

CHILDREN ON THE ESCAPE TRAIL

HABRICHA: EUROPE 1945 - 1948

(ישראל 60)

הקטן יהיה לאלף והצעיר לנו עצום.

The little one shall become a thousand, and the small a mighty nation.

(Isaiah 60)



על הילד אברם / נתן אלתרמן

בהיותו ישן על מדרגות ביתו בפולין כתום המלחמה, מפחד לשכב במיטתו

עיר פולנית,

ירח רם,

וכתמיד עננים בשיט.

בבוא לילה שוכב הילד אברם

על אבני מדרגות הבית.

מתיצבת אמו לפניו מקרוב

וברגליה בארץ איננה נוגעת.

ואומרת: אברם, קר הליל ורטב.

ביתה בוא, למטה המצעת.

ועונה לה אברם:

אמי, אמי,

לא אישן במטה ככל ילד.

כי אותך בה ראיתי,

אמי, אמי,

ישנה ובלבך מאכלת.

מתיצב אז אביו ומושיט אליו יד

וגוער בו, שקוף וגבוה.

ואומר לו: אברם, בוא הביתה מיד

בני אברם, חיש הביתה בואה.

ועונה לו אברם:

אבי, אבי,

שם אפחד לעצם העינים.

כי אותך שם ראיתי,

אבי, אבי,

דם ישן בלי ראשך על כתפיים.

אז נצבת מולו אחותו הקטנה

וקוראת לו הביתה בבכי.

אך עונה לה אברם: שמה את ישנה

עם דמעת המתים על לחי.

לפניו מתיצבות אז שבעים האמות

ואומרות:

הננו עליך!

בשבעים פקדות-חק ושבעים קרדמות

אל הבית הזה נשיבך!

ואותך במטה המצעת נניחה

וישנת בה דם כאביך!

ואברם בחלום

צועק "אבי!"

וקורא שם אמו ועונה היא:

בני, אשרי... כי לולא הסכין בלבבי,

לבבי בי נשבר לשנים.

אז בליל השלך הס

וירח הועם,

ומול ברק פגיונות שוחרים לציד,

היה דבר אדני אל אברם, אל אברם

הישן בפרוזדור הבית.

לאמר: אל תירא

אל תירא, אברם,

כי גדול ועצום אשימך,

לך לך, דרך ליל מאכלת ודם,

אל הארץ אשר אראך.

לך לך דרך ליל מאכלת ודם

כחיה, כתולע, כצפור.

מברכיך אני אברך, אברהם,

ומקלליך אאר.

*

- - כך. לפרק הזה בקורות העתים

שם קרא בעולם: בעית הפליטים!

אך לא זו הבעיה,

לבלרים בני חיל...

ולא היא הקורעת תיקים ותייל!

ולא היא מוליכה הספינות אלי ים!

כי מוליק אותן רעם עתיק וגבוה,

כי מוליק אותן צו לידותיו של העם,

כי מוליק אותן דבר אדני אל אברם.

*

- ויחרד אברהם ויפל על פניו

ויצא מני בית ושער

כי הצו שרעם על אברם האב

רועם על אברם הנער.

introduction

With the end of the war, refugees from all of Europe try to return to their countries and to their homes. The Jewish kids – those after years of incredible suffering, those who have lost their parents, lived in constant fear coping with loneliness and hunger, cold and illness, those who did not have any education, love or adult's protection – have neither homes nor families to return to.

Of about 1,200,000 Jewish children living in Europe before the war, only about 150,000 survived. A few thousand more that were in the USSR, returned to Poland with the repatriation agreement. Many of these children are orphans, without any relative or even anyone aware of their existence.

The solution acceptable to many, among them the Zionist youth movements and other Zionist organizations, is clear: the children must be located – *“we have so few left”* – collected, cared for, and brought to safety in their new homeland, the Land of Israel. There, their wounds can heal and they can live safely.



A child survivor with his belongings

The Palestine Post

Tuesday, June 05 1945

There are more than a million war orphans on the Continent of Europe today. That is the rough estimate made in the latest publication of Youth Aliyah — "*Behold the Children of Our Time*." Not all of them are Jewish of course — but all of them are children or adolescents; not all of them have been through the nethermost hell of the concentration camps, but nearly all of them have experienced suffering of body and mind which it turns our delicate stomachs even to read about. But read about it we must, whether we be Jew or Gentile, for these children are citizens of our future world, and a legacy bequeathed to us by countless men and women, killed or murdered.

