

~CHILDREN AND WAR~

***The Children Accuse* (Poland, 1946):
Between Exclusion from and Inclusion into the Holocaust Canon**

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“The variety of historical evidence is nearly infinite. Everything that man says or writes, everything that he makes, everything he touches can and ought to teach us about him.”

Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 66.

In 1946 the Jewish Historical Commission in Cracow published the first collection of the early postwar testimonies of Jewish children in Poland *Dzieci Oskarżaja* (*The Children Accuse*).[1] The book consists of fifty-five children's testimonies and fifteen adult testimonies. The latter testimonies focus on children's experiences in various ghettos in Nazi-occupied Poland, whereas the children's testimonies are divided into six thematic sections: the ghettos, the camps, on the Aryan side, in hiding, the resistance and prison. The children testimonies can be characterized as 'unliterary,' simple descriptive reports, close in time to the events they describe. They convey diversity of individual experiences, but at the same time they all revolve around common themes and shared wartime experiences. They all are based on oral interviews with child survivors that were conducted according to the official guidelines on how to research Jewish children's wartime experiences that was issued in 1945 by the Historical Commission of the Central Committee of Polish Jews.[2] These interviews were carried out in Jewish children's orphanages, dormitories, and places of daily care that were established in various Polish cities and towns immediately after the end of war. In 1996 the British publisher Vallentine Mitchell published *The Children Accuse* in English in the series the Library of Holocaust Testimonies.[3] In the publisher's announcement the book was depicted as 'a most unusual book.' This phrase may well illustrate the difficulty of assessing its value as a documentary source in the Holocaust canon.

This paper discusses the problem of the prolonged exclusion of the early postwar child survivor testimonies from the Holocaust canon of documentary sources. It provides a set of general observations about their exclusion, the importance of their inclusion as documentary source in the reconstruction of the past, and the recent developments in the Holocaust historiography in respect to these texts.

The Children Accuse is one example of a marginalized text in the Holocaust canon of documentary sources. This text is also absent from the protracted theoretical discussion about the role and meaning of survivor testimony in the Holocaust studies.[4] I view the bowdlerization of early postwar children's testimonies as a result of two interwoven phenomena that persisted until very recently (1990s): the lack of historical inquiry into children's perspectives on the Second World War and into social aspects of the wartime

and early postwar periods in general, and the neglect of the rich variety of sources pertaining to the history of these topics.

The recognition of the early postwar testimonies as documentary source primarily depends on posing new inquiries into the under-researched areas of Holocaust studies such as the history of Jewish children during the war in which the child is the subject and not the object of the historical narrative. It also depends on what the French historian Marc Bloch calls 'the proper questioning' of sources.[5] Bloch asserts that the problems historians research and the questions they pose should determine the kinds of evidence they use.[6] Thus the early postwar testimonies should not be expected to deliver the same kind of information/ knowledge about the event as the official documents used as primary documentary evidence by the Holocaust historians specializing in 'perpetrator history.' By adopting Bloch's approach historians of the Holocaust could create a richer, fuller and more multidimensional narrative of the past in which the histories of victims, perpetrators, bystanders and resisters would be integrated. At present, this multidimensional narrative of the Holocaust comprising the perspectives of the victim, the bystander, and other social actors is still in the stage of infancy.[7]

The volume *The Children Accuse* reveals that the children's testimonies is a rich documentary source for the reconstruction of the history of Jewish children and Jewish family in Poland during the Second World War, and for the reconstruction of the multi-dimensional histories of Polish-Jewish and also Ukrainian- Jewish relations of that time. A critical examination of these testimonies reveals the patterns of Jewish family life in the ghettos: the issues of disintegration and normalcy of Jewish family and the reversal of the roles between children and their parents. It is essential for mapping social relations between the children and their families and other individuals and groups in the ghettos and camps; between the children and their Christian Polish rescuers; and between the children and other individuals both children and adults encountered on the Aryan side in wartime and early post-war Poland.

