In this chapter, I investigate the world of being, thinking, and feeling of Polish Jew-ish child survivors as they had emerged from the Holocaust. My aim is to present this topic through the children’s gaze and thus to illu-minate the “world of the inarticulate.” His-torians of childhood constantly grapple with the question of how to grasp the “world of the inarticulate” and creatively integrate it into the larger historical narrative of the history of a particular group of children or general history of childhood. Early postwar Polish Jewish child survivors’ personal testi-monies, memoirs, diaries, and letters, as well as artistic works such as drawings,1 constitute a wealth of evidence illuminating the “world of the inarticulate.” This evidence is scattered in various, difficult to comb through, archival collections in Poland, Israel, and the West. Though it cannot be viewed as self-sufficient evidence, it is nevertheless essential for writing the Alltagsgeschichte (everyday history) of Polish Jewish childhood both during and after the war, and the social history of the post-Holocaust Polish Jewish family. In my approach to these sources, I draw on the French historian Marc Bloch’s position, which advocates that the problems and questions histo-rians pose should determine the kinds of evidence they use.2 Thus, early post-war children’s testimonies should not be expected to deliver the same kind of data as official documents written by adults. Early postwar children’s accounts sculpt life from a “raw” child’s perspective, giving us a unique access to the modes of thinking, feeling, and expression of a child who has just emerged from the conditions of war and the Holocaust. Of course, we have to take into account the young age and limited cognitive and reflective abilities of their authors, and how adults may have inevitably shaped their thinking and the language in which the children retell the events.3 The contexts in which these testimonies were created, how, and by whom, matters.4 Nonetheless, in spite of the conscious and unconscious influence of adults and other age-related and psychological and cognitive limitations,5 we should view this evidence as
the best window we may have into the children’s early postwar way of thinking, feeling, and being. They are the only window we may have into the child survivors’ fresh and raw memories of the war as captured in the moment of retelling the events, even though some of these unrecorded testimonies may have been edited by the children’s interviewers.6

The early postwar voices of Jewish child survivors both document the short-term effect of the Holocaust on the youngest survivors and can be useful in reconstructing the map of Polish Jewish relations, especially the complicated chart of rescue and betrayal of Jewish fugitives. The period 1944–1949 was a relatively short, but fundamentally critical time during which the children’s future adult lives were taking shape. It was during this period that the children and the adults who cared for them made key decisions about the children’s national and cultural identities. For most of the children, this was when they either reunited with their prewar family or confronted the painful lack of reunion because of the murder of their parents and other close relatives. During this period, some of the children found new families through adoption by Jewish relatives and Jewish strangers or non-Jewish individuals, including their former rescuers. In their testimonies of the immediate postwar period, children expressed their yearning for education, and documented the process of leaving Poland and acquiring new personal names and new national identities.7 Many older children had input and retained agency in shaping their future lives, but the youngest ones, because of their age, hardly had agency in decisions concerning their future lives. Many key themes of this chapter, such as children’s attitudes toward their surviving relatives and their former rescuers, and the children’s attitudes toward Jewish identity and the loss of families, are similar to the experiences of Jewish child survivors from other Nazi-occupied countries, including France, the Netherlands, and Belgium.8 Other issues such as the treatment of child fugitives by rescuers are more specifically embedded in the historical experience of the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Poland and also other East European countries. One could hope that a comparative study aiming 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 will emerge in the future. Comparative synchronic historical studies of specific issues, such as attitudes and behavior of rescuers toward Jewish children during the Holocaust and attitudes and behavior of Turkish rescuers toward Armenian children, who had to convert to Islam during the Armenian genocide of 1915–1917,9 might be useful for a deeper understanding of the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities’ child victims of genocide, though such studies may prove difficult to conduct because of sparse sources in the Armenian case.
I focus on Polish Jewish children who lived on the Aryan side in Nazi-occupied Poland, passing as Christian Polish children, and those who were hidden in individual Catholic homes, state orphanages, and Catholic convents and monasteries because of their obviously Jewish appearance. They were all born in 1929 or later. These children constituted a large cohort among the five thousand Jewish children registered by the Central Committee of Polish Jews (Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce, ćKŻp) in the summer of 1945.\textsuperscript{10} The figure of five thousand Jewish child survivors was not final, as it did not include all the young survivors from Nazi-occupied Poland, nor those Polish Jewish children who had survived the war in the Soviet Union with their families.\textsuperscript{11} Nonetheless, it clearly indicated the sheer destruction of Polish Jewish children and youths. On the eve of the Second World War, Polish Jewry was considered a youthful community, and most scholars evaluate that in 1939, the number of children aged fifteen years or younger was several hundred thousand.\textsuperscript{12} The great majority of these children did not survive the war.

