In my practice as a writer, I have found children’s accounts more reliable than accounts of the adults, because children rarely have ideological, political, or other reasons to manipulate information. I like Joanna B. Michlic’s characterization that “child survivors’ testimonies are hooked on truth.” Her view that child survivors’ experiences are “worthy of a closer examination and are indispensable in writing the history of wartime childhood” is confirmed by Aharon Appelfeld, a child survivor himself. In his essay “Horror and Art,”1 he says that adults had a past, a point of reference, while we young children had no such thing. For adults the Holocaust was a period of madness, while for us it was normality. Adults tried to repress their memories, while children accepted them as reality. Attending the meetings of a child-survivors’ group for many years, I often heard complaints from group members that they did not receive what the psychologist Eva Fogelman calls “validation of their pain and suffering” and were dismissed as children who “did not know anything.” As in many study cases of individual child survivors, I often surprised my mother by recalling details from our Jewish war on the Aryan side. “How did you know that?” she wondered. We children in our formative years had our eyes and ears wide open. At the meetings of child survivors, I also heard complaints from those who had been reunited with relatives in America — in some cases earlier in Western Europe — that their relatives did not want to know and often forbade them to talk about their Holocaust experiences. In some cases one may call it insensitivity, in others a defense mechanism. “Try to forget, I’ll reward you for those years, I’ll do everything so you’ll forget,” her father would persuade the heroine of one of my actual stories.2 Another child survivor is driven mad when she hears a rabbi explaining that the Holocaust was a punishment for the Jews not being pious enough, or a universalistic theory that “the Holocaust was a gift for the world.”3 Adjustment had ambiguous forms: “I feel fine in New York. I like to vanish into crowds on Lexington Avenue and in the subway. I married twice
and didn’t try after that. I didn’t want to have children. I’d rather be by myself” — says still another female child survivor. And even in America, where Jews after the Holocaust were not only tolerated but accepted, a child survivor saved by Catholic nuns tries to keep her assumed identity: “I felt no guilt or shame about lying. Had it not been for lies, I would have long been dead. . . . Besides, I really did not know who I was.” I met several people still afraid of their true identity in the Washington-Baltimore child survivors’ group.

My book *Children of Zion* is a selection of children’s voices from interviews compiled in Palestine in 1943 by the Eastern Center for Information of the Polish Government in Exile. Called *Palestinian Protocols*, they included testimonies of Jewish children who in the fall of 1939 got out or were forced out of German-occupied Poland and found themselves under the Soviet occupation. Less than a year later, they were deported with their families to Soviet slave labor camps, mainly in Siberia. Another year later, under the Moscow-London agreement and pressure from the Western Allies, they were released from the camps, where they had lost many members of their families, and moved south, where they subsequently suffered even heavier family losses because of starvation and epidemics in the overcrowded cities of Soviet Central Asia. As orphans or semiorphans, they were evacuated in 1942 with the newly formed Polish army to Tehran, from where the Jewish Agency brought them to Palestine. Mostly from small Polish towns and shtetlech, the children spoke about the destruction of those little-known or unknown Jewish communities, including the mass murder that — according to their accounts — had started as early as September–October 1939. Named *Yaldei Teheran*, or “Tehran children,” they were in fact the first survivors of the Holocaust.

In order to extract the child’s voice, I cleansed the testimonies of the wooden style of bureaucratic reporting and the interviewers’ interference (which Rita Horváth calls “overwriting” in her essay on early postwar Hungarian interviews with child survivors). It sometimes required recasting the sentences, but I never changed the content and tried to retain the basic character of the child’s account. Here are samples from that underreported part of history to demonstrate the weight and reliability of children’s testimonies:

We lived on the street for three weeks. My father and mother got sick with typhus and my little sister and I took care of them.

We lived with other refugees, most of whom had typhus, dysentery, and other diseases. They refused to take them to hospital and most of them died as they lay next to us.

We slept in the open and my parents caught a cold. I tried in vain to get the hospital director to admit them. I managed to place them with an
Uzbek but I had nothing for them to eat [. . .]. Finally, I dragged them into a horse-drawn cab—no one helped me—I dropped them in front of the hospital and went back on foot. I was feeling sick and I knew I had typhus.

Many died on the street and there was no one to bury them.

