Janka Warshavska began smuggling in the Kraków ghetto when she was eleven years old. Submitting her testimony at age fourteen, she explained, “Did I have a choice? We didn’t have what to live off in the ghetto so I had to become a provider.” The Germans deemed bringing in food from the Aryan side a criminal activity and, as Janka pointed out, “It was very difficult to get back into the ghetto with merchandise. We had to be very careful and watch that a policeman didn’t grab us and take any merchandise. It would take weeks to recoup that which was lost.” She admitted to being embarrassed by the way she earned a living. “At first I was very ashamed to go around from house to house with our merchandise, or to stand in the doorways and bargain. Later, however, we got used to it.”1 With the impending actions in the ghetto, Janka’s tasks extended to smuggling out children to the Aryan side. She recalled the first time she took out a boy: “I didn’t know what to do with him. Aside from that, I myself was still a child and didn’t know what to do to get him to listen to me. When we got close to the fences I was so frightened that I pleaded with him not to cry. To this day I still feel the fear.”2

Janka’s testimony provides a glimpse into the smuggling operations of both goods and people, and the dangers associated with them. Her activities were not limited to obtaining food products for her family and those that she sold or bartered in the ghetto. In fact, Janka actively participated in transferring children from the ghetto for temporary “safety” during raids, and for permanent placement with gentile families. Janka’s story is but a small piece of the larger history of children in the Kraków ghetto and the way that illegal—and thus clandestine—activities led to the children’s (often temporary) survival. From the German point of view, Jewish life became illegal. For the Jews, this meant that their lives had to assume a circumspect and concealed form. German authorities held activities such as hiding, lying about
age, and sneaking out and smuggling in and out of the ghetto illegal. Yet they were essential to the well-being and survival of children and their families. Here I examine the ways, reasons, risks, and consequences of such actions, and how these activities contributed to young people’s prolonged survival in the ghetto. Jewish children and their caretakers realized that deception, evasion, and disobedience comprised tactics necessary for, but not guaranteeing, children's existence. Therefore, youths were routinely encouraged and supported in undertaking covert endeavors by their own families, and they often received assistance from gentiles. At other times, however, young people took their own initiative, unbeknownst to their families.

In analyzing the life circumstances of Jewish children trapped in the Kraków ghetto from the moment of its inception (March 3, 1941) until its final liquidation (March 13–14, 1943), the Jewish child emerges as a historical actor exercising (extremely stringent) agency. Agency refers to the child’s capacity to respond to his or her position as a participant in the events as they were occurring. Nazi anti-Jewish policy and German actions against Jews shaped children’s experiences. The lives of the youngest members of the persecuted group were also influenced by the responses of their gentile neighbors, Jewish institutions, and family dynamics. In their own actions, children were constrained by factors including racial categorization, religion, ethnicity, gender, and their membership in a child subculture of society. Yet children appeared not only as curious observers of the reality that was happening around them, or as invisible appendages to their parents, but also as avid agents influencing their own fates. They acted both independently and with the assistance of adults.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Jewish and some gentile individuals and organizations viewed Jewish children as the most vulnerable segment of the victimized people and one that symbolized the future. Yet historical studies have largely neglected children’s experiences. And scholars have overlooked the child’s voice for all too long. With the exception of several significant studies that grasp the fates of Jewish children in wartime Europe,5 the scholarship on Jewish children’s experiences during the Holocaust, particularly in Poland, is slim.6 Yet children under the age of fourteen numbered nearly one million out of Poland’s prewar Jewish population of more than three million.6

Reconstructing the experiences of such young people during the Holocaust poses several constraints. In her groundbreaking book Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe (1991), the American historian Debórah Dwork noted the fragmentary documentation on Jewish child life in Nazi Europe and discussed the reasons for this. Dwork has argued that it is justifiable to use the survivors’ accounts to speak for others, as their lives were parallel to the lives...
of those who perished until the moment of death. Allowing children’s voices to be heard, oral histories provide a valuable source of information.7

While they must be used with discretion, postwar accounts are invaluable. The memories, feelings, thoughts, behavior, and actions of those who were children during that time can, in the final analysis, be recalled by only those who lived through it. In her article “The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” British historian Joanna Michlic observed that “child survivors’ wartime biographies remain durable and almost intact in the child survivors’ memories despite the passage of time.”8 Michlic claimed that child survivors have retained memories of a set of emotionally charged and personally momentous experiences that defined their wartime lives. Children’s accounts shed light on aspects of young people’s lives during the Holocaust that cannot be gleaned from official German documents, or those produced by adult witnesses. Therefore, as Michlic argued, “Child survivors’ testimonies are a necessary and irreplaceable source in historical investigations concerning the lived experiences of the young survivors. Though they cannot be viewed as the sole or self-sufficient evidence, they are nevertheless essential for the writings of Alltagsgeschichte (everyday history) of Jewish children both during and after the war.”9