In spite of their clear shortcoming in terms of language, and their lack of precise references to time, space and social actors, child survivor testimonies provide certain nuanced information about developments and circumstances that are hardly to be found in any other archival documents. For example, they provide 'a raw information' about the motivation and actions of rescuers and of those who did not wish to extend help to the children. Thus, they shed a new light into the subject of individual rescue activities. They also provide evidence for a more nuanced picture of the Jewish community in early post-war Poland: especially of the attitudes of Jewish political and cultural organizations, social and cultural practices and ideological influence upon children. By the contextualization of the deciphered information in the broader social and cultural framework, historians may gain a new dimension to a historical event.

The early postwar child survivor testimonies could serve other functions. They provide rich material for a socio-historical analysis of identity in young individuals emerging from the conditions of war, genocide and a long-term presentation of being "someone else." Analysis of these texts can answer questions pertaining to the problems of "broken

identity” and formation and reconstruction of identity among children and youth under the circumstances of war and genocide. Their analysis also provides insights into the nature and content of the ‘raw memory’ of the Holocaust. The early postwar child testimonies constitute a source for understanding the nature of identity and identity formation on both collective and individual levels, but this should not preclude their use as documentary evidence in the reconstruction of the wartime experiences. The two approaches to these documents are complementary, not mutually exclusive.

What are the key factors responsible for the prolonged exclusion of the early post-war testimonies as documentary evidence in historical research?

In *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory and Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra asserts that canons and the process of canonization of texts have been more evident in literary criticism, philosophy, and art history than they have been in history or social science.[8] Yet, one can clearly differentiate between texts that the Holocaust historians have included into the canon of sources defined as possessing evidentiary function, and those they have excluded. The process of deciding which texts are valid historical evidence is rooted in the rigid division between two schools of thought: the first primarily concerned with perpetrators and the second primarily concerned with the victims.[9] This is the legacy that has for a long time determined the kind of source that a historian turns to and examines in detail.

‘Perpetrator history’ has mainly relied on evidence provided by the perpetrators: a variety of official documents, including postwar German legal records. ‘Victim history’ has used survivors’ testimonies for the reconstruction of their reactions to Nazi policies, the study of resistance and rescue operations and the effects of the Holocaust on individual and collective Jewish identity. Survivor testimonies from later periods, starting in the late 1960s, constitute the bulk of sources in the writing of the latter aspect of the victim history.

Historians who specialize in ‘perpetrator history’ have generally rejected the survivors’ testimonies as legitimate historical evidence by pointing to their lack of their factual accuracy, and, to what they regard, as the subjective and non-representative nature of the testimonies. They have also been critical of ‘victim history’ and have viewed it as a distorted, one-sided vision of the past that only conveys heroism and triumph of the victims. The case in point is Raul Hilberg, the key representative of the ‘perpetrator school’ who explicitly, forcefully and consequently rejects the value of survivors’ testimonies for historical reconstruction in two works *Politics of Memory* and *Sources of Holocaust Research*. [10]

Christopher Browning, who belongs to the same school of thought as Hilberg, has recently taken a more inclusive stance towards survivors’ testimonies. In *Collected Memories* he has somehow reluctantly acknowledged that a critical analysis of survivors’ testimonies could contribute to fill ‘a major lacuna in Holocaust scholarship’.[11] Browning poses new questions about the social structure of the Starachowice factory slave labor camp in his treatment of 173 adult survivors’ testimonies. By drawing the

portrayal of various groups within the slave labor camp and the variety of social relations that took place among them, Browning reaches a new understanding of the mechanism of the camp. Browning's inclusive approach to testimonies leads to an expanding definition of social agency and the enrichment of the historical narrative. However, in the discussion of various functions of survivors' testimonies, Browning does not address the subject of children's testimonies nor does he discuss the early post-war testimonies in general.

The exclusion of early postwar child survivor testimonies as evidentiary material can also be attributed to the fact that children have generally been marginalized as a subject of historical inquiries. Historians have not conducted research into how children witnessed both the war and the immediate post-war years. Instead, historical narratives about children have concentrated on attitudes and policies toward children and conveying their experiences through the eyes of adult-witnesses or through the eyes of child survivors after they became chronologically adults.