The children who survived the war in the Soviet Union began to be repatriated to Poland from the Soviet Union in early 1946. Of the total figure of 136,000 repatriates who arrived in Poland between February and July 1946, children below the age of fourteen constituted 20 percent.\textsuperscript{13} In contrast to the Jewish children who survived the war in German-occupied Poland, child survivors from the Soviet Union had at least one parent or other close relative with them throughout the war. Despite constantly suffering from hunger and various illnesses, the young survivors in the Soviet Union attended schools and enjoyed some basic pleasures of childhood, such as play in nature. Upon encountering those who survived the war under the German yoke, they learned that their wartime experiences, no matter how challenging and painful, were on the whole not as gruesome as of their counterparts. Therefore, in light of what they had heard and observed in daily contacts in early postwar Poland, many of them then and throughout their adulthood decided not to speak about their wartime experiences as part of the same tragedy that had befallen their peer group in Nazi-occupied Poland.\textsuperscript{14} Only in the first decade of the twenty-first century, because of new research into modes of survival during the Holocaust and the acceptance of a broader definition of Holocaust survivor, have historians begun to investigate the Soviet wartime experiences of Polish Jewish children and their memories as part of the broader historical examination of Polish Jewish childhood during and after the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{15}

What was it like to be a Jewish child in the early post-Holocaust period in Poland? How did children themselves understand and articulate their lives and wartime predicaments, especially their relations with their rescuers?
LOSS OF CHILDHOOD

Jewish children, who were delivered, or who found their way of their own accord, to the various Jewish organizations and Jewish children’s homes that began to mushroom in Poland in 1945, were instantly forced to confront the heavy burden of matters concerning their health, identity, family, and the future. Older children and youths were acutely aware that their childhood had been shattered and that they had been consequently transformed into premature adults bearing little resemblance to children. Many accounts articulate this painful reflection, which could be seen as a facet of the crystallization of a future collective Holocaust child survivors’ identity. For example, in the testimony of Hinda Dowicz, born on May 15, 1928, in Tarnów, one reads: “We are young old women. Now I am an orphan.”

In many child Holocaust survivors’ testimonies written after the war, we come across the articulation of the process of the divided “self,” between the self of the prewar happy Jewish child, the self of the wartime haunted Jewish child who had often assumed a Polish Catholic identity in order to survive, and the self of the fragile child who just emerged from the genocide. This articulation is a marker of an irreparable destruction of a sense of a unity of self in young survivors. Child survivors continue to articulate this division of self as adults in their late postwar memoirs of the 1990s and the 2000s.

Child survivors also had a profound sense of the loss of years of education and felt starved of knowledge, culture, and learning. Therefore, they immersed themselves in intellectual activities and pursuits trying to make up for the lost years. They not only studied intensely at schools, but also spent much of their free time studiously learning individually and in groups, so they could quickly be transferred to a class level more appropriate for their age. The youngest ones, however, experienced, often for the first time, the pleasures of ordinary childhood, such as playing with toys, playing games in nature with other children, and devouring unknown or forgotten treats such as chocolate, thanks to the assistance of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the largest international aid organization, and other Western charitable organizations. Children recollected the particularly painful loss of contact with nature, the central space of play and games in ordinary childhood, during the Holocaust. In contrast to non-Jewish children, nature became forbidden space to Jewish children in ghettos and the young fugitives hidden on the Aryan side: “I looked at how all the children played [outside]. I cried and contemplated if I could ever live to a day I could also play as the other children.”

Among the youngest there were also children who for the first time had to acquire skills in human bonding, as they had no recollection of being cuddled and kissed by their parents or other adults during the war, and in fact did not know what kissing and cuddling meant.
Next to the loss of childhood, children were acutely aware of their family losses. Therefore, they experienced overpowering loneliness, articulated in this characteristic, common, and brief utterance: “I am now completely on my own in the world.”

Intense yearnings for home and family were commonly reflected in the children’s testimonies. For children, regardless of having close surviving relatives or not, Jewish children’s homes often came to symbolize and represent their “new home.” In testimonies they openly articulated their attitudes toward the institutions that took care of them: their closeness and emotional attachment to the staff working in the children’s home and to the other children living there. Chana Grynberg, born on January 15, 1932, in Głowaczów in the district of Radom writes: “I have been living here in the orphanage in Otwock since 7 April 1945. I have been fairly treated, equal with other children. I have become a child again and have now ‘recovered my home.’”

Though the Jewish children’s homes were viewed as “the new, recovered home,” the total orphans often felt jealous of those children who had a surviving parent or were visited by parents, other relatives, or former Christian rescuers. For them, even the most caring educators could not substitute for the perished family. They felt pain that there was no one to visit them, that no one was writing to them. Some children’s letters to their beloved former rescuers confirm that their authors had longed for a word from their previous guardians, not only because of a strong emotional attachment, but also because they did not want to stand out as different from those children in Jewish children’s home who had at least one surviving parent or other close relative:

Dear Mummy,

I am happy. I am in the Children’s Home in Zabrze, near Katowice. How does Papa feel? Did he travel to Zakopane? What is Zbyszek doing? Is Granny still working? Here I have one very good friend named Fredek. He, like myself, lived with a Polish lady. Fredek misses her a lot and I miss you a lot and therefore we are happy to be together. We will soon be leaving for France and I will write to you from there. I ask you to reply to my letters. All other children receive letters. And only I do not receive letters and am very sorry about that. I kiss all of you many times.