The primary aim of this new

pamphlet of the Youth Aliyah is not to seek the where-withal to carry on their work of rescue (though if the booklet is read as it deserves to be, that appeal becomes overwhelming). It is designed to lay a foundation for scientific study of the psychology of these waifs from the observation gained in Palestine of some 13,000 Jewish children already brought out from Hitler's Europe. The fraction is pitifully small compared with the need, but it amounts to something a little more than a laboratory experiment, for the earliest arrivals have been there for several years, and no nation or country in the world has yet had anything like so much experience of the treatment required to restore to these young lives some faith in humanity.

In July 1947, Aliyat HaNoar lists include 36,000 children as candidates for Aliya. They are in 130 youth homes, scattered in 13 European countries.



Lucy Gertner (LUSIA FENSTER-on left)

Charbonograd, Poland – Kids in a monastery. Lucy Gertner leftmost

The Global Jewish News Source

7,000 Jewish Children in Budapest Are Homeless; Orphanages Obtained for 3,000

June 29, 1945

Tel Aviv (Jun. 28)

Of the 10,000 Jewish children remaining in Budapest, 7,000 are wandering the streets, homeless and uncared for, according to a report received here today. Shelter in orphanages has been obtained, so far, for only 3,000.

Meanwhile, it was announced today that Jacob Griffel, a representative of the American Agudas Israel and the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, has arrived in Germany to visit Jews still detained in camps. Griffel has already obtained permission to visit camps in the American and British zones, the announcement said.

Organizations at work

Rescuing the children required rapid and coordinated action. The children were gathered into youth homes. They needed both physical and emotional care: providing medical care, food, shelter and clothing, teaching new behaviors, making up schooling and addressing fears, angers, mistrust and worries about the future.

Several organizations collaborated to save the children. The first were the survivors themselves: pioneers of the youth movements, partisans, ghetto fighters, survivors of concentration camps and others, all finding within themselves the required energy and looking for solutions to the problem of the children.

“For years, we each had to fight to stay alive. Once we found our way back to a sane world, and no longer needed to lie, cheat and steal to stay alive, we felt good and clean, able to work for an ideal, something larger than ourselves. We found meaning to our continued existence.”

Itzhak Dichter, Principle of the school of the youth home, Rosenheim.

These were later joined by the Bricha emissaries from Israel, sent for the purpose of saving the refugees, who guide and run the operations. Helping them are the soldiers of the Jewish Brigade and the transportation battalion, who are mostly involved in transporting the children. “Aliyat HaNoar” operates the youth homes, and the JOINT funds most of the operations. UNRWA is responsible for operating the refugee children camps which it built.



Sonium, Greece. Jewish Brigade trucks, transporting Jewish children collected from Christian hostels



*Florence, Italy. Jewish Brigade soldiers
escorting camp children*



*Brigade soldier Eliyahu Ben-Hur
with a young refugee*



*JOINT representative with
an orphaned Jewish girl*



Poland, 1946. A group of children with Bricha activists

Chotto Fighters' House



JOINT employee helping children try on shoes

The first contact with the kids



A group of surviving children

Abandoned Jewish children, without parents, family, nor home, appear in the streets. Kids who are returning to Poland through the repatriation agreement, others who are released from the concentration camps and ghettos, from hiding places and from the Partisan war zones, and have nowhere to return to.

They wander the city streets neglected and hungry. Their experience with the cruel fight to survive and the horrors of the war equipped them with amazing survival skills, and with an understandable mistrust of others. Anyone may be an enemy. It is difficult to gain their trust and it is not simple to bring them to the youth homes for treatment and rehabilitation. The Bricha activists seek out these children, put effort in befriending them, while offering a safe, protecting and caring place.



*Warsaw, Poland. Jewish children
selling cigarettes in the street*

Rescuing kids from christian environments

Much effort is spent locating Jewish children hidden with Christian families, monasteries and Christian institutions. Some of those have no idea of their Jewish origins. Most of these kids were given up by their parents in order to save them, and are often the only survivor of their family.