Skepticism surrounding the language, competence and reliability of children's testimonies and the issue of children's suggestibility have constituted another key factor behind the exclusion of collections such as *The Children Accuse* from the Holocaust canon of documentary sources.

The social and cultural context in which the early post-war child survivor testimonies emerged provides vital information pertaining to issues of competence, reliability and suggestibility of the children's testimonies. Here the textual analysis of the earlier mentioned 16-page long instruction booklet published in 1945 sheds light on the nature of these testimonies and their value as documentary evidence. The booklet was published in Lodz, a city that served as the capital of Poland and the capital of Polish Jewish community in the first postwar years.

The booklet is organized into three sections: the methodology of conducting an interview with a child, the discussion of the questionnaire and the entire questionnaire.

The opening passage to the 'Methodology' section of the booklet reveals that the authors of the instructions were aware of the complexities of interviewing a child. They stress that the outcome of the interview depends on many factors ranging from the character and professional and intellectual skills of the interviewer and the character of the interviewee, the attitude of the interviewer towards the questioned child, to the subject, the time and the place of the interview. This approach suggests a professional experience of collecting, conducting and interpreting oral interviews. The expertise in collecting and analyzing oral testimony that developed in East European Jewish scholarly institutions such as the YIVO Institute in the pre-1939 period must have played a salient role in the post-1945 approach of the Historical Commission to testimonies.

The methodology section lists the five main aims of the interview. The first stated aim is to 'obtain the comprehensive picture of all the Nazi actions aimed at physical and moral destruction of the young generation.' The second aim is to demonstrate heroism of the

Jewish youth and the survival skills of Jewish children. Here the physical survival of the interviewed children is defined as an act of defiance against Hitler: as heroism itself. This aim, brought about by the sheer scale of the destruction of European Jews by those who were involved in active struggle against the Nazis, was utilized as a powerful historical narrative in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Later this narrative came to be criticized by scholars such as Hilberg for creating a one sided heroic version of the history of Jews during the Holocaust. Yet, the analysis of the early postwar child testimonies does not show that the second aim is the dominant one in these testimonies. The interviewers do not seem to have actively interfered with the testimony in order to obtain an image that would confirm or stress heroism of the children. *The Children Accuse* contain only three testimonies under the section of resistance that describe stories of three boys serving in the Soviet partisan groups in Eastern Poland. The daily wartime experiences of moving from one place to another, escape and finding food and refuge, maintenance of facets of childhood, and child's suffering or witnessing of other's suffering constitute the main tales of the testimonies.

The authors' third aim in interviewing the child is to evaluate the psychological and physical conditions of the young generations emerging from five years of living under extreme conditions. The fourth aim is to research the future plans of the children and youth, their ideological preferences and their attitudes towards other nations. The findings under this category are defined as material to serve further education purposes among the surviving Jewish youth in Poland. The information obtained under this category could be treated as useful in the historical investigation of the influence of various Jewish organizations upon the children in the early post-war period.

The fifth aim of the questionnaire is to research various attitudes of Polish society toward Jews, the registration of both positive and negative attitudes and behavior and the evaluation of the influence of the Nazi propaganda on Polish society. The latter purpose became a narrative also stressed in the early postwar period by the Polish political and cultural elites of various ideological affiliations in their discussion of negative attitudes and behavior of Poles toward Jews.

The final overarching aim listed by the authors is to collect evidence in order to combat fascism and to inform the world about the crimes committed by the Nazis. Maria Hochberg- Mariańska, one of the editors of *The Children Accuse* emphasizes the final aim in her introduction to the book.[12]

The next section of the instructions deals with the interviewing methods. This section is crucial in the discussion about the evidentiary function of child testimonies. What this section reveals is that the authors of the instruction booklet define the role of the interviewer as passive and not as active. The interviewer is requested not to interfere with children's answers to the questions, not to intrude into their stories and their way of associating various facts. He or she is also requested to register any digressions from the main story and to keep notes on child's behavior throughout the interview. The authors of the instructions reject the concept of a 'leading question' as a correct method of interviewing. They explicitly instruct the interviewers not to ask any leading questions.

