Wiener Collection, Tel Aviv University (hereafter WLTP).

13 Saul Friedländer, Nazi Germany and the Jews, vol. 1, The Years of Persecution, New York 1997, 5.

The Parents' Perspective

Although the care for children's physical, emotional, and social well-being is universal, the time span during which children enjoy such parental care before joining adult society, the way this care is provided, and the distance between childhood and adulthood vary from culture to culture and in different historical periods.[14] In Nazi Germany there was an attempt to abolish to a certain extent the traditional separation between the private and the public spheres in German society,[15] in the course of which racially fit German parenthood became declaratively a matter of state, part of its ideology and the National-Socialist »revolution.«[16] By contrast, Nazi Germany's attack on Jewish parenthood totally broke down the separation between the public and the private in order to dehumanize its victims. Parents were gradually stripped of their parental power as their livelihood was destroyed, property confiscated, and above all the »juridical person« killed.[17] With each stage of persecution that denied means of living and basic rights, parents went through a process of »infantilization« that increasingly blurred the boundaries between children and adults, as neither group had a legal status and both were completely dependent on Nazi authority. In the following, on the basis of the parents' testimonies, I outline the various kinds of conduct and emotion on the part of the parents during the gradual process that damaged their parental resources.

The first reaction of parents to the anti-Jewish attacks was to seek refuge for themselves and their children outside the Third Reich, where they would be able to continue with their lives. Such was the case of Ursula S., a German Jew who left Berlin with her baby daughter after *Kristallnacht*.[18] Parents of older children often tried to obtain shelter for them, while they themselves stayed behind. Personal factors such as a crisis within the family often accelerated the decision to separate from the child. Excerpts from parent' letters to the Kindercomité (Children's Commission) in Amsterdam from late 1938 and 1939 reveal that although these parents were prepared to relinquish direct contact with their children during what they believed to be a tempo-

14 Philippe Ariès, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life, trans. Robert Baldick, New York, 1965; Bar-On/Chaitin, Parenthood and the Holocaust (fn. 1), 5; Beatrice Blyth Whiting/Carolyn Pope Edwards, Children of Different Worlds, Cambridge, MA 1988, 86.

15 Gisela Bock, Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany: Perpetrators, Victims, Followers and Bystanders, in: Dalia Ofer/Lenore Weitzman (eds.), Women in the Holocaust, New Haven and London 1998, 91.

16 See for example a greeting card sent by the SS to the new fathers among its men: »The brigade thanks you for the child with which you have presented our *Volk*,« Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter YV), 0.64.1/44.

17 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (fn. 5), 447.

18 Author's interview with Ursula S. (Ravensbrück project), Bat Yam, May 5 and 12, 1998 [German].

rary separation, they sought to ensure that their children would have as normal as possible a life outside the Reich. Soon after *Kristallnacht*, a mother wrote to the Children's Commission: »Would you be so kind as to help me find a place for my daughter Eleonore, where she will be treated well. My husband committed suicide last month […] My daughter […] is good natured, speaks English and plays the piano and has good hands.«[19] An Austrian Jew, who was released from Dachau, asked the Commission for help for his children, while another man, whose wife had committed suicide, requested refuge for his two teenage sons, where they could continue their education. This, he writes, would relieve him of a huge worry.[20]

It is noteworthy that the redistribution of traditional roles within the family was a dominant feature in the parents' experience. While mothers played a crucial role right from the onset of the persecution, the impairment of the father's traditional roles as protector and provider was evident. With the outbreak of war, the advance of the German army and the beginning of the deportations, parents realized that they had to act radically and unconventionally; while their acts would jeopardize themselves, and their children, they would provide a chance to escape the Nazi trap. A German Jewish woman, Gigi K., prevented her teenage daughter's deportation from Holland to Poland by pretending that the girl had appendicitis, thus getting her hospitalized and operated upon; after her recovery she made her sick again by injecting her with malaria.[21] Although Mrs. K.'s affidavit was given not long after the war, she added these details only in a later supplement, which indicates the difficulty she had in revealing her conduct.

The widespread solution was to find a hiding place for children of all ages, a move that involved not only separating from the children but also a change in their identity, which meant relinquishing parental authority. In spite of the logic of such a move, it was often perceived by both parents or children as a kind of desertion.