On the one hand, perpetrator documents, such as German decrees against Jews, defined the terms and boundaries of Jews’ existence. On the other hand, records maintained by the Jewish community that operated inside the ghetto provide information about the situation of children and include official statistics of the Jewish population, offering estimates on the number of children. This study relies on children’s (and in some instances, on their caretakers’) testimonies, which are, in turn, divided into several categories. The Central Committee of Jews in Poland collected a large number of written accounts from both adults and children in the immediate postwar years.10 They provide an invaluable source of information about events witnessed by children whose memory was not yet influenced by the subsequent acquisition of historical knowledge.11 Later postwar compilations of survivor accounts contain rather short descriptions of children’s lives, which are nevertheless crucial for research on Jewish childhood during the Holocaust.12 Then too, memoirs expound on important issues while presenting survivors’ interpretations of events. In addition, the oral histories collected by the Shoah Foundation Institute act as a lens on multiple aspects of a child’s life, otherwise inaccessible.13

WHY KRAKÓW?

The topic of children’s illicit activities aimed against and in response to Nazi anti-Jewish policies, but that nevertheless served to prolong children’s lives, offers insight into Jewish life under German occupation in Poland, par-
particularly in Kraków (Cracow), the capital of the General Government and seat of the Kraków District (both German-created administrative entities). The German army invaded the city on September 6, 1939, and immediately began to introduce and enforce laws restricting Jewish presence and mobility in public life. Forced isolation (legal and physical) severed Jewish Krakovians from the Polish nation, to which they believed they belonged and to which they had to a large extent integrated. The prewar historical and cultural role of Kraków\textsuperscript{14} and the self-identification of its Jewish minority as Polish Jews frame the impact of German occupation on its inhabitants and on their responses to persecution. Yet, surprisingly little has been written about Jews in wartime Kraków.\textsuperscript{15} The German occupation of the city affected the lives of all of the more than 250,000 Krakovians. However, the war and the ensuing genocide influenced the fates of some sixty thousand Jewish residents of the city differently from those of their gentile Polish neighbors.\textsuperscript{16}

German plans for Kraków stipulated the disappearance of Jews from the urban landscape. Following the expulsions from the city between May and August 1940, only some twenty thousand Jews were permitted to remain. In tandem with the policy of dispersion, the Germans instituted a strategy of concentrating the remnant of Kraków’s Jews. On March 3, 1941, the governor of the Kraków District, Dr. Otto Wächter, announced the establishment of the \textit{Jüdischer Wohnbezirk} (Jewish living quarter), giving health and safety reasons for the creation of the ghetto.\textsuperscript{17} The territory destined for Jews was actually an enclosed and guarded area where Jews were forcibly concentrated and persecuted. Located in the Podgórze district of the city, where few Jews had lived before the war, the ghetto was separated from the former Jewish district and the city proper by the Vistula River and two bridges. It was surrounded by barbed wire, and later a wall was built with four entrances (including one for the brisk passage of trams catering only to Aryan customers). Othmar Rodler became the commissar of the ghetto, which fell under the jurisdiction of Gestapo and ss Oberführer Julian Scherner in April 1941. Increasingly harsh regulations ensued. Jews who attempted to leave the ghetto without special permits faced the death penalty as of October 15, 1941. The decree specified that the same punishment applied to gentiles providing aid to Jews. Beginning the same day, Jews were responsible for acquiring their own food supply. And reversing their earlier directive, the German authorities forced all Jews from Kraków and the vicinity to report to the ghetto.

**POPULATION POLICY**

Based on the estimates of May 1, 1941, there were 10,873 Jews in the Kraków ghetto, consisting of 5,034 men (including 870 boys up to the age of twelve) and 5,839 women (including 912 up to the age of twelve).\textsuperscript{18} The ghetto’s pop-
ulation swelled when the German authorities forced all Jews from Kraków and its surrounding areas to enter the city’s Jewish quarter in October 1941. In total, some 25,000 Jews lived in the Kraków ghetto throughout the two years of its existence. Sources vary on the number of children. According to official reports of Jewish organizations that operated inside the ghetto, about 2,500 children lived there at its peak in December 1941. The census takers of Jewish organizations who worked in the ghetto may not have included all children on the official forms, being mindful of the fact that children’s clandestine presence might offer future protection. Moreover, a number of children remained in the ghetto illegally by sneaking in and failing to register with the authorities. Then too, some children deceived the authorities about their age. Finally, the reports are only fragmentary and were drafted by various organizations.

