This groundbreaking volume, edited and introduced by Joanna Beata Michlic, illuminates the persistent impact of childhood Holocaust experiences from World War II until the present day. Twelve chapters written by Holocaust scholars from a broad range of countries and disciplines discuss the Holocaust not only as a cataclysm that brutally ripped apart families and murdered family members, but also as the generator of pathological environments in which social norms and expectations were inverted and social lacunae festered: husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters were deprived of each other, and they were also deprived of critical familial roles that the other played. Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present powerfully reveals the ongoing implications of these familial disruptions.

Historical Jewish societies considered families to be foundational social institutions, de rigueur for productive adult existence. Jewish law and culture created clear generational and gendered familial norms, norms that were expected to bolster the physical and spiritual Jewish well-being of adult generations as well as protect and nurture Jewish generations to come. Despite historical and geographical disruptions, and changes over time, Jewish families were expected to promote what today would be called Jewish religious “continuity,” and to serve numerous educational, sociopsychological, and sexual functions. Not least, traditionally defined roles within Jewish families often helped to cushion family members in times of difficulty, compensating for personal and societal existential uncertainties.

In contrast, the Holocaust violently distorted normative family relationships. Several of the essays in this collection emphasize the ways in which new, ad hoc, family-like structures were created: both adults and young people tried to fill in the gaps by playing roles for each other that enhanced the possibilities for day-to-day survival. In this environment, children were robbed not only of loving family members but also of necessary developmental episodes. For the youngest children, those who could not remember an environment prior to the Holocaust, their daily living situations may have seemed “normal,” some testimonies reveal. Nevertheless, other testimonies show that child Holocaust victims were not necessarily passive in the grip of moral distortions. On the contrary: isolated and without adults capable of playing protective adult roles, some children responded by consciously resisting and by playing quasi-adult roles and protecting each other. Ironically, many victimized
children were much less passive than children with normal childhoods—they learned to depend on their own agency. During the Holocaust, these adultlike children understood that they must repress aspects of their childhood selves in order to function and survive. Later, in their postwar lives, such adult child survivors realized that their very childhoods had been stripped from them. Even those who succeeded economically and socially during adulthood were often haunted by such bereavements throughout their lives.

The testimonies of child survivors of the Holocaust are especially prominent sources in this volume. Many general readers will not have previously encountered testimonies of child-survivor experiences and losses, even though such testimonies were recorded and stored in various oral history and archival collections. For decades, the memories of people who had been “children” during the war were not considered reliable evidence for historians. Today, scholarly appreciation for the importance of child survivors’ testimonies is growing—partially because of the pioneering work of scholars such as Michlic and her colleagues.

These compelling essays reveal that the often ignored, mistrusted, or sentimentalized testimonies of child survivors of the Holocaust differ in important respects from the recorded memories of adults—and from each other. They illuminate a range of childhood and familial experiences foundational to understanding how and why the Holocaust continues to play a profound role in Jewish lives and societies. In reclaiming the voices of these child survivors of the Holocaust, and in showing how an analysis of gendered and family-like relationships is foundational to understanding the ongoing impact of the Holocaust, Joanna Michlic’s *Jewish Families in Europe* performs a scholarly task that is humanitarian, feminist, and very much in keeping with the mission of the Hadassah–Brandeis Institute: “promoting fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender worldwide.”