The determination that Ursula S. had displayed when leaving Germany failed her when it came to hiding her daughter in Brussels. When she went to the Jewish Commission requesting a place for the son of her brother, who had been arrested, she was urged to hide her five-year-old daughter as well.[22] Ursula was not ready to renounce her parental authority: »But I am still here, I will of course keep the child with me,« she said to the woman of the Jewish Commission, who replied: »What will happen when they come for you?«

19 Wiener Library, London (hereafter WL), excerpts from letters to the Kindercomité in Amsterdam, B.263 [German].

20 Ibid., B.264, B.257.

21 WL P.III. d.769 (Holland), affidavit of Mrs. Gigi K., New York, July 8, 1956 [German].

22 The Comité de Défense des Juifs in Brussels attempted to find hiding places for Jews, especially for children. See Dan Michman, Brussels, in: Yisrael Gutman (ed.), Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, New York 1990, 251 f.

Two days later, when representatives of the Jewish Commission came to her home, she asked them:

> »›You came for the boy?‹ ›No,‹ they said, › […] we have a place for a girl.‹ They took my daughter with them. For two weeks they did not let me know where she was […] [After a while] I saw her every week in the forest in a small house, and this child at her age said to me: ›See you Mutti, you promise that you will come again next week?‹ I promised. I was one year in Auschwitz, altogether I was away for two years [weeps].«[23]

The leitmotif throughout Ursula's testimony is her sense of having violated her daughter's trust. This was one of her worst experiences during the Holocaust and was exacerbated by the fact that even when they were reunited after the war the damage to her parenthood could not be healed.[24]

Part of the trauma suffered by Jewish mothers in their attempt to save their children was caused by the shifting of roles within the family and the incapacity of men to act, not only because they were denied the traditional means of supporting their families, but because they could not risk what was considered exceptional behavior, such as traveling alone with infants or small children, which would evoke suspicion in the reality of the Holocaust.[25] Women, who before the war had lived in a sheltered environment, where contact with the outside world was maintained primarily by the men of their families, had for the first time in their lives to act not only independently but also courageously.

Sabine R. described herself as having been a dependent young wife and mother during the prewar years.[26] She blamed herself for her naivety, which had conditioned her behavior before being forcibly separated from her baby daughter. The decision to give her child into the care of a Polish woman was made by her parents, but when it was discovered that the child was being mistreated, the family took her back and decided that Sabine and her by then sick child would travel under false identities to a remote health resort: »My husband convinced me to disguise myself and the child as Gentiles. I didn't want to part from him. I was afraid […] I got tickets for Rabka. I was like an automaton. I didn't know what was happening with me.« Traveling alone, she felt incompetent to cope with the situation: »I was devastated that [the guards] didn't approach me. I thought if they would only look at my papers, they would see that they were fake and would kill me and I would be rid of everything.« Finding a place to stay, she was eventually turned in by the

23 Interview with Ursula S. (fn. 18).

24 Ibid.

25 See the testimonies of two women concerning their husbands' refusal to escape with their children; one of the reasons given was that this might give them away as Jews. YV 03/10528 YV 03/3733.

26 Author's interview with Sabine R. (Ravensbrück project), Tel Aviv, December 17 and 21, 1997 [Hebrew]; transcribed by Yad Vashem, YV 03/10870.

landlord. The police came for her when she had gone out to buy milk, leaving the child in her room. Describing her impulse to run for her life and leave her daughter behind, she explained: »That way I might rescue the child, I wasn't dressed, but I had money with me, but I couldn't part from the child.« At the Gestapo prison, they remained together for 24 hours before the child was taken from her.[27]

Parents used their last resources in an attempt to save their children even when they were already inside the Nazi destruction machine. When the twelve-year-old daughter of a Hungarian-Jewish woman Elisabeth S. refused to stay in Budapest in hiding, she was forced on a march to the Austrian border together with her mother.[28] Confronted with the brutal reality during the march, Elisabeth decided at enormous risk to assert what remained of her parental abilities. When they reached the border she gave one of the Hungarian guards gold necklaces, and in return asked him to bring her daughter back to Budapest to her father who was in hiding. Elisabeth S. did not know till the end of the war whether the guard had fulfilled his side of the bargain or had taken the gold and killed the child. When she was liberated, Elisabeth walked 11 days back to Budapest where she found her daughter. As in the case of Ursula S., however, it seems that the mistrust created by handing her daughter over to the Hungarian guard was not healed after the war.[29]