Templehoff, Germany. A Jewish girl in a Confirmation (initiation into Christianity) ceremony

Chicago Sentinel

March 01 1945

The most disturbing news came from Rome. Lahayal, official publication of Jewish Palestine's units, carried an editorial on the situation in Italy and pointed out that Jewish children were being baptized wholesale, by the very churches which rescued them from death. That was too high a price to pay for rescue, the publication asserted, and charged that rabbis and Jewish community leaders in Italy, fearing strained relations with the Church, had failed to take action to stop these wholesale conversions. The criticism seemed to be aimed mainly at Jewish failure to act against this epidemic.

* * *



Poland. Church kids choir, some of Jewish origins

The work is quite hard, as there are no organized lists. In addition, many monasteries and families refuse to give up the kids. They saved the kids, hiding them from the Nazis, while putting their own life at great risk, but with the end of the war, many families try to use the children to their advantage, and request large sums of money to give them back, as if they were commercial goods. Others are quite attached to the children, as if they were their own, while others refuse to return them to Judaism from theological-religious reasons, wanting to “save their souls” as well.

Saving Jewish Children, but at What Cost?

PARIS, Jan. 8 - In October 1946, just a year after the defeat of the Nazis, the Vatican weighed in on one of the most painful episodes of the postwar era: the refusal to allow Jewish children who had been sheltered by Catholics during the war to return to their own families and communities.

A newly disclosed directive on this subject provides written confirmation of well-known church policy and practices at the time, particularly toward Jewish children who had been baptized, often to save them from perishing at the hands of the Nazis. Its tone is cold and impersonal, and it makes no mention of the horrors of the Holocaust.

Its disclosure has reopened a raw debate on the World War II role of the Catholic Church and of Pope Pius XII, a candidate for sainthood who has been excoriated by his critics as a heartless anti-Semite who maintained a public silence on the Nazi death camps and praised by his supporters as a savior of Jewish lives.

The one-page, typewritten directive, dated Oct. 23, 1946, was discovered in a French church archive outside Paris and made available to The New York Times on the condition

that the source would not be disclosed. It is a list of instructions for French authorities on how to deal with demands from Jewish officials who want to reclaim Jewish children.

"Children who have been baptized must not be entrusted to institutions that would not be in a position to guarantee their Christian upbringing," the directive says.

It also contains an order not to allow Jewish children who had been baptized Catholic to go home to their own parents. "If the children have been turned over by their parents, and if the parents reclaim them now, providing that the children have not received baptism, they can be given back," it says.

Even Jewish orphans who had not been baptized Catholic were not to be turned over automatically to Jewish authorities. "For children who no longer have their parents, given the fact that the church has responsibility for them, it is not acceptable for them to be abandoned by the church or entrusted to any persons who have no rights over them, at least until they are in a position to choose themselves," the document says. "This, obviously, is for children who would not have been baptized." ...

Pioneering movements in Poland, along with rescue organizations and financial assistance from the JOINT, form a “Zionist Coordination for Saving Jewish Children” Organization, whose goal is locating and rescuing Jewish children who were hidden as Christians during the war back to their own nation.

The organization works with Bricha activists to collect, “pay for”, sometimes extract and other times “tear” these children from the monasteries and from the Christian families. Over fifty boarding houses, with 3,800 children, are created by the Jewish Committee. Each child has his own moving, heartbreaking story.



Poland. Jewish children hidden at Srtz'nsky Monastery during the war.

The transit camps

Living conditions in the transit camps were harsh. When the pressure increased and the Bricha increased pace and the existing centers could not take in additional people, new emergency centers were erected in tents, abandoned garages and dilapidated shacks. A phenomenon that became apparent in the camps was ever-increasing numbers of children.



*Salzburg, Austria. Child being bathed in
'Franz Joseph Kasserne' transit camp*



Mother and son in a transit camp



Bergen-Belsen, Germany. Celebration of the birth of the 1,000th baby in the transit camp

A caregiver at one of the “child kibbutzim” – the name of the children's homes in Poland - tells how, on the first day, all the food they served to the children had disappeared, obviously stolen. The following day the instructors, without any comment, increased the amount of food served, but this too disappeared in its entirety. Quite a few days have to pass before the children learn to trust that sufficient amounts of food will be served to them, and they stop hoarding.