My five-year-old brother, Zissel, got sick. I went every day [to the hospital] to find out how he was. One day I found his little bed empty. They told us he had died and had been buried, but they refused to show us his grave.

I went to find out how my brother was feeling. They told me he had died in the night. I sat in front of the hospital all day waiting to take my brother's body to the cemetery. In the evening, they told me that the funeral had already taken place, but they refused to show me where the grave was.

[My father] was taken to the hospital and I never saw him again. I don't even know where he's buried.

I saw [my mother] fall asleep in such a strange way and then become as hard as stone. For four days, I sat by her and guarded her. Then some strangers came and took her somewhere.

[Papa] slid off his straw mattress onto the floor. I tried to drag him back but he was very heavy . . . His eyes had always been blue but now they were of a completely different color and tears were running from them. I saw my mother die, then my father. They both died of hunger.

My father and mother got sick with typhus. They refused to give us a cart to take them to the hospital. They died on the same day. We cried all night and the next day buried them ourselves.

My father was forty-two, my mother forty-one. I sold their clothes to bury them in the Jewish cemetery in Bukhara, and I had a gravestone erected for them.

My brother Shloime died on the way to the hospital, and Aron in the hospital. We knew we were dying.

[In the orphanage] we would get four hundred grams of bread a day, but we were afraid our father would die of hunger, so my little brother and I would eat only half and give the rest to him so he wouldn't die.

[In the orphanage] we would get three hundred grams of bread a day and a plate of soup. Part of the bread we would take to our older brothers and sisters, even though there was a severe penalty for that.
I would creep out of the orphanage and go to my mother with the bread I didn’t eat. One day I found her in such a state that I didn’t want to go back to the orphanage, but she would not let me stay.

We had a bad time in the children’s home where the Polish children called us dirty Jews, but from time to time, we would sneak out and take whatever we could to our parents.

Since leaving for Tehran, I’ve had no news of my family, and I’m probably the only one who survived.

I didn’t say good-bye to my mother, because I was afraid they would find out I wasn’t a complete orphan. What became of her later I don’t know.

To this day, I don’t know whether my father is alive, or where he is.

Where my parents and brothers are I don’t know.

We were seven brothers and sisters. Only I survived.

I had six brothers and three sisters. Now I’m all alone.

When I was left alone in the world, I was brought to Palestine.

We were four children in our home, but only I came to Palestine.

The “Tehran Children’s” accounts indicate the Nazis’ murderous intentions even before the so-called “Final Solution” that began after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. They also confirm that inhuman mass deportations by freight trains to slave labor camps were a Soviet, not Nazi, invention. Which leads to a question: why a great power that carries on a lucrative trade in oil, natural gas, weapons, and nuclear technology does not pay—and is not even asked to pay—compensation for the slave labor and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent foreign civilians, mostly Poles and Polish Jews?

I have my own evidence supporting Fogelman’s statement that “the youngest were the most vulnerable [and] the least likely to survive”—but with some nuances. Two little girls were smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto at about the same time, late February–early March 1943. Each was entrusted to a gentile woman. Each of the women had received a certain amount of money and kept the girl for a time before passing her on to a Catholic establishment for abandoned children. From there—according to both women—each girl was passed on to an orphanage run by nuns, yet only one survived. As I wrote in The Victory (a sequel to The Jewish War), my stepfather had brought home a girl from an orphanage hoping she was his daughter. Then another Jewish man appeared claiming she was his child. A Solomon lawsuit followed. Each woman insisted that the child in the courtroom was the one she had helped
to save. Eventually, the other party produced a nun who had saved the girl’s original birth certificate proving she was the other man’s daughter, and my stepfather lost his child—for the second time. Afraid of causing pain, I did not dare to ask about more details; but more than fifty years later, I had a chance to see copies of the protocols from the court proceedings. According to witness testimonies, one girl was about one year older than the other. The younger, born in October 1939, did not even know she was Jewish. I remember that she insisted on not being Jewish, no matter how hard we tried to convince her that it is not so bad to be a Jew… The older girl, on the other hand, knew too much and—as the woman in court said—“She talked too much,” in particular about her time in the ghetto. The court came to no conclusion on what had happened to the five-year-old who “knew too much,” but it transpired from the testimonies that she had been abandoned in the street and picked up by police, who of course asked her a few questions. I was in Warsaw with my mother at the same time (from March through June 1943), and as I wrote in The Jewish War, one day I got lost in the street. I knew too much, too; but I was six and a half, and I knew I should not “talk too much.”¹⁰ Thus, in the first case, the younger child had a better chance of survival than the older, while in my own case the opposite was true.