Wiktor B.

Child survivors constituted the most affected and vulnerable social group in the turbulent early postwar period, as developments during this time determined not only the circumstances of their immediate presence, but also
their short- and long-term futures. For many, who were well looked after and loved by their Christian Polish rescuers, the appearance of a forgotten or an unknown relative meant a messy and frightening disruption of what they regarded, at that time, as a solid familial life and happy childhood. Therefore, it took them a while to adjust to the idea of leaving the familiar and stable environment in which they had lived for two or three years, or in some cases, even five years. Reluctance to leave their rescuers is exemplified in many children’s testimonies. For example, the April 3, 1948, testimony of Jurek Adin, born on June 22, 1933, in Warsaw, speaks of his preference for staying in Poland in close contact with his private tutor from the pre-1939 period, the Polish woman who saved his life on many occasions during the war. Because of their close emotional bond and the woman’s total dedication to saving the boy’s life, Jurek naturally preferred remaining with her to being reunited with unknown members of his Jewish family who lived in the United States:

I sometimes went to the Aryan side and many times wanted to remain there but no opportunities arrived. . . . I asked one boy to take me to my private tutor. I could not stay there because she worked as a nurse for the Germans and lived at Krankenstube. She placed me with her friend who was already hiding one Jewish boy called Borenstein. . . . My tutor arranged for me to be taken home by Ms. Adela. She told me to go to a particular shop at Belwederska Street from where I would be taken home by Ms. Adela. Ms. Adela arranged a Christian birth certificate for me and registered me as Marian Podbielski. My tutor paid from her pocket to buy my false birth certificate. I spent some time at Ms. Adela’s home. She used to go to work in the morning and I was left on my own. In the summer of 1942, I went to a holiday place called Zielonka [a small town in the vicinity of Warsaw] and in August I returned to Warsaw. The priest who baptized me was very good to me and placed me in the children’s home of St. Anthony in Świder. . . . I stayed there until 1945, when my tutor came and took me with her to Roszalin. Again I felt so good.25

The youngest children, those who were born on the eve of or during the war, were the most shocked by the visits of strangers who came to claim them, since in their eyes, they had never had any other family or a different ethnic, social, and cultural background than that exhibited by their Christian/ethnic Polish rescuers. Like some of the older children, they did not have any memories of their biological parents or of the main facets of Jewish identity. Thus, they not only had to adjust to their new Jewish guardians, but also to the adoption of a new social identity. Jewish identity was a totally new, scary, and foreign terrain — terra incognita.

The testimony of February 22, 1948, by Henryk Weinman gives us an insight
into how the youngest were shocked and confused by learning about their unknown painful past and by having to leave those whom they considered their natural and only parents. Henryk was born on March 23, 1941, in Skarżysko-Kamienna in central Poland. He was the youngest son of Tomasz Mieczysław Weinman and Ewa Federow and had three older siblings of whom one already lived abroad. During the liquidation of the ghetto in Skarżysko-Kamienna in late October 1942, his parents perished and he escaped to the “Aryan” side with his two siblings. This was the beginning of their lives in hiding. In January 1943, when he was almost two years old, his older brother Witold took Henryk to Kraków. In a desperate move, Witold decided to leave Henryk at the entrance to the building at Krakowska 45 in the city. The caretaker of that building took Henryk to a nearby Catholic orphanage, where the boy remained until 1945. In 1945, a childless Polish couple, Mr. and Mrs. Janowscy, visited the orphanage and decided to adopt him. As an adopted child under the name of Stanisław Janowski, Henryk lived with his new parents without any awareness of his biological family’s background until 1946, when his brother Witold located him. Witold wished to take his brother away from the Janowscy family, but the couple did not agree to it. Therefore, as was typical in such cases, Witold took the matter to a Polish court. After a long legal procedure lasting almost two years, the court granted Witold custody over his younger brother. In the autumn of 1947, Witold placed Henryk in the Jewish orphanage in Częstochowa. In the meantime, Witold also found his sister, Danuta, in Warsaw. She was placed in the same Jewish orphanage in Częstochowa as Henryk.

In his testimony, the seven-year-old Henryk presents the story of the reunion of his biological family from his own perspective. For him, the forced departure from the Janowski couple, the only parents he had known, was the most traumatic and challenging experience to come to terms with:

I was not aware that I was a Jew. I recall that when I was in the orphanage [the Christian orphanage in Kraków], I heard that being Jewish was something bad—that the Jews were “an ugly nation.” . . . I was taken to a different orphanage and mother and father came. They gave me a nice pair of shoes and new clothes. They told me that from now on I would be their child and that they would take me home with them. I went with them without crying. I was very happy. . . . She [mother] later told me that a certain man wanted to take me away and that he was a Jew. “He says that he is your brother but that is not true; you are a Pole.” I told mother that I would never leave her. Many times she repeated: “Do not return to the Jews.”