Children eating at a gathering station. Unknown location

Another caregiver tells how a little girl in a children center in Poland refuses to remove the cross from around her neck, and has trouble falling asleep at night "*because there is no image of Christ*". The caregiver encourages her to pray. When the child comes to the kids camp in Germany she relaxes and removes the cross from her own.



*New Freeman, Germany.
Kids playing War Games in a deportees camp*



*Bratislava, Slovakia.
A caregiver feeding a girl*

During the war the girl Eve Nissimov was hidden, separated from her mother. After the war, she met her mother again, but could not remember her, so she calls her "woman-mother."



Budapest, Hungary. 1946.

A Girl at the **Mount of Liberty** orphanage

In the book *"The Girl from There"* she describes their stay in a deportees camp:

"The woman-mother and I go to Germany and live in a deportees camp.

I'm sick, very sick, dying. Everyone says there's nothing more to do. The camp doctor moves my bed into his office. The room is nice and bright. I can look at the doctor as much as I want.

He is bent over his desk and writes. But when he has the time he sits down next to my bed and we play with blocks.

Finally, a miracle happens, so everyone says, and I get better. I am no longer in the doctor's room and that is sad.

The woman-mother brings me a doll with the head of a rabbit and a whole orange and I play and eat ... "

Nissimov, E. (In 2007). *Girl from There*, Mikteret Publishers



Bratislava, Slovakia. Orphanage children receive chocolate

On the road

The children can not be held over time in transit camps or in displaced persons camps. The obvious goal is to bring them to the land of Israel as soon as possible . After getting initial treatment, the children begin their long journey. Small groups head out to the unknown, accompanied by a handful of guides that lead children through European roads towards Mediterranean ports, where they will board the immigrant ships headed to the land of Israel.

“From Poland we had to escape through the trails of Habricha. When it was made known that we are going to Israel, there was general chaos. Some children were cheering, while others wept, and still others are beside themselves. Hasya Bernstein, the caregiver, was told of the trip only 24 hours prior to departure, while the children were told just prior to departure. Complete secrecy was essential.”

*Dekel , E. . (1963) . **Survivors of the Sword : Rescue of Children in the Holocaust and beyond.** Tel - Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publications*



*A group of a youth movement members on a train
en route to Bratislava, Czech Republic*

At border crossings

"Abraham Verzheizr told of an incident in which he crossed the Polish-Czech Border with 60 children who came from Lodz and Warsaw. As they crossed the border, the border patrol guards arrived, conducting a search. They were shooting and approaching the forest, but did not enter it. The children were scattered in the woods and were ordered to lie on the ground. After about three hours, during which the children were alone, the soldiers finally left. The gathering signal was given and the children, shivering with cold but with no signs of panic or fear, reported back. 'It was impossible to sleep because of the band of guns and machine guns playing incessantly', complained one of the children..."

The Bricha member tells of the incident: 'It is hard to imagine the fear during those three hours when we hid in the woods. 60 surviving children were quite a rare treasure in those days – so few were left' "

Dekel, E..(1963) . Survivors of the Sword : Rescue of Children in the Holocaust and beyond.
Tel - Aviv: Ministry of Defence - Publications .

*A guide giving final instructions
before heading to the border mountains*



1946, Polish-Czech Border. A group of survivors crossing secretly

On foot, in the mountains

"Crossing of the Austrian-Italian border through the Tyrol mountains is considered to be physically challenging. We feared the children would not be up to the task. We were wrong. They were good mountain climbers, more disciplined than the adults ...

...Once, we transferred a group of children from Poland to the Czech Republic along a 'black' route (without the border guards' knowledge, on either side!) . A group of 12-15 year olds headed out after midnight. They were instructed to walk quietly, and not to utter a sound while walking. A 12 year old boy said 'Of course we will keep quiet, we are used to it'. After about three hours of walking we reached the Czech Republic and the children entered the youth home. One of the kids asked then, 'Nu, jetzt bereits Reden werden?'. Well, are we allowed to talk now?"

Dekel , E. (1963) . *Survivors of the Sword: Rescue of Children in the Holocaust and beyond.*
Tel - Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publications



A refugee convoy in snowy mountains



A group of refugees in the Alps, accompanied by Italian troops

Youth homes

The hope of bringing the children to Israel soon, was not fulfilled. Once in Germany, Austria or Italy, it becomes apparent that their stay at the camps will be indefinitely long. Obviously an organized, educational and beneficial routine has to be established for these children, who need certainty and relaxation more than anything.