In order to control the ghetto’s population and fulfill the objectives of the program of genocide, the German authorities staged three major actions in the Kraków ghetto. Between May 28 and June 8, 1942, approximately seven thousand Jews were deported to the death camp in Bełżec. This raid was overseen by Wilhelm Kunde and led by ss Obersturmführer Otto von Mallotke. According to Heinrich Himmler’s order of July 19, 1942, all ghettos in the General Government had to be eliminated by December 31, 1942. Hence, the Germans unleashed the second big dragnet operation on October 28, 1942, under the direction of ss Sturmbannführer Willi Haase. About six hundred Jews were murdered on the spot (including approximately three hundred children) and more than forty-five hundred others were shipped to Bełżec. Hans Frank, the governor of the General Government, declared the zone Judenrein (free of Jews) on November 14, 1942, except for five closed ghettos in Kraków, Radom, Warsaw, Lwów, and Częstochowa. At this time, approximately five thousand Jews remained in the Kraków ghetto. The German authorities divided it on December 26, 1942, into “Ghetto A,” for Jews who were assigned work, and “Ghetto B,” for those without work and as a dumping ground for Jews from the Kraków area. Both sections were dissolved in the final liquidation on March 13–14, 1943, under the direction of Amon Goeth, the commandant of the Płaszów camp. The Jewish inmates of Ghetto A were marched to Płaszów, while those from Ghetto B were killed.

**DECEPTION**

The German authorities required all Jews over the age of fourteen to perform forced labor. They were detailed in various ways. Youths were rounded up or obliged to report to a specific place, from which they were taken to work sites. The Arbeitsamt (labor office) in the ghetto also assigned children to workplaces where they went on a regular basis. Realizing that working might protect them against deportation, Jews in the ghetto used their networks
of family and friends to look for jobs. Youths sent by the Germans to work outside the ghetto received special permits. They usually worked alongside adults, including their parents.

Children often lied about their real age in order to be spared deportation and be considered useful through work. At times, it was sufficient to deceive German officials by telling them that the child was older. In other instances, youths had their birth certificates falsified. Jane Schein’s falsified document, purchased by her mother from the Kraków Judenrat (Jewish Council), recorded that she was sixteen years old, when in fact she was only eleven. She spoke about that experience many years after the events. “I was eleven, looked like I was going on five, and was passing for a sixteen-year-old.” Mieczysław Staner also had his birthday “formally” adjusted in order to assure his survival. He recalled half a century later: “Somehow, my parents arranged a change of my birth date to show that I was 16, otherwise I would have been classified as a useless child and therefore be disposed of. I grew up rapidly and my struggle for survival had just begun.”

Some children were made to look older. Changing hairstyle, applying makeup, and wearing more adult clothing helped deceive the authorities. One trick involved braiding long hair around a girl’s head so that she appeared more mature. Other girls donned long dresses or wore long coats or hoods to cover up their bodies and appear fuller. Still other girls were disguised as full-fledged women wearing high heels, lipstick, and stuffed bras. Presumably boys, too, participated in activities meant to fool the authorities about the boys’ young ages.

Misleading through age distortion and physique camouflage allowed some children to lead clandestine lives in the ghetto. Classified as useful Jews, they could avoid instant death during an action or being sent to a death camp. At the same time, because of their status as laborers, these youths received food rations. In this way, children helped contribute to their family’s well-being. They exercised their agency by agreeing to work, thereby understanding the implications of employment for Jews in the ghetto. Youths were actors in their own right since they chose to follow the demands related to multifaceted deception. Irrespective of the type, forced labor was dangerous for young people. Apart from their young age, exhaustion, stress, and fear, coupled with being terrorized, made them prone to injuries in the workplace. The benefits associated with their work capability category, however, often outweighed the disadvantages and risks.

**HIDING**

Masquerading as an adult served as one of the ways in which youths engaged in covert activities. Physical concealment constituted another tactic.
Hiding inside the ghetto emerged as an important way for children to avoid violence, deportation, and death during raids. Hiding was a constant in the lives of a number of children in the ghetto, and finding hiding places was an endeavor in its own right. Some youths were trained by their parents to conceal their presence or, fearing any type of commotion, hid instinctively. Jane Schein was precocious for her age. Her parents felt relatively secure leaving her alone at home while they went to work. Whenever she heard any kind of noise, Jane knew to hide so that she would not be caught. Other children hid in various places: in the sewers, under a heap of potatoes, behind a cupboard, in cellars and attics. All that Jerzy Cyns remembered was being camouflaged. Half a century later he recalled: “Until March 1943, during the deportations, I was hidden in various places.” His memory is limited to images of things and people that “accompanied” him during that time. “Little remains in my memory other than stacks of dirty laundry, under which my older brother, Henryk, a girl cousin, and I sat for many hours when they were conducting ‘selections.’” During one such action, the laundry basket caught the attention of a German officer, who poked the clothes with a rifle butt. However, the children, who were well trained and subconsciously understood that their lives depended on silence, did not utter a sound.

