

Hidden Children: An Overview

Children of the Holocaust

When Germany came under Nazi rule, the country adopted as official policy a racist ideology aimed at the destruction of the Jews. To bring about the complete eradication of this entire population, the Nazi strategy demanded that not only adults be marked for destruction but that children be targeted as well. In fact, in each European country conquered by the Germans, the survival rate of children was much lower than that of the overall Jewish population. It is estimated that one and a half million Jewish children, from infants to older teens, were gassed or shot to death in Nazi-occupied Europe. This means that nine out of ten Jewish children were murdered, not as a result of some tragic accident or some wild scheme gone wrong, but simply because they were Jewish.

Such deliberate and systematic killing of children was unprecedented in human history. Very few escaped the Nazi plan of Jewish annihilation. Those who were sent to concentration camps were killed upon arrival. Only an occasional, healthy-looking teen-ager managed to slip through the system.

Hidden Children

For the most part, the children who eluded the Nazis survived because they were hidden from their persecutors. Sometimes for years, they lived out of their captors' sight, in convents, orphanages, haylofts, woods, basements or sewers. Some lived openly, concealing their names, pretending to be Christian.

Often, families were torn apart. In a desperate attempt to save their children, parents made the agonizing decision to leave their little ones with strangers. And, frequently, children were left to fend for themselves, wandering through forests and villages in search of food and shelter.

Children in hiding, many of them very young, had to learn basic survival skills, one of which was being silent. Some children had to live in a quiet way so that they would not be discovered; others, like children who were living with Christian families had to be silent about their Jewish Christian identity. One mistake could cost them their lives as well as the lives of those who were protecting them.

Even today, no one knows how many Jewish children were hidden during the war. The one name most people know is Anne Frank. But there were many others, perhaps as many as 100,000, who lived their own nightmares. Those children who hid by themselves rarely found their parents; many lost their entire family and found themselves alone again at the end of the war. Many of the child survivors ended up in orphanages or displaced person's camps.

Until recently, the story of the children of the Holocaust was rarely told. Many survivors continued to live "in hiding" by keeping their stories of survival and loss private. However, more and more survivors have courageously shared their stories over the last decade; finding

comfort in sharing their stories and examining the range of emotions including pain, anger, loss, guilt, and hope with others. Their legacy is a critical piece of people learning about and understanding the Holocaust in terms of the living as well as the six million Jews who died.

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