An interview with parents whose four-year-old son was saved after they managed to have him smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto and placed in the care of a Polish family provides both the mother's and the father's perspective. The mother described the moment of parting : »[…] he looked at me and I didn't cry, but I probably had a terrible face. And he said to me, ›I am not afraid […].‹ And he took her [the Polish woman's] hand and turned around hopping as if nothing happened […] I cried when I got home, not in front of him […] It was my duty to protect him.«[30] The father reported: »I have regular nightmares and they are always the same thing. Never the camps, only the ghettos. I am in the ghetto and an action starts and I am in charge of her and the child. And there's nowhere to hide them, and the hopelessness. They are coming to kill us and there is nothing we can do.«[31] The ordeal of both the parents and the child did not end after their postwar reunion. The boy was extremely resentful towards both his parents, but especially towards his mother.[32] While the mother's trauma stemmed from her son's pain and his inability to comprehend her conduct, the father's trauma was caused by

27 Ibid.
28 Author's interview with Elisabeth S. (Ravensbrück project), Yavneh, June 5, 1997 [German].
29 Ibid.
30 WLTP AD-JK- 5.5.1982, 10, 14 [English]. (In these interviews only the initials of the interviewees are given.)
31 Ibid., 11.
32 Ibid., 7f.

his sense of impotence to fulfill his role as the protector of his family before they were separated.

When the sexes were separated at the gates of the concentration camps, men were torn from their wives and small children, and thus denied any chance of protecting them. It was unusual for small children and their mothers to survive at this stage. Of the few that did, some survived by chance while others fell into a special category or were treated under an exceptional procedure. For example, Sarah K. was a Hungarian citizen living in the Netherlands with her husband and three small children; their citizenship provided them with a certain measure of protection. Unlike the rest of the detainees in the transit camp of Westerbork who were deported to the extermination camps in the east, Sarah and her children were transferred to the concentration camp of Ravensbrück, and her husband to Buchenwald.[33] In Ravensbrück, Sarah, like other Jewish mothers who were citizens of neutral or allied countries, was allowed to remain with her children; thus her story affords an insight into the phenomenon of Jewish mothers, children, and infants living together in the reality of a Nazi concentration camp. Sarah's fight for survival was first and foremost a fight for her children's survival. She scarcely mentioned her own emotions or state of mind, mainly narrating the practical problems she had to face, either because she knew she could not make the interviewers understand the horror she had experienced or because her total focus on her children did not allow her own feelings to surface, even at the time of the interview. »I wasn't thinking about anything,« she said, thus indicating how automatic her behavior had been in those circumstances.[34] Only a few times in her testimony did she hint at the nature of the events she had been through. At one point she said that all her concern had been for her children, whom she had kept »very close.« At another point, describing the march out of Ravensbrück, she admitted: »I don't know how I did it […] we didn't look back, I only looked forward […] in a situation like that one gets strength.«[35]

When the Nazi trap closed on them parents were deprived of any means of rescuing their children. They had to witness their children's murder or, in some cases, they managed to hide with them under atrocious circumstances in which the only surviving trait of parenthood was that of guarding the physical survival of the child.

When Hanna H., a Polish Jewish woman, heard that the Germans were approaching, she grabbed her three-year-old daughter and started walking

33 Interview with Sarah K. by Adriana Kemp (Ravensbrück project), Beit Yitzhak, July 17, 1997 [Hebrew]; transcribed by Yad Vashem, YV 03/10424.

34 Henry Krystal defined a state of »robotization« of prisoners that could partly be applied to Sarah's behavior. Henry Krystal, Trauma and Aftereffects, in: *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 33 (1978), 81-116, cited in: Herman, Trauma and Recovery (fn. 9), 84.