[At one point] Witek arrived [at our home] and wanted to take me away. He told me that I would be his brother. I cried out so much and shouted that I would not go with him. Mother and father cried a lot too. All three of us
cried, except for Witold. He took me by force into his car . . . I asked him where he was taking me. I told him that I wanted to go back to my mother, but he did not listen to me. At night, he took me to the train station and we travelled to Częstochowa. In Częstochowa we went to the [Jewish] orphanage . . . I did not like Witek. After all, to have a mother is more important than to have a brother. Witek told me that it was better for me to be with him and ordered me to forget about my mother. But I shall never forget her because I love her very much. . . . I am happy here [at the orphanage], but I would like to go back to her because I love her.26

REGAINING JEWISH IDENTITY AND FREEING ONESELF FROM ANTI-JEWISH PREJUDICES

Henryk’s testimony also reveals that child survivors had to unlearn viewing Jewishness in pejorative or purely negative terms. These children had acquired strong anti-Jewish feelings and attitudes as a result of internalizing various anti-Jewish stereotypes disseminated by the German occupier and also the anti-Jewish stereotypes articulated in the Polish Christian environment in which they had grown up during the war. Typically, they would be afraid of “returning to the Jews,” being touched by the “Jewish hand,” and encountering Jewish social circles and institutions. For example, nine-year-old Ludwik Jerzycki recalled, in an interview conducted on September 27, 1947, in the Jewish Children’s Home in Chorzów, that at first he refused to enter the place: “I cried, I did not want to return to the Jews, because they were saying that the Jews kill children. I was so afraid. But I found out that things are different here. I feel so content. I am not being beaten up. I learn and go to school.”27 This statement, of course, reveals the process of unlearning anti-Jewish stereotypes through building trust among Jewish children in Jewish children’s homes, and thus these children’s gradual internalization of the positive associations with Jewish identity and Jewish traditions and mores.

Still, some Jewish children were eager to leave their former rescuers, even with an unknown relative or a total stranger—a representative of a Jewish organization. Those were children who were physically or mentally abused by their former rescuers and guardians and were eager to experience a better life and regain a sense of childhood in the care of newly encountered adults. A history of the brutal mistreatment of Jewish child fugitives by those who were supposed to rescue and care for them has not yet been written, though a detailed chart of the abuse and murder of Jewish fugitives by members of Polish society in wartime Poland is in preparation.28 Because of the short passage of time, the children’s early postwar memories of the cruel wartime encounters with adults were still vivid, and they managed to describe them in a simple but powerful manner.
The picture that emerges from the children’s early postwar testimonies reveals a disturbing picture of strange intimacy and cruelty in the realm of the home of a rescuer-abuser. What should have been a safe shelter was often for the hidden children a space of daily suffering, isolation, and loneliness. The reasons behind the abuse seemed to be pure cruelty mixed with anti-Jewish prejudice, the knowledge of Nazi persecution of Jews, and the calculated understanding that Jews were simply disposable in the eyes of the German occupier and that one could benefit from the helpless fugitives. Children were capable of expressing what they felt and what they thought as a result of being exposed to different doses of cruelty every day. They articulated their confusion, fear, and helplessness in the face of being dependent on abusive individuals who experienced pleasure from tormenting the young Jewish fugitives. The children also articulated how they coped with the knowledge of being badly mistreated and uncared for by those who were supposed to care.

Some children hidden in Polish villages, who were exposed to mental and physical abuse and long working hours in the fields, typically recalled in the early postwar period that: “They did not care about living any longer.” Because of the conditions in which they were confined, paradoxically, these children reached the point of contemplating death instead of yearning for life as most people their age would. A good illustration of the desire to die is represented by the brief, early postwar recollections of how the children reacted to the news of local battles between the encroaching Russian army and the retreating German army in the second half of 1944. Unlike their rescuers, the children did not flee to safe shelters, but stayed in the fields with the cows at risk of being killed by bombs and shooting; they had stopped caring about what happened to them. Recollections of threats of denunciation by cruel and simpleminded rescuer-abusers and of children crying and begging them to spare their lives for one more day provides a brutal and disturbing picture of “rescue” that looks more like a grey zone in which human greed, lack of compassion and respect for young lives, and pure exploitation of the young are central to the relationship dynamic between Jewish children and the rescuer-abusers. From the point of view of hidden children, hard work, making yourself as useful and indispensable as possible, using wit and intelligence in dealing with the rescuer-abusers, and sheer luck were the only means that guaranteed their survival.

On September 3, 1947, in a Jewish children’s home in Bytom located at no. 23 B. Prusa Street, Gizela Szulberg recollects matter-of-factly the ways her rescuers mistreated her on a daily basis. Gizela, born on September 23, 1934, into a well-to-do middle-class Jewish family, was fully aware of the fact that her rescuers, the family of Wajdzik in Włoska Wola, could at any time transform themselves into her murderers, since they casually talked about killing her
or poisoning her without hiding from Gizela their thoughts and plans concerning the girl. What stopped them from killing her were greed and some remnants of human decency on the part of her main host, the father of the family. At some point, the rescuer demanded that after the war the girl would agree to bequeath them her dead parents’ property. This was not an unusual demand among the group of rescuers for profit. Gizela’s father had been an engineer and co-owner of a glass factory in Dubeczno, near Włodawa, in Lublin voivodeship, so her rescuers knew well that the Jewish orphan girl would be wealthy after the end of the war. Thus, keeping her alive instead of killing her was a more profitable option after they learned that Gizela’s parents were dead.