“Instead of asking ‘were you involved in smuggling?’ one should ask the child ‘what did you do?’”[13]

The authors advise the interviewer to familiarize himself/herself with the history and the character of the interviewed child in preparation for the interview, and to conduct the interview in a short time span because of children’s propensity for tiredness and loss of concentration. They instruct the interviewer to remain a keen and attentive listener, to collect all the notes and write down the testimony and the accompanying form describing the child’s behavior and character immediately after the completion of the interview. The booklet’s ideal interview narrative is as close to the child’s presentation of the events verbatim as possible. This appears to be the common form of testimonies included in *The Children Accuse*.

The second section of the instructions describing the questionnaire reveals the authors’ expectations of the interviewers in relation to the subject matter of the interview. It opens with a statement asserting that to reconstruct a child’s wartime experiences one has to ask a child the most difficult and painful questions.[14] The section continues with the guidance on how to ask specific questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into ten chapters. Chapters one and ten of the questionnaire focus on the investigation of the personality and psychological state of the child at the time of the interview, whereas chapters two through nine are concerned with the reconstruction of the wartime experiences, starting with the first period of German occupation, ghetto and liquidation of the ghetto and ending with sections about life in hiding in the forest and ‘open life’ on the Aryan side. The instructions emphasize the importance of attention to detail and to differences in descriptions of various places and actions. For example, in chapter three concerning the life in the ghetto, interviewers are requested to note all titles of songs and the games played in the ghetto that a child mentions and to pay attention to differences in the titles and content of the games children played on the Aryan side.[15]

Chapter five, on the child experiences in labor camps, recommends interview questions about encounters with the individual perpetrators and children’s reactions toward the individual Germans and about the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish children in the camp. Interviewers are also urged to take into account a child’s lack of criticism and imagination in drawing careful interpretations of children’s descriptions of events and actions, particularly of the descriptions of life in the forest and partisan groups.

The third part of the questionnaire provides all the questions being asked in each of the ten chapters: in chapters two through nine, questions can be divided into two groups oriented toward the described wartime event and toward the child’s reaction toward the wartime event.

Overall the instruction booklet reveals that its authors were professionals who had training and expertise in historical and psychological investigation. Even if we infer that some of the selected interviewers did not have much experience or the right personality to carry out the interview, the structure and the content of the questionnaire worked to limit the personal influence of the interviewer upon the child. There is no doubt that the

Historical Commission in charge of writing and implementing the instructions expected to gather rich detailed documentation to be used for historical investigation into children's wartime experiences and into their impact on the child. The children's testimonies did not fail their expectations, though it is clear that they do not provide the same type of information about the past as official documents, and the information deciphered from them needs to be contextualized in a wider historical context.

Historians who share reservations about the reliability and suggestibility of children's testimonies are also advised to turn to the findings and conclusions of psychologists. In the last two decades, psychologists have rapidly advanced the empirical study of the subject of children's eyewitness memory in respect to judicial inquiry. Their conclusion is that despite great skepticism surrounding accounts of child eyewitness in court, it is important not to just dismiss these accounts, but to acknowledge the strengths as well as the shortcoming in the evidence provided by children.[16] This balanced approach when applied by historians could lead to the recognition of the value of early postwar children's testimonies as evidentiary material and at the same time recognizing both their strengths and limitations.

What is the future of early postwar child testimonies in Holocaust historiography?