35 Ibid., 19-21, 25, 31, 27, 29, 13.

aimlessly, driven by the realization that she had no other options: »I went with the child through the darkness, and the child was crying. I ask her to be quiet […] but the dogs were running after me, and the child screamed, […] how does one cope […]? I had no choice […] I was brave.« Hanna, her child and husband ended up hiding for eight months in a pit. In addition to her own terror Hanna had to cope with her daughter:

> »I told the child that she wasn't allowed to talk, that she would get a sore on her tongue if she talked, that the sore would grow until her tongue fell off. The child was scared. She talked very little, but when it was quiet in the village, I talked to her about how [they would] free us […] and the child lived with that […] her eyes were blank […] she knew that she shouldn't talk because I told her again and again how her tongue would fall off, how she wouldn't be able to talk or eat ice cream, so she didn't talk.«[36]

In the ghetto of Dwinsk, Ch.'s three children were killed while she and her husband were at work:

> »On the morning of November 9, 1941 […] we heard rumors of another SS operation. I was terrified that something terrible was going to happen to the children. My husband comforted me saying that we have red ›Scheine‹ [certificates]. To my sorrow I was right. When […] we […] returned [from work] we found to our great horror that all the 800 children of the ghetto, among them my three, Bernhard 13 years old, Ida 10 years old and Isack 5 years old, had been taken by the fascist hangmen away from the camp and murdered.«[37]

After the murder of their children, Ch. and her husband decided to escape, a move that even she finds hard to believe: »It is hard for us to understand today that […] after such a horrific experience […] we could plan soberly our escape from the Ghetto. Was it the enormous pain that we experienced that gave us the extraordinary strength not to surrender alive […] or was it the defiant drive that made us refuse to give in? It must have been both.«[38]

Although Ruth E., a Jewish woman from Czechoslovakia, was pregnant when she was deported to Auschwitz at the end of December 1943, she managed to pass the selection.[39] She did not think about her unborn child, Ruth stated, but was driven by her determination to survive. When she was transferred to Hamburg for hard labor, her pregnancy was discovered. The SS man was astounded that such a phenomenon existed that deep in the concentrationary universe and transferred her first to Ravensbrück and then back to

36 YV 03/10528 [Hebrew], 25-28, 31.
37 YV 03/3733 [German], 5 f., 8.
38 Ibid., 9.
39 YV 03/8940, 1996 [Hebrew].

Auschwitz.[40] On August 4, she gave birth to a baby girl. In the morning, Mengele ordered that her breasts be tied in order to measure how long it would take her baby to starve to death:

> »[…] the child[41] cried […] when I got some bread I chewed it and dipped it in the black coffee or soup […] and gave it to the child. It was terrible. […] Every morning Mengele made his rounds, checking the tiny body. It was torture, I cannot describe it. The child, at first she cried, but then she cried less and less. […]. On the sixth day she no longer cried, but made voices like a small animal.«

On the seventh day, Mengele told Ruth that he would come to take her (Ruth) on the next day. She knew that this meant death. A Czech doctor said that she would help. She brought a morphine injection and told Ruth to inject the baby:

> »I said to her, ›Do you want me to kill the child?‹ I was shocked […] she talked about the Hippocratic Oath […] that the child would not survive, [but] that I must live. She talked and talked […] until I did it. I killed my child […] they put her with the rest of the bodies in front of the barracks. Mengele came in the morning […] he wanted to see the small body but he couldn't find it in the huge pile of bodies. It was only because of Berta and the doctor that I didn't go to the fence to kill myself.«[42]

The Children's Perspective

»Our introduction to the new German ›Kultur‹ was through the persecution of children,« stated Donald K.[43] Nazi Germany made the stage of childhood of the young victims regress far back into history, in many ways even out of history and the »civilizing process,«[44] not only through the suffering and torment it inflicted upon them but also by depriving them of the protection

40 Ibid., 27-30.

41 The Hebrew word she uses is »ha-yaldah« (the little girl), a formulation that points to Ruth's need to distance herself emotionally from the event during the interview.