My host had two sons-in-law, terrible anti-Semites, and they constantly said, “We have to kill this Jew or give her back to the ghetto.” This is how they talked about me. The wife of the rescuer ordered me to pray to my Jewish God for help. I sat in the room next door and heard everything. The farmer used to say: “I will not kill her; I do not want to have blood on my hands.” His wife used to say in response: “You wish to kill me, you do not have mercy over your own children.” Our gardener [the brother of Mr. Wajdzik] took lots of money from my parents but did not share the sum with his brother. He would advise him to kill me, and that would be the end of the story. They kept me in a wardrobe and I was often hungry there and had to make my business there too if they had guests. I experienced a lot of unpleasantness. . . . Later, I learnt what happened with my parents. They were in hiding, but at some point, they did not have any funds because a woman [not clear who?] did not want to return their belongings to them. They wanted to visit me but were caught by the Germans and were killed and buried in a ditch. After we received this news, the farmer decided to keep me after all, but demanded that I bequeath my parents’ estate to him. All days they would talk only about the estate, nothing else. I wanted to be treated well, so I had promised them that I would bequeath them the estate. In spite of my promise, once they threw me out of the house. I sat near the barn because I had nowhere to go. They found me there later and allowed me to return inside the house.

I was so drained that I did not care any longer what they would do with me. When the spring came, I was looking after the cows in the fields and was happier, because I did not need to be in the wardrobe in a bent position. Until today, my posture is still a little bit bent [as a result of living in the wardrobe]. . . . They caused me so much pain. They hated me because I was a Jewess. They treated me as if I was a Cinderella, and nothing else. I would wake up with the sunrise and would go to fields with the cattle. I had
eighteen cattle including the sheep under my care. My legs were so full of cuts and blisters, they looked horrible.29

After the war, thanks to her surviving cousin and the Polish police, who had to take her by force from the Wajdzik family, Gizela was finally freed from her rescuer-abusers. However, her testimony of 1946 reveals how mentally and emotionally fragile she still was that year, and how confused she was about her identity because of the loss of her parents and the long and cruel years in hiding with the Wajdzik family. The testimony reveals her lack of confidence and desperate emotional and mental state; it provides clues on how she entered into what one can call a pathological dependency on her rescuer-abusers, as a result of the years of mistreatment at a very young age and the lack of loving care.

After the Soviets came, the people started to tell me: “The Germans will not kill you any longer, you are free.” But I could not believe in my luck. In the spring of 1946, I converted to Christianity as a way of thanking them for sheltering me [the Wajdzik family]. I wanted to simply give them my soul. After I went to visit my parents’ grave that is the ditch where they were buried. I put violet flowers there and cried a lot. Today I do not cry any longer, my heart has hardened out of fear, because of my experiences. . . . After one of my cousins found me and wanted to take me away from them, but they demanded “A half a million for a child.” He did not have the money because he served in the army, and left. I did not even want to say “good-bye” to him; I was so stupid. I wanted to remain with them forever, and to be a Pole, I was so used to that life. But my cousin told the Jews about my existence and they took me from [the] Wajdziks. But at the first attempt of taking me away, I run away and walked seven kilometres back to the farmer. At the end, the police had to come to take me away, they held me by my hands and legs because I did not want to go with them. The Jews placed me in the orphanage, and now I feel good.30

Some orphaned children who had survived the war mostly through their wits and determination did not wish to be dependent on any adults after the war. Their wartime experiences made them prone to distrust all adults, non-Jewish and Jewish alike. The daily experiences during the war also taught them to be tough, bold, and impudent in dealings with adults. As during the Holocaust, in the early postwar period they continued to be proactive and determined to making their own decisions about their future. Józef Himelblau, born in 1929 in Warsaw into a middle-class, learned Jewish family in which both parents were teachers, articulates poignantly the feelings of mistrust that continue to color his perspective on human relationships after the war:
My strongest experience from the time of the occupation was when my mother and sister, and my brother, were taken away and I remained alone, without a penny and without anyone to ask for advice. But I held fast and managed.