Some youths concealed their presence during actions in previously arranged places that their parents or caretakers considered relatively safe, and which would serve as a meeting point for the family after the deathly assault against the ghetto population had ended. The course of events, however, sometimes required the young person to think and act quickly, not always strictly according to the plan. During one of the raids, Jane Schein ran near the assembly place, Plac Zgody. She saw what was happening and decided to go to the “safe house”—the Jewish police building. Instead, she hid in a garbage can that stood in the courtyard of the Jewish police headquarters. She was petrified and afraid to move. After several hours, Jane eventually reached the “safe house” and was reunited with her parents.

As opposed to hiding outside the ghetto, it was fairly common for an entire family, or at least all the children, to hide together inside the ghetto for the duration of an action. Hiding in a group was often necessary since there were limited concealment opportunities in the ghetto. And families wanted to remain together. Also, the ghetto was, paradoxically, perceived to be the safest place because the Polish gentile informants and blackmailers operated on the Aryan side. Jews were conscious of the constant risk of discovery by the Germans and the fact that they and their families would eventually have to emerge from their hiding places and continue their clandestine lives.

If some families remained together, others chose to separate when hiding in the ghetto. This was motivated by safety reasons or simply by the lack of one
hiding spot that would accommodate the entire family. Sometimes, families identified multiple hiding places within their building. In a case such as this, children frequently evoked ingenuity, courage, maturity, and responsibility. Jerzy Aleksandrowicz’s eight-member family had been assigned various hiding places in case there was a raid. When he overheard a German officer conducting a search of the house, Jerzy took the initiative. He grabbed the keys from his mother and dropped them out the window to the building’s caretaker, who then opened the cellar door and took out Jerzy’s aunt and grandmother, who were hiding there, into the street and into safety. This undertaking required quick decisions and swift action. In a sense, Jerzy became responsible for his family’s survival. His situation also shows that Jews selected hiding arrangements being mindful of protecting each member of the household. They did so in anticipation of roundups, and not just in response to a raid already in progress.

At times, parents placed their children with other Jews hiding in the ghetto mainly because they had not managed to smuggle out their offspring in time, or there was not enough space for the child to join his or her parents in another hiding place. This allowed parents with other means to escape a raid to do so with the knowledge that their children were taken care of. Before the liquidation of the ghetto, Janka Warshavska’s father placed her two sisters, Gusta, age fourteen, and Reina, age sixteen, in hiding with one Mrs. Drenger. The well-camouflaged space provided a hiding place for twelve people. Janka described the inconspicuous bunker: “The entrance was through the lavatory, which was almost impossible to enter because of the revolting stench. There was a well-concealed door, which opened on a dimly lit corridor, where there was a dirty old cupboard. By going through a cupboard, a small room was reached, which could not be detected from the outside.” Emerging too early from the hiding place resulted in immediate death at the hands of the Germans, the tragic fate met by Mrs. Drenger and her children.

Boys in particular took up the role of caretakers of those in hiding. Janka Warshavska recalled how Victor Tenenbaum took care of her sisters’ group, being the only one to exit the hiding place to obtain food and water. He sought to resist the oppressors in any way possible. “He prepared bars of iron and announced that the Germans would not take him alive.”

While in hiding, children were overwhelmed by the fear of ensuing danger, brutality of the persecutors, and possible discovery. Their reactions varied. Some youths experienced adverse physical responses induced by stress. Older and more religiously observant children in particular, thinking of an impending end, prayed or said the Kaddish (prayer for the dead). Many years after the event, Roma Ligocka, a very small child during the war, recalled a specific incident, or rather the feelings associated with it, which dug deeply into her memory. During one raid when the Germans entered their
apartment, her grandmother hid Roma under the table. The girl was numb with fear. She covered her ears so as not to hear her grandmother’s screams as she was brutally taken away. Several hours later, Roma’s father found her under the table. She knew that something terrible had taken place, but she did not ask questions. She stayed under the table that night. While the chronology was not recorded in the small girl’s mind, the memory of the emotions experienced at that specific moment never escaped her. Roma’s reactions to the event signify the immense trauma she suffered when her loved one was violently pulled away. She herself might have met the same fate had she disobeyed her grandmother’s request to hide silently under the table.

Hiding in a group with younger children posed a certain risk of discovery. Especially in a group of strangers, adults were skeptical and often outright denied children the right to shelter in communal hiding places. They (understandably) feared that the noises made by young children would expose everyone. The ideal of solidarity sometimes crumbled in face of such danger. Yet, the perseverance of parents and the voices of other people in the room often quelled those on the offensive, and children were allowed to stay. Many children bore witness to tragic scenes while hiding with others. During the October 1942 action, Aneta Weinreich was hidden in an apartment together with approximately thirty people, including two babies. When the babies started crying, the mothers put cushions over their mouths; one baby suffocated. Aneta believed that this incident probably saved her life. Before the ghetto’s liquidation, Janina Pietrasiak’s father and other men created a hiding place to accommodate several people. “Dantesque scenes took place there,” she recalled. Janina witnessed the accidental death of a child. “One of the little children began to cry, so his mother covered his head with a pillow to silence him. The child suffocated.” The older children surely understood that infanticide, however horrible it was to witness, had nevertheless saved their own lives and the lives of other people.