A younger child could be more easily adopted; but an older child had a chance to be hired by a farmer, and I knew such survivors among my peers. There was also a special category of children: street-smart youths who crossed the Warsaw ghetto walls back and forth, and who after the liquidation of the Ghetto became homeless on the Aryan side. I remember boys who sold cigarettes in the street, screaming: “Papierosy swojaki, papieros!” “Swojaki” meant “homemade” (not in the sense that they were healthier, but cheaper). About ten years ago, I read a memoir by Joseph Ziemian, The Cigarette Sellers of Three Crosses Square.¹¹ It turns out that most of the cigarette sellers were Jewish. I also remember boys and girls singing in the courtyards and on streetcars and trains. They sang forbidden but very popular anti-German songs, and they too appear in Ziemian’s book as homeless Jewish orphans on their own, whom he regularly contacted and helped on behalf of Żydowski Komitet Narodowy (Jewish National Committee).

My mostly autobiographical short novel The Jewish War is divided into two parts: “The Father” and “The Mother,” as if especially for Dalia Ofer’s research on the roles of men and women. In the first part, Father is the leader. He decides when to run and where to hide, provides food and shelter, and does everything that is expected from a caring husband and father. He is resourceful, tenacious, courageous, yet he is losing the war one step after another. In the second part, Mother takes over. She decides to obtain forged Aryan identity cards and to move to Warsaw. Father is against it, but he cannot stop her. The
question was: who could save the child? He wanted to keep me, because she had a better chance of survival without a little boy who was circumcised; yet she insisted that only she could save me, and she was proven right. This was one of those “role-reversals between husbands and wives,” about which Lenore Weitzman wrote in her essay included in this volume. The Jewish War, which is more than an autobiography, emphasizes the universal difference between the masculine and the feminine elements, pointing out that under certain existential circumstances the more flexible feminine element with its unconventional ways and means is the winner.

The famous pedagogue and educator Janusz Korczak (1878–1942), in his diary written in the Warsaw ghetto, quotes a boy from his orphanage who wrote in an essay: “My father was a fighter for a piece of bread.” It was always my view as a witness that in the Nazis’ war against unarmed Jewish civilians—which I had called “the Jewish war” as early as 1965—fleeing, hiding, and obtaining food for the family was a form of resistance and defiance. Everybody was a fighter in that war—no matter what gender or age.

In the Warsaw ghetto—as in the Kraków ghetto from which Joanna Sliwa, in her chapter, has cited so many painful details—children often became the sole providers for their family, and risked and lost their lives in the process. In Lodz, which had been annexed by the Reich, the ghetto was so isolated from the Polish Aryan side that no interaction was possible. There the children fought for their lives by slaving as hard as adult laborers and—as in the Kraków ghetto situation presented by Sliwa—pretending they were older than their actual age. Her remark that ironically the ghetto was often “the only safe place to be” is reminiscent of the bitter diary of Calel Perechodnik (1916–1944), who wrote that because the Jews were robbed, blackmailed, informed on, tricked, deceived, and exposed even by people who ostensibly offered them shelter, they came out of their hiding places and returned to the ghetto to be together with other Jews, which meant to die among the Jews rather than in a hostile territory where it was hard to tell a friend from a foe. Mentioning an acquaintance who had managed to jump out of a train to Treblinka, Perechodnik bitterly comments that “had Kejzman known what lies ahead for him, he would have remained in the train.”

In the memoirs of Jan Kostański, which I coauthored with him, Jan, a gentile teenager at the time, recalls not only the street cigarette sellers, but also boys who helped the Polish national underground as smugglers of arms and supplies, and as messengers during the Warsaw Uprising of August–September 1944. Popular and generally admired like the Parisian gavroches, many of those children fell in the fighting and were buried under crosses, as nobody knew their Jewish identity. In most cases, they were the same street-smart youths who before the annihilation of the ghetto had smuggled food in.
They are also remembered by Bogdan (Dawid) Wojdowski (1930–1994) in his *Bread for the Departed*, which in my opinion is not only one of the best Holocaust novels, but also a reliable—though “subjective”—eyewitness testimony.