I was not jealous of Christian children. There was not time to think about this, I was hardened, I had to think about everyday things. How to earn money. We did not proceed with any [Jewish] holidays. I was not once in a church. With my friends one spoke about trading, where to enjoy oneself, about movies, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and other happy things. I did not believe people and I had to help myself alone in all cases. Today I also do not believe people. People say one thing and do something else. The family also does not bring me warmth. I am left entirely to myself and on several people here from the dormitory. I believe them and entrust my life further [to them]. But mostly I believe myself alone. My own strengths.31

Józef Himelblau’s testimony of January 19, 1948, was taken in a child’s dormitory at 25 Narutowicza Street in Lodz, the short-lived center of Jewish life in the early postwar years in Poland.32 At the time, the young man was catching up on the lost years of education. Józef attended seventh grade in the Jewish public school. His prewar education was finished at fourth grade in a public school. In the notes accompanying the testimony, the interviewer Genia [Genya] Silkes confirms that Józef Himelblau shows “signs of possessing the ‘so-called life-spirit,’ behaves not like a child, but like a grown-up, and ‘does not allow himself to show any sad emotions.’”33

In the early postwar period, children feared being associated with Jews not only because of homegrown, antisemitic prejudices encountered during the war in Polish society, but also because of the fresh, intense memory of the German genocidal policies against Jews. This memory led them to associate Jewish identity with living in a state of permanent danger. Therefore, they viewed Jewishness as a “stigmatized identity,” an identity with discredited attributes.34

Some children continued to play a double-identity performance: in Polish state schools, they continued to act as Christian Polish children, no different from the other pupils, whereas in the Jewish environment, they were “allowed” to return to the Jewish self. These children offer a good illustration of a skillful, long-term split-identity performance in order to physically survive, ready to be utilized under different circumstances. They were encouraged to do so out of fear for their well-being and safety in the Polish environment, as antisemitism permeated the atmosphere in many schools where both Polish teachers and Polish pupils expressed it in a variety of ways. They usually abused and verbally humiliated the Jewish children.35
Yehudit Kirźner was born in 1935 in Vilnius, today the capital of Lithuania [prewar Vilna], into a wealthy family in which her father, Grigori, was an owner of a furniture factory. Yehudit’s family could count itself among the rare and lucky nuclear Jewish families, because both parents and Yehudit’s sister all survived the German occupation on the Aryan side in the Lithuanian countryside near Vilnius. The sisters’ prewar nanny played a major role in their survival. After the war, as with many other Jewish survivors, they made their new home in Lodz, where Yehudit’s father worked as administrator in a Jewish children’s home in Helenówek. At the time Yehudit attended the fourth grade of Polish public school no. 24, and the family lived in a comfortable apartment at no. 44/71 Kiliński Street. In her testimony of December 15, 1945, Yehudit states how on her father’s instruction, she performed the Polish Christian identity act on a daily basis at the Polish school, while her “Jewish self” was supposed to lie dormant, ready to be fully expressed only upon the family’s departure to the Yishuv in Palestine/Israel:

My father found our residence on Tatarska 20, residence 2, where we lived before the war, and where we had a furniture store. Nothing remained there, the Germans stole everything. We lived for some time in Vilna [Vilnius], later we came to Łódź. We traveled to Łódź for two weeks. In Helenówek we met my aunt. She works here as a doctor. We really liked Helenówek and we settled here. My father received work as an administrator. And I go with my sister to school. It is very happy here. We play, sing and put on performances. I go to a Polish school, with a Polish name. My parents do not want anyone in our school to know that I am Jewish, because I do not look Jewish. My father said that in the meantime, [it should] be that way, because when we will leave for Palestine, I will be able to be Jewish.36

Genia Silkes, Yehudit’s interviewer, acknowledges that the girl has the perfect physical attributes to continue mimicry acts in the Polish Christian environment. Yehudit is “a tall, blond girl, with light hair, blue eyes, a [?] tiny nose, calm, easy-going.” Silkes’s observations indicate that for Yehudit the act of being a Christian Polish girl became second nature, as she “does not exhibit any indication of [being] a Jewish child.”37

Some older children made a conscious decision not to “return to Jews” because of what they had personally witnessed during the war. They were aware of and feared the Nazi image of the Jew as a parasite and subhuman. The Jew, in their minds, was purely the object of German extermination policies, and the Jewish identity came to mean a terrible stigma. For many children, it was not only the German policy and practice toward Jews that made them afraid of regaining their Jewish identity, but also the prejudicial attitudes and behavior of the Polish population toward the Jewish fugitives during the war and Jewish
survivors after the war. The children witnessed and experienced a full range of negative attitudes and behavior, ranging from verbal to physical and sexual abuse, constant threats of denunciation, murder of their dearest, and very meager food portions—despite the very heavy workload they were expected to perform on daily basis, especially in the countryside. In her testimony made in the Jewish Children’s Home in Kraków, Dora Zoberman, born in 1936 in Kraków, recollects that she and her sister continued to be cautious in their dealings with Polish peasants after the Russian army entered the region. They had a very good reason for their vigilant behavior: less than two weeks earlier on April 25, 1944, their mother and older sister were killed by local Polish peasants after being chased from their shelter in a nearby forest. The next day, the girls’ father found his wife’s corpse and discovered that her golden teeth and her golden rings were brutally removed by the killers without any respect for her dead body. Soon after, in early May 1944, the widowed father and the half-orphaned girls were suddenly separated near Staszowo during heavy fighting between the German and Russian armies. The grieving girls were left on their own without any familiar adult. In order to survive, they decided to ask a wealthy Polish peasant, Rogala, for work on his farm. To be accepted by the farmer, they announced to him that they were planning to convert to Catholicism. The sisters were reunited with their father only in 1946; but in 1945, the girls’ aunt, a survivor of Mauthausen concentration camp, found them at Rogala’s farm. This first postwar serendipitous family reunion had happened just before the girls were supposed to convert to Catholicism, which in practice most likely would have meant remaining with Rogala on the farm.