Wasembik, Austria. Children in the playroom of a children's home

The Zionist youth movements, especially Dror and Hashomer Hatzair, established in Poland over 17 kibbutzim (collective training centers) for youth aged 16 to 21, following the model of collective training centers before the war. The caregivers in the youth homes develop an educational-therapeutic approach, trying to give the children a sense of stability and safety, despite the uncertainty and the preparations for Aliya. The group is a substitute for family, the counselors - substitute parents. They give the children love, food, clothing and shelter along with a clear framework, ensuring proper behavior and educational activities.



Children's home in Lodz, Poland, 1947. Story hour.



Lodz, Poland. 1947. Meal time at the children's house



Austria. A Bricha youth home, immediately after the war

The counselors

The instructors, most of them Holocaust survivors themselves, feel total responsibility and commitment towards bringing the children to safety in Israel. They see the sad eyes, the anger and the loneliness. They work from morning to night and find within themselves endless strength for the children.

"A miracle happened to the children - these counselors ... We did not fully appreciate this group of people, who are themselves children, who have not tasted childhood

and they were the ones to save the children, making it the content of their lives"

From a report by M.. Selinger, Agency emissary.

"We felt such responsibility for those who have no one but us, and it is up to us to show them the way back"

From the words of A. Payne, a counselor at Rosenheim



Poland. Counselors of the youth homes in Provinz Niederschlesien



Czechoslovakia. Children survivors with a caregiver

Chamonix, France. A counselor combing a girl at a youth home



Lodz, Poland. With the teacher in the youth home

Israel comes to them

The Bricha activists are working to rehabilitate the children. They develop a curriculum, teach the language and conduct social and cultural activities. The education system encounters great difficulties: a medley of languages, gaps and missing knowledge. There is a difficulty in concentrating, difficulty in discipline - how could there not be - and a deficiency of trained teachers.



Germany. Feldafing Deportees Camp. End of summer colony, by the fire

The educational goal is to “bring the land of Israel” to the students even before they arrive at its border. They learn about Israel, learn the Hebrew language, sing songs of Israel and dancing the Hora. They celebrate the Jewish holidays, including the holiday stories, songs and ceremonies.

קיבוץ ילדים



על שם פרומקה

הרצל ה"ח

תחבוקנה

תחבוקנה יבוי קל-אחינא. תחבוקנה
אסרות ארצנא באר המ שם
אל יפול חובם-עלבים, מתבוקנה
יבא שם אחז נצרת הצם.

II

מי בל לאם קטנות הבל נמא 331 ים,
מלול את עמם, ללתי עז
עב נמא מלאי הבלים מתפא 331 ים
קולות אחינא הקראים עז! עז! עז!

A page from the songbook of Hanna Mahrshak,
a girl in the Rosenheim youth home.

Classroom in a Dror youth home, with a "Tower and Stockade" model



Sztz'in, Poland. 1946. Children's chorus in the Tutz youth home



Sztz'in, Poland. 1946. Girl dancing in the Tutz youth home.

Finale

The rescue operations come to an end. Most of the surviving children were collected and treated, received loving, warm care and brought to the Land of Israel. Long is the list of men and women who worked towards the rescue, rehabilitation and education of the children, who have horror so deeply engraved in them both physically and emotionally. The instructors, the guides who lead them en route, those who forged the needed documents - all were endlessly devoted to the children, and felt privileged to "be there" for the kids. They were anonymous and unpaid, and remain so to this day, but their effort shall be remembered.

It is a great right to be among the children who survived the hell of the war, withstood the rigors of roads and took part as small-big fighters in the struggle for the establishment of the state of Israel.



*On board of the ship "Theodor Herzl"
approaching the coveted shore*

Habricha Legacy Association



The story of the Bricha is not well known, and does not get the commemoration it deserves. We, “Habricha Legacy Association”, seek to give this chapter its justified place in the collective Israeli memory and to raise the awareness to the role of Habricha Organization in the redemption of the Holocaust survivors and their immigration to Israel and in the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel.

We invite everybody related to Habricha – activists and survivors alike, their relatives or anybody who finds interest in this subject to join the association.

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