Life in hiding forced many children to endure horrifying experiences. They saw adults fall apart or some of the older people lose their minds. They saw individuals commit suicide. During the liquidation of the ghetto, four-year-old Roma Ligocka and her mother were hidden with several others in a hole under a paint store. In the darkness, Roma came upon an unidentified figure, which she thought was a corpse, and screamed. Others, scared of the possibility of being discovered, tried to calm the girl by holding her and pressing their hands over her mouth to the point of near-suffocation. They reasoned that sacrificing one girl for the sake of the others’ safety was plausible; however, Roma’s mother persuaded the people to leave her daughter alone. In essence, children were expected to stop behaving like children and control themselves and adjust their reactions the way adults do.
SNEAKING INTO THE Ghetto

Throughout the existence of the Kraków ghetto, children practiced still other forms of deception, evasion, and disobedience. Many youths were either smuggled into the ghetto or they sneaked in themselves. Some had been hidden on the Aryan side and entered the ghetto to join their parents or relatives. Others were smuggled into the ghetto when their caretakers on the Aryan side wanted to get rid of the burden of harboring them, or when the danger to their lives became imminent. Finally, some children sneaked in from neighboring ghettos to wait until the raids passed and the situation calmed down. Their presence was rarely, if ever, recorded. Hence, their entire life and presence within the ghetto was clandestine; they were off the books, as it were.

Mendel Feichtal’s case exemplifies how some children entered the Kraków ghetto only temporarily because it appeared a safer alternative to the smaller ghettos in the vicinity. Mendel testified in the immediate postwar years that on hearing rumors of an action in the Brzesko ghetto (about fifty-three kilometers away), his mother sent him with a Polish woman to the Jewish quarter in Kraków. Once he reached the ghetto’s gate, Mendel bribed a Jewish policeman with approximately 3,000 złoty and entered the ghetto with Jewish workers. He stayed there with his aunt for about two weeks, until it was rumored that the raids had stopped in Brzesko. To exit the ghetto, Mendel once again bribed a Jewish policeman and also a Polish policeman with money and a gold watch. The policemen pretended to take him to the precinct, when in fact they escorted him to the railway station.42

Mendel’s history demonstrates the Jews’ desperate search for safe havens, including visiting ghettos. As a medium-size ghetto, Kraków offered opportunities to meld in with the crowd, something difficult to accomplish in the Brzesko ghetto, because of the ghetto’s small population and area size. Mendel’s furtive entrance into the Kraków ghetto illustrates, too, that Jews’ mobility was possible despite the German’s efforts to curb it. Certainly difficult and dangerous, and even life threatening, Jewish secret—and thus illegal—entry into the ghetto was often facilitated by bribery, but also depended on the timing. Mendel entered the ghetto before the October 1942 action. Following this particular action, the German guardianship of the ghetto intensified, relieving Polish and Jewish policemen from certain duties and abolishing outside labor groups, limiting opportunities for sneaking in and out. The Germans and their henchmen dissolved most ghettos in the area by the end of 1942, concentrating the remnant of Jews from the smaller ghettos, and those previously not subject to ghettoization, in the larger ghettos of the General Government, including Kraków.43
SNEAKING OUT OF AND SMUGGLING INTO THE GHETTO

German restrictions failed to impede Jews’ efforts to survive, and children assumed a vital role in those endeavors. Sneaking out of the ghetto, purchasing foodstuffs on the Aryan side, and smuggling the score back into the ghetto were closely intertwined domains in which young people predominated. Adult Jews who were sent to work on the Aryan side, or obtained permission to exit the ghetto, also brought in the contraband. But after the October 1942 action in the ghetto, those avenues of smuggling were cut off. An important reason that young people filled the niche was that children under the age of twelve were not yet subject to the laws requiring Jews to wear a visible marking on their clothes. The order had already gone into effect on December 1, 1939, and applied throughout the ghetto years. Severe punishments awaited those who disobeyed the law. The wording of the regulation, however, opened a legal loophole that offered a solid reason for sending the youngest members of the family on smuggling missions. When exiting the ghetto, child smugglers were formally breaking only one law—the prohibition against existence outside of the ghetto.

The ability to interpret the law for one’s own purposes facilitated a parent’s decision to send off their child on smuggling missions, or instilled confidence in a child to serve as a potential smuggler. Yet, more factors contributed to the reasons that children undertook illicit activities. They were small enough to pass undetected, yet old enough to understand the risks, follow their parents’ instructions, and make fast decisions. As children, they aroused less suspicion and evoked more sympathy. Inconspicuous, they blended in among gentiles. Inside and outside of the ghetto children displayed flexibility and adaptability to situations that could change instantly. At the same time, they exhibited courage, even if they were afraid of their actions and terrified of the consequences, and showed responsibility for themselves and their families. Youths had to use cunning strategies when leaving and reentering the ghetto and finding places whence they could obtain food, as well as ingenuity once they returned to the ghetto and parcelled out their products. The situation required them to become manipulative, resourceful, and independent, although they were still young people, who needed to be cared for and catered to. These children matured quickly and understood that their actions influenced their own and their families’ fates. For many families, whose adults could not leave the ghetto, the children’s illicit smuggling activities contributed to their families’ well-being.