Some young Jewish survivors simply did not want to be associated with a people for whom others had only contempt and hatred. In some cases, these emotions accompanied a deeply split sense of social identity, persisted for a long time after the end of the war, and have played a major part in making choices of friends and loved ones in their adult lives.

I was attracted to my colleagues from the Jewish dorms and at the same time repelled by them. When I heard them speaking Yiddish, I got goose pimples. I was unable to get used to it. I thought that somebody would come soon and put an end to “it.” It seemed impossible that they could be so calm, that they should talk and laugh. I could not find a place for myself among them. I looked at them, and the people I liked the most were those who looked the least Jewish. Those who looked the most Jewish scared me. I ran as far away from them as I could.

This also happened later. I would run away from Jews then I’d come back to them. At times I thought I could be with some Jews, but then I really couldn’t. I ran away and pretended I didn’t have anything in common with
them. Then I’d be drawn to them again, and I would come back. From the
time I was a little child, I had to deny being Jewish, and this has left traces
that did not allow me to think, see, or live normally.  

Among such children were some who remained in postwar Poland and
continued to pass as Christian Poles after the war and to pretend throughout
their adult lives that they were someone else. Only in the 1990s and 2000s, as
mature individuals, in the new political and social climate in post-1989 Po-
land, did they feel the need to come out in the open and come to terms with
their Jewishness—what they called the return to being oneself.  In the last
two decades, a number of these children have gradually begun to speak out
publicly and write memoirs for the first time about their Jewish identity. They
are members of the Association of the Holocaust Children, established in June
1991 in Warsaw, and view it as their “special family,” individuals with similar
sets of wartime and postwar experiences and with a great deal of understand-
ing for each other’s wartime and postwar life trajectories and anxieties, and
sharing similar sensitivities and fears.

**CONCLUSIONS**

War and the Holocaust destroyed the children's families and their child-
hood. Those children who had found secure and loving shelter among loving
and caring rescuers during the war found it difficult, in the early postwar
years, to leave that safe world and forge new bonds with forgotten or un-
known relatives, as well as with strangers representing Jewish organizations
that intended to create a new life for them in unfamiliar locations and in an
unfamiliar culture. Some remained in that safe world with the rescuers, who
became their adoptive parents, and only as adults did they fully grasp what
had happened to them and come to terms with their complex dual identities
and painful dual family past. Others were keen to leave rescuers who had
physically or emotionally mistreated them, even with family members they
had forgotten. Others, as a result of years of mistreatment, had difficulty leav-
ing their rescuer-abusers, as they had lost all confidence in themselves.

Issues of social identity were central in the child survivors’ lives. They
yearned for their lost years of education and for a loving, solid, and stable
family, and dreamed of regaining at least some facets of childhood. They ar-
ticulated their perceptions, concerns, dreams, and hopes in their early post-
war testimonies. They did not have the self-reflective and cognitive abilities
of adults and may have been influenced by adult perspectives. Nevertheless,
the child survivors were capable of expressing their feelings, thoughts, and
attitudes in a profound manner. Their early postwar testimonies may be
the best window we have for studying the short-term impact of genocide on
children just emerging from genocidal conditions. Some of these testimonies contain unbridled emotion and are fragmented, because the children could not continue to retell the most painful accounts from their wartime existence; but many seem devoid of strong emotion and are narrated in a matter-of-fact manner. One can explain the lack of strong emotions because for many of these children the Holocaust with all its horrific experiences and encounters was the only reality they knew—for them this was the only world of their childhood and growing up, and they did not remember a different reality.42

The children’s testimonies carry profound observations about the world and about adult attitudes and behavior toward the young. The cases delineated here demonstrate that in spite of a multitude of individual children’s wartime biographies, it is possible to detect certain clear patterns and commonalities in the children’s microuniverses of wartime experience and interaction with the adult world, whereby one can conjure up a history of a generation or generations of Jewish children and youths from Poland. The children’s personal histories constitute a major part of transnational history of post-1945 Polish Jewry—the remnants of the community.

Finally, all the cases attest to the great vulnerability of children in the adult world, not only during the wartime era, but also during the early postwar period. This, of course, is not unique to the experience of Jewish children during the Holocaust, but it highlights some aspects of their tragedy shared by non-Jewish child victims emerging from other genocides. We can place these experiences in a comparative perspective; but at the same time, we have a duty to preserve the historical distinctiveness of the experience of Jewish children in Nazi-occupied Europe, as much as we do to the particularity of children’s experiences of victimhood and survival of other genocides.