Most Holocaust accounts published in America follow a pattern: first an idyll, then a disaster, then fight or flight for survival, and finally the victory of good over evil. But in reality there was no idyll. There was a disaster and fight or flight for survival, but no true victory, and no happy ending. The Holocaust was a tragedy without a catharsis. Anne Frank’s “cathartic” statement: “In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart” was written before her arrest and arrival at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Alvin Rosenfeld doubts she could have retained that view in the barracks, where she was dying an inhuman slow death with thousands of others. A girl exactly her age, who was dying there at the same time yet miraculously survived, says at the end of her narrative in my *Drohobycz, Drohobycz and Other Stories*: “The world had ended and I was supposed to go on living, I didn’t know how.” All the other narrators in that collection of documentary stories also coped with this existential question.

An Oscar-winning documentary film tells the story of a young Jewish woman who survived deportation and slave labor; married her liberator, a U.S. Army officer who happened to be Jewish; and had children and grandchildren—a happy ending. But a Holocaust story does not end there. The “wall of silence in the families” that Uta Larkey discusses in her essay is confirmed by Ruth Wajnryb, who interviewed twenty-seven men and women of the second generation born and brought up in Australia. She writes that parents kept silent, because they did not want to pass their suffering on to their children; and the children did not ask, so as not to reawake their parents’ pain—thus both sides mutually protected each other. Moreover, children were afraid of what they might learn. The silence did not help: the children felt their parents’ pain and in addition feared what was unknown to them, and in this way the trauma was being passed on. The documentary about a Holocaust survivor who happily lives ever after had simply ended too early. Had it lasted a little longer, it would have ended on a different note. After my own experience with return to the place of tragedy—recorded by a documentary film entitled *Birthplace*—I seriously doubt whether Deb Filler, the comedienne cited by Larkey, really understood her father’s trip to his hometown if she found that experience “cathartic.”

A digression: Larkey has mentioned Daniel Vogelmann of the second generation. Daniel’s half-sister Sissel was born in 1935 in Florence and arrested on December 20, 1943, with her father, Schulim Vogelmann, originally of Przemyślany, Poland, and her mother Anna Disegni, the daughter of the chief rabbi of Turin. Deported on January 30, 1944, from Milan with transport no. 07, they
arrived on February 6 at Auschwitz, where Sissel and her mother were immediately put to death. Her father survived as prisoner no. 173484, and after the war married Albana Mondolfi of Bologna. Daniel, their son, was born in 1948 in Florence. In 1980 he founded the publishing house La Giuntina, specializing in Jewish subjects. (La Giuntina published, among other pieces, some of my short stories in Italian translation). Daniel Vogelmann has written several collections of poetry, including a cycle about his half-sister Sissel, which I have translated into Polish. His father, before his death at seventy-one, said that after Auschwitz he is 2071 years old, and I know that his son Daniel is not a happy man.

The Victory, which I wrote more than forty years ago, is still a rare literary attempt at dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust and the absence of actual victory or even catharsis. I am one of those child survivors for whom—as Michlic put it—“the war did not end in 1945.” In my preteen group in the Jewish children’s home at Helenów near Lodz, we did not speak about the past, but about the present and future. A reflection on this came later when we were growing up and saw the void around us. The other reason why we kept silent about our past was that nobody asked us about it: “You were too young to know.” But we did know, or at least felt and internalized our fear. In a collection of accounts entitled The Last Witnesses: Children of the Holocaust Speak, a woman who survived, passing as a gentile child, recalls that after the liberation, “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.”

I felt something similar. After intensive Catholic instruction, culminating in confession and communion (though without baptism), I did not want to become a Jew again. The priest did not intend to instill hatred, but if one believed the story of Jesus, one could not help resenting the Jews; and so for some time after the liberation, I insisted on saying my nightly prayers and going to church on Sunday. Children felt much safer within a religion that “saved” them from being Jewish. I suppose that retrieving Jewish children from convents and Catholic families was complicated by this crucial factor. Such must have been the situation in Poland, Belgium, and France, with Cardinal Aaron Jean-Marie Lustiger (1926–2007) as perhaps the best-known case in point.