Young people slipped out of the ghetto illegally with or without the help of German guards, or Jewish and/or Polish policemen. Sometimes children took advantage of the guards’ silent consent, sensed a moment of inattention, or offered a bribe. Once on the Aryan side, Jewish children relied primarily on
their “Aryan looks,” proficiency in the Polish language, knowledge of Catholic rituals, and if they could obtain them, falsified papers that declared them non-Jews. All of these acts were prohibited by the German authorities, who rendered severe punishments on individuals caught in the act.

Methods of evasion and deception proved useful for child smugglers once they crossed to the Aryan side. Jewish girls with the so-called “Aryan look” had an easier time fooling the watchful eyes of informers outside the ghetto. For Jewish boys who had been circumcised, sneaking out of the ghetto posed an additional and substantially greater danger of disclosure than it did for females. When recognized by a prewar neighbor or schoolmate, pointed out by a stranger, stopped randomly by a Polish policeman, or suspected by a German, the young man was often forced to pull down his pants to show his physical marking as a Jew. Nevertheless, some took the risk. In order to deal with fear, danger, and risk of discovery, many child survivors recalled that they employed a strategy of not drawing attention to themselves.

Deemed illegal by the German authorities, smuggling acquired a positive connotation among ghetto inhabitants, for whom it became a crucial means of support. Children also recalled mixed feelings about their smuggling assignments. While some recognized the importance of their activity for their family’s well-being, others felt uncomfortable with their tasks. Initial embarrassment, however, disappeared in the face of food scarcity. Even though many child survivors referred to their wartime smuggling missions as “stupid,” they acted out of necessity, pushed by their parents to fulfill a role they themselves could not.

**ESCAPING THE GHETTO**

Escaping the ghetto and hiding on the Aryan side for the duration of an action was another way for Jewish children to survive. Such covert activity carried its own set of risks, of course. With the imposition of Hans Frank’s “Third Decree about Limiting Jews’ Presence in the General Government” of October 15, 1941, providing any form of assistance to Jews became legally prohibited. From then on, Jews who left the ghetto without a permit risked the death penalty; and gentiles who aided them and offered shelter faced the same punishment, although certain cases (as determined by special German courts) qualified for arrest or imprisonment. This law was instituted early in the existence of the ghetto evidently because instances of gentiles’ helping Jews had occurred, which the Germans had noticed. This law terrorized the Polish gentile population and served to deter it from engaging in activities that would ameliorate the Jews’ situation.

Yet despite the strict law, parents searched for ways to whisk their children out during danger and sought out prewar friends, acquaintances, coworkers,
maids, nannies, teachers, neighbors, building supervisors, or even strangers, asking them to keep the child in a secure place on the Aryan side until the situation in the ghetto had calmed down. Some parents made arrangements before moving into the ghetto, and the child either was spirited away by an adult or a child smuggler, or left the ghetto on his or her own accord and went to a prearranged place. Some individual Jews undertook organized actions to bring children to the Aryan side for safekeeping. In some cases, Jewish women, who lived on the Aryan side or left the ghetto for the purpose of finding potential rescuers, solicited gentiles willing to care for a Jewish child until the raid was over and prepared smuggling routes. Such endeavors provided hope for the children’s clandestine survival, if only temporarily.

Once a gentle caretaker had been secured, the parents needed to devise an avenue of escape. People used their ingenuity to invent ways to smuggle out children. At times, Jews staged a fight to divert the guards’ and policemen’s attention. Often, however, children were physically camouflaged and removed from the ghetto, carried out in knapsacks or baskets. At other times they were injected with a sleeping medication to avoid disclosure. Roma Ligocka’s parents, for example, realized that children were being targeted, and they also knew that some of the youngest members of their extended family, such as their cousin Roman Polanski, were hiding on the Aryan side. They gave Roma some liquid to drink and put her into a suitcase. Her screams, however, were too much too bear. Roma’s history demonstrates the intricate ideas adults came up with in order to remove the child until the immediate danger had passed. It also shows the issues that parents wrestled with when faced with exposing their children to the unknown.