NOTES
1. In this work I am not focusing on the analysis of children’s visual works. This will be carried out in a separate project.
5. On the value and limitations of the Jewish children’s early postwar testimonies and other methodological issues pertaining to the analysis of these testimonies, see, for example, Joanna Beata Michlic, “The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” in Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources, ed. Sarah Horowitz, 141–89 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, October 2012), and the chapter by Rita Horváth in this book.

6. My position here stands in opposition to the key arguments of Beata Müller in her article “Trauma, Historiography and Polyphony,” History and Memory 24, no. 2 (2012): 157–95, in which she argues that the early postwar children’s unrecorded testimonies “do not offer a direct insight into the child’s world, a direct access to a child’s voice” because they may have been edited by the children’s interviewers, who had their own specific agendas in presenting the children’s testimonies. Müller presents an interesting theoretical position about these testimonies as an expression of polyphonic voices, but without providing sufficient analytical evidence for major interruptions into the children’s testimonies and the nature of such interruptions, or how the interviewers themselves recorded the testimonies. One can also argue that Müller’s absolutist position does not recognize that all texts, even scholarly ones, are to some extent polyphonic because of the stylistic interventions of editors and translators. Though Müller states that the silences matter in the children’s testimonies, she does not analyze the functions and the meanings of such silences.


10. On the history of the reemergence of Jewish child survivors and Jewish organizations in the early postwar period, see Lucjan Dobroszycki, “Re-emergence and Decline of a Community: The Numerical Size of the Jewish Population in Poland, 1944–47,” YIVO
17. Testimony of Hinda Dowicz [in Polish], Central Committee of Polish Jews (hereafter, CKŻP), file no. 301/1328, Archives of Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (hereafter, ŻIH), Warsaw.


19. Testimony of Sala Szajnwurcel, CKŻP, file no. 301/2282, ŻIH, 5.

20. Minutes of the conference of the heads of Jewish orphanages under the patronage of the CKŻP, December 12 and 13, 1947, Kraków (second day of the conference), CKŻP, Department of Education, file no. 303/IX/67, ŻIH, 21.

21. Testimony of Jankiel Cieszynski, CKŻP, file no. 301/5514, ŻIH.


23. In the documentary *My Hundred Children*, the filmmaker Oschra Schwartz follows in the footsteps of a group of former child survivors, including full orphan Jewish boys.
who had to fend for themselves during the Holocaust. After the war, in the Jewish children’s home in Zakopane run by Lena Küchler-Silberman, the boys were particularly jealous of a Jewish boy who had a surviving father, the dentist in their children’s home. Out of jealousy and anger, one day the boys attempted to punish the dentist’s boy by hanging him, but fortuitously a member of staff put an end to the boys’ dangerous game, which might have ended in a tragedy. These boys as adults remember the episode in the film.

24. Wiktor Baranowicz to the Barański family, October 20, 1946, Zabrze, Poland. A second, undated letter, also written in the Children’s Home in Zabrze, contains a similar message; for both, see file no. M31/7081, Archives of Righteous Among the Nations, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel.

25. Testimony of Jurek Adin, CKŻP, file no. 301/3695, Archives of ŻIH.

26. Testimony of Henryk Weimann, CKŻP, file no. 301/3362, Archives of ŻIH. In the attached statement, the interviewer, Janina Małowska, stated that Henryk was a nervous boy who was unwilling to talk except about his foster mother, Mrs. Janowska.

27. Statement of Ludwik Jerzycki, to interviewer Janina Sobol-Małowska, September 27, 1947, file no. 301/2755, 1, Archives of ŻIH.


30. Ibid., 3.

31. Testimony of Józef Himelblau [in Yiddish], signed by the interviewer, Genia (Genya) Silkes, CKŻP, file no. 301/3615, Archives of ŻIH, 9–10.


33. Genia (Genya) Silkes’s observations of Józef Himelblau [in Yiddish], included in the testimony of Józef Himelblau, CKŻP, file no. 301/3615, Archives of ŻIH, 1.


36. Testimony of Yehudit Kiržner [in Yiddish], CKŻP, file no. 301/2077, ŻIH, 8.
37. Observations of Genia Silkes included in the testimony of Yehudit Kiržner [in Yiddish], CKŻP, file no. 301/2077, ŻIH, 1.
38. On robberies of Jewish victims, Jewish fugitives, and survivors, including Jewish corpses during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust, see Jan Tomasz Gross with Irena Grudzińska-Gross, Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The latter appeared first in Polish in March 2011. On the taking over of Jewish properties by the German authorities and also by Poles, see the collective volume, Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, Klucze i kasa: O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950 (Warsaw: Centrum Badań i Zagładą Żydów, 2014).
42. On the death camp in Auschwitz as a space of Jewish childhood, see the memoir by a child survivor and Holocaust historian, Otto Dov Kulka, Nofim mi-metropolin ha-mavet (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sfarim, 2003); English translation, Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death: Reflections on Memory and Imagination, trans. Ralph Mandel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).