“Child survivors cannot recollect the Holocaust the way adult survivors do. Their contribution is bound to their experience. But their limited experience is a profound one.”¹ This statement uttered by Aharon Appelfeld (1932– ), an acclaimed Israeli writer and a child Holocaust survivor from Bukovina, can be viewed as one of the underpinning ideas for this collective volume. The book delineates key aspects of postwar histories and (self)-representations of mainly central east European Jewry through the lenses of Jewish parents, children, and youths, and to a lesser degree, through charismatic Jewish activists and educators and Jewish organizations and institutions. It does not claim to provide the final word on the subject, but instead, presents a rich sample of the most recent avenues of research into child survivors’ postwar memories and into the coping mechanisms of Jewish families and youths during the Holocaust; the possibilities, limitations, and dynamics of the reconstruction of the post-Holocaust Jewish family; and the impossibility of the recovery of childhood in the aftermath of the genocide. It hopes to invite scholars from a variety of fields to engage in further stimulating intellectual conversations, debates, and research on the subject. It alerts the reader’s attention to aspects of social history of the Holocaust and its aftermath of which our understanding is still patchy.

The volume records the experiences of Jewish families and children in central east Europe during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Some of these experiences are similar to the experiences of Jewish families and children from Nazi-occupied Western Europe.² However, some other aspects, such as the mistreatment of Jewish fugitives by those who could be defined as rescuers-abusers, are more specifically embedded in the historical experience of the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Poland and other east European countries. The editor of this volume recognizes the need for a comparative study aimed at writing a comprehensive history of the rescue of Jewish children in Western and Eastern Europe and the history of European Jewish family reconstitution after the war. Comparative synchronic historical studies of specific issues such as the attitudes and behavior of rescuers toward Jewish children during the Holocaust and the attitudes and behavior of Turkish rescuers toward Armenian children, who had to convert to Islam during the Armenian genocide of 1915–1917,³ might also be useful for a deeper understanding of the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities’ children who are victims of genocide,
though such studies may prove difficult to conduct because of sparse sources in the Armenian case. Another potential comparative synchronic study worth exploring, in order to deepen our understanding of young survivors’ lives in the aftermath of genocide, is to compare the memories and self-perceptions of Jewish youths as they had emerged from the Holocaust with those of young victims of other twentieth-century genocides, such as the young Tutsi victims of the Rwandan genocide of 1994: how both groups felt about and reflected on their own survival.

At the same time, I believe that present-day scholarly examination of the experiences of children in World War II and in the aftermath should reflect historical distinctions between various groups of child victims, and not be “colorblind” to the differences between Jewish children’s experiences and those of children from other ethnic and national groups. It is crucial not only to discuss similarities of experiences, but to pay attention to historical differences and the different historical contexts of the varied child victims. By denying specific features of child victims’ experiences in Nazi-occupied Europe, we are in danger of providing a rather a shallow and inaccurate picture of the impact of war and genocide on families and children, and societies as a whole. Of course, such a scholarly analysis should be free of any ideological goals and of attempts at ascertaining a hierarchy of child victims.

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NOTES