The approach to children’s temporary survival soon changed diametrically. Sensing an impending major action, which turned out to be the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto in March 1943, parents made the desperate decision to permanently relinquish their children in the hope that their lives might be spared. On the Aryan side, some youths were placed with gentile families, while others were left to face the uncertain situation on their own. In some cases, parents made arrangements with individual Poles; in other instances, an informal underground network composed of Jews with contacts on the Aryan side, or the Kraków branch of ŻEGOTA (Council for Aid to Jews), an underground organization run jointly by Jewish and ethnic Polish socialist and Catholic activists, took upon itself to find safe havens for children. The latter began its activities in the Kraków ghetto only in March 1943 as the ghetto was being liquidated.

A common escape route led through the barbed wire or a hole in the wall. Frequently, a child’s “illegal” exit from the ghetto depended on the assistance of other children and teenagers. A number of children managed to sneak out
through the sewers. Janina Fischler and her brother Joseph escaped through a manhole into the sewers. Janka Warshavska's sister, thirteen-year-old Helena, and her fifteen-year-old brother Ignatz escaped in the same manner. According to Janka, when Helena descended into the sewer, many children surrounded her and begged her to take them with her. Helena was mindful of the fact that bigger children had a better chance of successfully making it to the other side, while smaller children were in greater danger of drowning. If some children escaped through the tunnels by themselves or in groups, others left together with adults, often with their parents.

Some children left the ghetto by a combination of their own devices and outside assistance. Ten-year-old Roman Polanski recalled the events of his escape. “On the day the Kraków Ghetto was finally liquidated, March 13, 1943, my father woke me before dawn. Taking me to Plac Zgody, to a blind spot just behind the SS guardhouse, he coolly snipped the barbed wire with a pair of pliers. He gave me a quick hug, and I slipped through the fence for the last time.” Finding the door locked to the apartment of the Polish gentile Wilk family, with whom he was acquainted, Roman decided to go back to the ghetto. He saw a marching column of Jewish men, among them his father. When Roman finally got his father to notice him, his father hissed, “Shove off!” Roman explained the reason for his survival: “Those two brusque words stopped me in my track. I watched the column recede, then turned away. I didn’t look back.”

During the liquidation of the ghetto, all children under the age of fourteen were to stay behind. Amon Goeth, the commandant of the Płaszów labor camp, promised the parents that all children would eventually arrive at the camp. But some parents, unwilling to be separated from their children, attempted to smuggle them into the camp. Henryk Zvi Zimmerman, a witness to the events, recounted the stories of parents smuggling their children in backpacks, so that they could stay together in Płaszów. They did so at great risk. “Groups of SS-men walked between the suitcases and bags and kicking with their hobnailed boots, and poking with guns, they checked whether there were any children hidden in the baggage. Blood was dripping from the luggage.” One particular incident stood out in his memory. “In front of me and the Waldmans stood the wife of Harry Zweig with 12-year-old daughter Sylwia, dressed to look older than she really was.” In addition to her daughter, who was posing as an adult, “Zweigowa carried a big backpack. Seeing her terrible despair, we understood, that their three-year-old son Jerzyk was hidden in that backpack.” The quick action of a fellow ghetto inmate saved the child. “Cunning old Waldman, standing behind Zweigowa, whispered to her ‘Drop the backpack!’ Zweigowa, hypnotized, did what he said. I also understood Waldman’s intentions. The bag was now lying on the ground in front of..."
us. With full force we kicked it towards the baggage that had already passed control. We made it, because the policemen were paying attention to some tumult in front of us.”

A number of children were smuggled out of the ghetto in carts among furniture or medical equipment. Other children tried to leave the ghetto with the columns of prisoners marching to the camp. Janek Weber’s father understood that children had bleak chances for survival. Janek’s father put the eight-year-old boy into a suitcase and smuggled him on a cart going to Płaszów. Janek recounted the incident half a century later: “I felt, surprisingly enough, that it was an adventure, and I don’t recall being frightened. My luck, there is luck in such circumstances, is that I was sufficiently adult and grown up, mature enough to cope with the situation but unable to grasp the tragedy of it all.”

Only a small number of children survived the liquidation. Some did so by hiding in the ghetto. They were either subsequently smuggled out or they sneaked out to the Aryan side. The remaining children were killed. During the liquidation, Janina Pietrasiak, her sister Ewa, and their mother had hidden in a wooden outhouse; her mother and Ewa held the latch, while Janina squatted. After two days in the outhouse, the mother looked through a crack and saw a German soldier standing at ease. She gave him the little remaining jewelry that she had, and they escaped to the Aryan side. On March 14, 1943, Roma Ligocka came out of the hiding place in the cellar. Her mother just managed to whisper to Roma that her last name was Ligocka, not the original Liebling. Both were among the last to be smuggled out of the now defunct ghetto in a cart transporting suitcases and other possessions. On the day of the ghetto’s liquidation, Janka Warshavska had just returned from smuggling out a child. Horrified at what she witnessed in the ghetto, Janka took advantage of the commotion and ran away to the Aryan side.