42 Ibid., 28-33.

43 Donald K., Child of the Concentration Camp, unpublished memoir in the author's possession, 8.

44 According to Lloyd deMause, »The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused.« Norbert Elias has seen a close connection between the civilizing process and the space between the child and the adult worlds: »The distance in behavior and whole psychical structure between children and adults increases in the course of the civilizing process.« Lloyd deMause, The Evolution of Childhood, in: idem (ed.), The History of Childhood, New York 1975, 1; Norbert Elias, The Civilizing Process, Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1994, xiii.

of the state and making it impossible for their parents to protect them. Child survivors' descriptions of the gradual deterioration of their lives are tightly entwined with the transformation in their parents' capacity to care for them. In the following I will outline the most salient references of the child survivors to this transformation.

The children's concept of parenthood underwent an upheaval when it was deprived of its central components: the ability to explain the world, the ability to provide living necessities, the power to protect and thus the respect accorded to the parent. The mere presence of their parents was important for all children and eventually determined to a large extent the way they perceived them. However, while for infants and pre-school children, the parents' presence provided a primary sense of security,[45] older children were aware of their parents' »failure« and degradation. As the gender-based distribution of roles within the family broke down, the undermining of the father's authority and the ensuing change in the child's perception of the father figure were major factors in the damage to the family unit.

This process was gradual; it began with the parents' inability to explain what was happening. Since it was traditionally the father's role to explain occurrences in the outside world, this was mainly perceived as his failure. Thus Otto K., who was eight years old when the war began in Holland, reported: »My father, who always knew what to do and how to do it, to whom I could always turn to with any question, didn't have answers. At that moment, my world caved in.«[46] A woman reported her first experience with violated trust when she was about 10 years old: »I was always taught we were the Chosen People and when they were able to send us out the way they did, I said to my father, ›Tell me, if we're the Chosen People, how come they were able to do this to us?‹ And he tried to explain to me, a child, the usual bit. But I don't think I bought it.«[47]

The second stage in the disintegration process usually paralleled the first physical attacks against the family. For Rudi K. the trauma of the deportation to the transit camp of Westerbork was intertwined with what he perceived as his father's weakness: »This was a revelation, that my father was helpless, [that] he could not protect us […] I must say it was a terrible revelation.«[48]

45 Everett M. Ressler/Neil Bothby/Daniel J. Steinbock, Unaccompanied Children: Care and Protection in Wars, Natural Disasters, and Refugee Movements, New York and Oxford 1988, 148.

46 Menachem Kallus, Als Junge im KZ Ravensbrück, Berlin 2005, 26 f.; see also interview conducted by Adriana Kemp and the author with Emi and Menachem K. (Ravensbrück project), Tivon, July 17, 1997 [Hebrew]; transcribed by Yad Vashem, YV, 03/10425.

47 WLTP, CR-SY 1987 [English], 9.

48 Interview with Rudi K. conducted by Sabine Kittel (Ravensbrück project), Saarbrücken, February 26, 1999 [German]. See also the testimony of Judith B., YV 03/9416, 1995, 34.

When the men were separated from their families before entering the concentration camps, the disintegration in Otto's father figure reached its nadir. He felt the intervention of »a great and terrible power, greater than the power of my father.«[49] Although he wrote his memoirs almost 60 years later, when he clearly understood his father's powerlessness, there is still an accusatory tone in his description of what, as a child, he had perceived as capitulation.

Children of privileged groups, who were imprisoned with their mothers in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, described their humiliation during the traumatic entrance to the camp and the removal of their clothes. The public exposure of their mothers' nakedness was particularly traumatic and was perceived as sacrilege, as an even deeper level of desecration of the parent's honor.[50] The roll-calls were another location where mothers were often publicly humiliated. Naomi M. reported that her mother had been brutally beaten by an *Aufseherin* because she had brought a chair for her sick son so that he could sit down during the roll-call.[51]

The damage to parental authority inevitably blurred the boundaries between the adults' and the children's worlds as children increasingly assumed responsibilities of their parents. Pnina A., a Jewish woman from Poland, remembered that at the age of 9 she went to collect money owed to her father when it became too dangerous for him to travel to the neighboring villages.[52] In the transit camp of Westerbork children quickly became cognizant of the regulations, sometimes more so than the adults, who were physically and emotionally exhausted.[53] The children's achievements were mixed with pain for the harm done to the adults:

> »They took everything my parents had away from them. My father was not allowed to earn, my mother was not allowed to make a home for us, and Grandpa and Grandma were not allowed to take care of us. On the contrary: I went with Grandpa to show him where everything was in the camp […] I would even speak on his behalf […] All this threw me into a state of great confusion.«[54]

Children also took over the care of their younger siblings. Recalling the Germans' search for Jews who had gone into hiding in the small town of Przysucha, Poland, Bella B. testified: »[…] I dressed, I dressed my younger sister

49 Kallus, Als Junge (fn. 46), 54.
50 Ibid., 60; interview with Rudi K. (fn. 48), YV 03/10515, 6.
51 Interview with Naomi M. conducted by Adriana Kemp and the author (Ravensbrück project), Netanya, July 2,1997 [Hebrew]; transcribed by Yad Vashem,YV 033C/5583, 15.
52 Author's interview with Pnina A. and Bella G. (Ravensbrück project), Tel Aviv, April 27, 1998 [Hebrew]; transcribed by Yad Vashem, YV 03/11008, 7.
53 See Judith S. Kestenberg/Ira Brenner, The Last Witness: The Child Survivor of the Holocaust, Washington 1996, 22.
54 Kallus, Als Junge (fn. 46), 46.

[…] I remember that I hid under the bed with one or two children […] I tell this in order to show the extent of the confusion, how the parents had no control over the situation and didn't know what to do.«[55]

The burden of taking over their parents' responsibilities was so great that these children sometimes felt liberated when they no longer had to look after their families or when they were no longer able to because of conditions of extreme deprivation This may explain the startling statement made by a woman who had spent two years as a child struggling to obtain food for her family before she was imprisoned in Auschwitz: »Auschwitz was for me a place where I did not have to bring food home every day. I was almost free, free as a bird.«[56]

Along with the phenomenon of the collapse of faith and trust in parents, some children recalled their parents' attempts to rescue them even when the family was already trapped in the Nazi vice. Once it became clear that age was a significant factor in determining the victims' fate, children lied about their real age and parents claimed their children to be older than they were. A boy reported how in the ghetto his parents disguised him so that he would be able to pass for 16 when he was actually only nine years old. They sewed him a special jacket with a bump on the back that made him look like a hunchback, teaching him to say in German: »16 years old, didn't grow.«[57]

Among the group of mothers and children who managed to remain together throughout the Holocaust, the mothers' ceaseless efforts to save their children were reported in most of the children's testimonies. One of the girls compared her mother's behavior to that of an animal taking care of her young. In order to safeguard her children while she was sleeping, she tied her little daughters to her body.[58] Occasionally we even find descriptions of the ways in which mothers coped with the emotional hardships of their children by creating a mental bubble detached from the reality of the camps. One boy described how his mother helped him conquer his fears by persuading him that what was happening was not real, but a kind of play that was being staged there.[59]

The admiration for their mothers' conduct expressed by some of the children occasionally turned into a kind of glorification in later years. This is best exemplified by the two testimonies of Judith B., one given immediately after the war, the other in 1995.[60] While the early testimony is a monotonous report of her family's experiences in the Holocaust, the later testimony is a

55 YV 03/7595, Haifa, 1994 [Hebrew], 6f.
56 YV 03/5369, Nir Galim, 1986 [Hebrew], 9.
57 YV 03/12266, 2003 [Hebrew], 11.
58 Author's interview with the L. family (Ravensbrück project), Jerusalem, January 30, 2001 [Hebrew].
59 YV 03/9814, 1996, [Hebrew], 6, 11; see also K., Child of the Concentration Camp (fn. 43), 21.
60 WL P.III.h. no. 441 General [German]; YV 03/9416 [English].

story of almost biblical proportions centered on the mother's heroism, ethics, and wisdom.

Children have reported how in some cases parents abandoned their role in the extreme conditions of the extermination camps. »I couldn't understand those few mothers who didn't go with their children, who were able to give up their children,« stated one of the child survivors.[61] In Auschwitz babies were found hidden in suitcases;[62] it is not clear whether the mothers had hidden them in the hope that they would be rescued or in an effort to survive by pretending to be childless.