The Jewish children’s home in Helenów helped me become a Jewish child again. There we were taught work ethics, collectivism, and shituf, not unlike in a kibbutz. As I depicted it in The Victory, the few survivors from my mother’s shtetl Dobre moved to a common apartment in Lodz and shared their income from a common stand in the marketplace, as well as food from a common kitchen as in a kibbutz. About a dozen demobilized Jewish soldiers shared an apartment, where we Jewish boys liked to visit them, and they liked to see us.
Orphaned adolescents flocked to a Jewish bursa and lived there as one family. After I left Helenówek and returned to my mother and stepfather in Lodz, I spent my after-school time at Zionist youth clubs. In addition to ping-pong and chess (the traditional Jewish sports), we practiced boxing. Gabriel Finder writes that boxing in the Jewish Displaced Person camps had psychological appeal as a way to develop courage, agility, and self-defense skills. It had the same appeal for us Jewish boys in postwar Lodz. Many of us were signed up with kibbutzim, so that we could be taken out of Poland before our parents would be able to leave. Most boys and girls in the Lodz Jewish day school, which I started attending in 1947, were wearing the various colors of Zionist organizations; and every break between classes resounded with singing and dancing the hora. Zionism seemed to be—as Avi Patt put it in his chapter in this book—“an obvious conclusion to wartime experiences and the postwar anti-Semitism,” and the Zionist youth movement seemed “the best response to the psychological needs” of survivors, especially the young. Zionist emissaries may have facilitated the mass exodus from Poland, but they did not need to exert much influence.

In my collection Drohobycz, Drohobycz, the most optimistic story is one that ends in Israel: “When I landed here, the young man who received refugees held out his arms to me. I stayed in his arms. God wanted to repair the wrong, and I was born a second time—when I placed my feet on this ground and when I gave birth to my children here.” But it was not always the case. Amos Oz remembers that Holocaust survivors were resented as those who “went to death like sheep,” and their stories evoked not empathy but shame. Aharon Appelfeld, who came to then-Palestine in 1946, was one of those who had to cope with such an unfriendly climate: “What could we, boys of twelve, do with so many memories of death? Relate to them, live them? We learned to keep quiet.” “One had to suppress the trauma and keep silent, because nobody was able to listen to it, and if they did, they did not understand,” confirms Irit Amiel, another child survivor from Poland. Most of the protagonists of her true stories never regained mental balance, and some assumed false identities as native “sabras,” changing even the biographies of their parents. My mother, who lived in Israel from 1957 to 1960, was on several occasions shamed for “not fighting back.” Let me once again testify: 1) My father was one of the fighters for a piece of bread, and thanks to him my mother and I survived the first phase of our Jewish war; and 2) my father and mother did more fighting than the members of the armed young men and women in the Warsaw ghetto, and my mother won. Of my childhood friends, the most successful in Israel were those who had survived the war in Soviet Russia and as such did not have to face any “shame.” The situation has changed after the “revelations” of the Adolf Eichmann trial, which for us survivors were not revealing at all.

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On May 9, 1995 — fifty years after the greatest disaster in Jewish history — I was in Tel Aviv, the most beautiful of Jewish cities. I stood in a hotel window overlooking the sea, where ships of the Jewish navy were parading, and from behind the horizon emerged fighter planes marked with the blue six-pointed star by which our enemies degraded us in our past. With supersonic speed, the jets came straight at the skyscraper buildings and in the last split second vertically rose up into the pure blue of the Mediterranean sky. This was cathartic, and I lived to see and feel it. The Zionist dream had saved over half a million Jews and millions of their descendants; nobody had saved more Jewish lives. I truly respect the sincere dedication of the Bundists and idealistic Jewish communists, but it is the Zionists who have liberated us, and I do not believe there ever was a more miraculous miracle. Or that there ever will be. What worries me is the short memory of the people who do not appreciate it.

NOTES
3. Ibid., 140–41.
4. Ibid., 203.
5. Ibid., 216.
7. Ibid., 133–66.
10. Ibid., 33–35.
17. Ibid.
23. Hebrew for “common property.”