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of children’s concealed existence and illicit activities in the Kraków ghetto demonstrates that young people led multilayered covert lives in order to survive. Securing a hiding spot inside a medium-size ghetto such as Kraków was not an easy task. It required ingenuity, courage, and often the help of others.

In tracing children’s covert existence and activities, young people emerge as active participants in the events, exercising agency, albeit in a limited way, along every step of the deception process. Several factors played a part in that. Age influenced children’s perception of reality. Older children understood that cooperating with their family members in lying about age, assuming a mature look, hiding, and sneaking out and smuggling into the ghetto were
necessary to stay alive. Younger children, in comparison, were often not fully aware of the gravity of events and the ensuing dangers, but knew they needed to make themselves invisible the moment a commotion began. They also knew to remain silent while in hiding. Gender was an important aspect in hiding and smuggling operations. When hiding in a group with mostly women and girls, boys appeared to assume the role of caretakers. This was either because of the traditional gender roles assigned to males or a spontaneous decision made by the boys. A child’s background also played a role in the success of clandestine activities. Young people who spoke fluent Polish, were familiar with local customs, and even knew Catholic prayers were better positioned to avoid the watchful eyes of Germans and Polish informants.

The case study of the Kraków ghetto illuminates the centrality of children for the Jewish community in their efforts to sustain their lives and for the German authorities in their systems to destroy them. Children participated in various degrees in assuming a covert existence in the ghetto, and methods considered illicit by the perpetrators were necessary to assure Jewish continuity.

NOTES

Note: This article is part of the author’s doctoral dissertation: “Concealed Presence: Jewish Children in German-Occupied Kraków” (PhD diss., 2016, Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts).

1. “Janka Warshavska’s Story,” 12. I thank Shelly Tenenbaum, Clark University, for bringing her aunt’s (postwar name: Janette Warshavska Geizhals) written testimony to my attention and for providing a copy of it. Janka’s account is deposited at the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim (Wspomnienia t. 192/1046, inw. 173940). Azriel Eisenberg recalls the story of Janka, but refers to her as “Manya,” in The Lost Generation: Children in the Holocaust (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 120.


3. According to Nazi laws, “Jewish children” denote individuals up to the age of fourteen racially defined as Jews. Jewish organizations, which continuously stressed the importance of child care as it concerned the entire ghetto population, applied the same age limit. “Ogólny bilans wydatków na opiekę za pierwszy semester 1942 roku,” YIVO [YIVO Institute for Jewish Research], 335.1, folder no. 91.


10. For more information about the committee, see Laura Jockusch, Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).


14. The city served as an important historical and cultural hub for Poles, and as a center of rabbinic study and expertise in Halakhah (Jewish religious law). For many Krakov-
ian Jews, who viewed Kraków as the Jerusalem of Galicia, the city stood at the crossroads of eastern and western Jewry.


16. The city’s prewar population statistics can be found, for example, in Sean Martin, Jewish Life in Cracow, 1918–1939 (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), 16.


20. At first a labor camp, Płaszów became a concentration camp in January 1944.

21. At the beginning of the German occupation, the order to perform forced labor applied to Jews over twelve years of age (decrees of October 26, 1939 and December 12, 1939), ANK, J13907, p. 287. In February 1941, the Germans specified another age limit for Jews performing labor—over fourteen years old. ANK, J13910, p. 167.


26. For an in-depth analysis of hiding places, see Marta Cobel-Tokarska, Bezludna wyspa, nora, grób. Wojenne kryjówki Żydów w okupowanej Polsce (Warsaw: IPN, 2012).


32. Kichler-Silberman, “Janka Warshavska’s Story,” in One Hundred Children, 28–29; Eisenberg, The Lost Generation, 120. Eisenberg refers to Janka Warshavska as “Manya.”
33. Ibid.
42. Testimony of Mendel Feichtal, 301/609, AŻIH (Archiwum Żydowski Instytut Historyczny) [Jewish Historical Institute Archive], Warsaw.
44. “Der Distriktschef von Krakau Wächter; Rozporządzenie o znamionowaniu żydów w okręgu Krakowa. 18.XI.1939,” November 18, 1939, ANK J13922.
46. During the Holocaust, an “Aryan appearance” meant possessing certain physical characteristics: fair skin, preferably light and straight hair, eyes that did not “evoke sad-
ness,” facial features that did not invoke associations with the Semitic stereotype, as well as emotional features that included an overall composure and confidence, and a particular way of carrying oneself.


49. Knowing particular escape routes, confidently treading on the Aryan side, familiar with the map of the city, and possessing connections in the city, Jewish child smugglers became sought out as suitable smugglers of not just goods, but also of other children.


51. Pearl Benisch, To Vanquish the Dragon (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1991), 171.


59. Ibid., 34–35.

60. Testimony of Leah Bladberg-Muskatenblut, YVA [Yad Vashem, Jerusalem], 0–33/1801, quoted in Felicja Karay, The Women of the Ghetto Kraków (Tel Aviv, 2011).