Some teenage girls described the sense of having being deserted by their mothers after they had been forcibly separated. Twin sisters recalled the moment when their mother ordered them to go with Mengele, who was looking for twins for his experiments at the gates of Auschwitz. The mother's act obviously saved the girls' lives, yet it was described as their worst trauma.[63]

Any attempt by prisoners to remain with a family member entailed great risk. Staying together contradicted the Nazi practice of dismantling families, as one *Aufseherin* explained, screaming at a woman who was begging her not to be separated from her daughter: »Here there is no daughter, no mother, there are no families!«[64] In the camp of Malchow, a young Jewish girl from Poland was separated from her mother, who had been selected to leave the camp. The girl begged the *Aufseherin* Luise Danz to let her join her mother. Danz responded by hitting her with a club. When the girl fell to the ground, she trampled on her with her boots until her stomach split open. The girl died immediately and her mother was put on the transport.[65]

Children reported the increasing deterioration and desperation of the adults during the last phase before liberation. Donald K. remembered that prisoners who were too weak to button their shirts came to the children asking for help.[66] Mothers whose struggle for survival focused primarily on their children's continued existence collapsed under the double burden. Bella testified that during the evacuation march her mother went into a ditch and refused to get up; it was only her fear that the SS would shoot not only her but also her daughter that made her go on.[67] Channa's trust in her mother's parental abilities, which had remained intact throughout their entire Holocaust ordeal, was shattered at the last moment because of her mother's de-

61 WLTP, CR-SJ, USA, 1987 [English], 14.
62 YV 03/11814, 2000, 9, YV 03/5369, 9.
63 YV 03/5377, Nir Galim, 1987, 15. See also YV M-1Pf/271.
64 YV TR11/462; see also YV 03/9416, 1995, 26.
65 Irith Dublon-Knebel, »Erinnern kann ich mich nur an eine Frau Danz …« Die Aufseherin Luise Danz in der Erinnerung ihrer Opfer, in: Gisela Bock (ed.), Genozid und Geschlecht. Jüdische Frauen im KZ-System, Frankfurt/Main and New York 2005, 75.
66 K., Child of the Concentration Camp (fn. 43), 39.
67 YV 03/7595.

spair.[68] The mother of Otto, Rudi and Emmi K. died in Bergen-Belsen five days after the liberation. Suddenly, she was no longer there, Rudi related. Initially, he felt angry because she had always been there for him, and suddenly she disappeared. Later, he told himself that now she was free; it was the only thing she had done for herself – and she had only done it after ascertaining that her children had been rescued.[69]

Conclusion

The cases described here show that the concept of parenthood was severely undermined during the Holocaust when most of its components could not be fulfilled. However even though the damage to the most basic and significant of all human relationships, that of parent and child, constitutes a major domain of destruction in the history of the Holocaust, it amounted almost to a taboo on the part of both the parents themselves and researchers. This can be explained by the fear of touching those aspects of the Holocaust in which the dehumanization process caused victims to deviate from basic human values and radically altered basic human relations – those areas in which the perpetrators succeeded in dehumanizing their victims not only in their own eyes but also in the eyes of the victims themselves. This is not only the understandable difficulty of the victims in confronting these dark moments, but also the difficulty experienced by society, researchers and above all states and institutions, which choose to highlight heroic events in the history of the Holocaust or cases in which victims were able to resist the dehumanization process.

While the parents in the cases cited here clearly conveyed the feeling that their parenthood had been crushed, sometimes irrecoverably, even when they had been able to save the lives of their children, the children demonstrate a variety of reactions, from outright anger at their parents' »failure,« through empathy and pain for their parents' helplessness and humiliation, to appreciation and admiration. The gap between the children's and parents' reactions has perhaps been best explained by one of the child survivors as follows:

> »[…] if this was happening when I was grown and had children, I couldn't have survived it […] you watch your children and it is ten times worse. That's why mostly youngsters did survive. I mean, I didn't like seeing my parents suffer, but it's not the same thing as watching your children suffer. Now that I have children, I know, but at that time I didn't understand.«[70]

68 YV 03/5396, 1986 [Hebrew], 12.
69 Interview with Rudi K. (fn. 48).
70 WLTP, YT CR-SJ [English], 14.