In the light of the most recent and still ongoing developments in the historiography of the Holocaust, one could become cautiously optimistic about the inclusion of *The Children Accuse* and similar published and unpublished testimonies into the Holocaust canon of documentary sources. That historians such as Christopher Browning, who write the 'perpetrator history' of the Holocaust, increasingly recognize adult survivors' testimonies as a potential valid source for historical reconstruction indicates a move toward the integration of survivor testimonies into the Holocaust canon of documentary sources.[17] More importantly, the emergence of a new type of research on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, particularly on the history of local communities of the region such as Omer Bartov's project *Multi-ethnic History of Buczacz* has been accompanied by a new discussion about the limitations and possibilities of the application of personal testimonies in historical inquiry.[18] Bartov's work on Buczacz is an example of a multidimensional narrative of the Holocaust achieved through a critical analysis of the testimonies of the victims, bystanders, resisters and perpetrators.[19] Finally, the most recent scholarly approach toward children in the Holocaust could be seen as a development leading to the inclusion of child testimonies into the canon of the Holocaust documentary sources. This approach defines children as subjects rather than as objects of historical narrative and places children's experiences within broader social and cultural context during the Second World War. Nicholas Stargardt's *Witnesses of War. Children's Lives under the Nazis* published in 2005 in England, represents the best illustration of this new approach.[20] The work can be viewed as a breakthrough in historical research demonstrating the merits of history of children, written from a child's point of view, using sources ranging from children's diaries and schoolwork.

All these new developments in the Holocaust historiography somehow unintentionally confirm the correctness of Maurice Bloch's position that the problems being researched

and the questions being posed determine the kinds of evidence to be used. Thus, the new sets of inquiries into the previously neglected social aspects of the Holocaust and early postwar period play a key role both in the emergence of a new discussion about the use of testimonies in historical reconstruction and in their gradual integration into the Holocaust canon of sources that play evidentiary function.

Notes

1. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds. *Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają*, Kraków, Żydowska Komisja Historyczna w Krakowie, 1946. Maria Hochberg- Mariańska, who was one of child survivors' interviewers, also wrote short stories based on the children's testimonies 'Dzieci,' in: *W 3-cią rocznicę Zagłady Ghetta w Krakowie (13. March 1943 – 13 March 1946)*, Kraków, Żydowska Komisja Historyczna w Krakowie 1946, 146-157. She is also a co-author with her husband Mordecai Peleg of wartime autobiography *Witnesses Life in Occupied Kraków* London and New York, Routledge, 1991.
2. *Instrukcje dla badania przeżyć dzieci żydowskich w okresie okupacji niemieckiej*, Seria II. Prace Metodologiczne, Vol. 3, Łódź, Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich, Komisja Historyczna, 1945. 1-16.
3. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds. *The Children Accuse*, London, Portland, OR, Vallentine Mitchell, 1996. (Translation from Polish by Bill Johnston).
4. Except for the discussion of early post-war testimonies by Henry Greenspan in *The Awakening of Memory. Survivor Testimonies in the First Years after the Holocaust and Today* (Monna and Otto Weinmann Lectures Series, Washington, DC., 2000), 6-9, they are not mentioned in any important discussion and overview of the role and meaning of survivor testimonies.
5. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*. New York, Vintage Books, 1953, 64.
6. Ibid., 62-69. On Marc Bloch's approaches to social history and evidence see, Daniel Chirot, 'The Social and Historical Landscape of Marc Bloch,' in Theda Skocpol, ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, 22-46.
7. See Omer Bartov, *From the Holocaust in Galicia to Contemporary Genocide. Common Ground-Historical Differences*, Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Annual Lecture, Washington DC. USHMM, 2002.
8. Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1994, 27.
9. For insightful observations on the division between 'perpetrator history' and 'victim history', see Omer Bartov, 'The Lessons of the Holocaust,' *Dimensions*, Vol. 12 no. 1, 1998, 19

10. See Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory. The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 1996, 132-133 and the same author *Sources of Holocaust Research. Analysis*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2001, 142-174.
11. Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories. Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony*, Madison Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, 48.
12. See the introduction by Maria Hochberg-Mariańska in Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds. *The Children Accuse*. 16-17.
13. *Instrukcje*, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 9.
15. *Ibid.*, 9.
16. On the recent psychological approaches to the issue of the reliability and suggestibility of child witness in court see the special issue of *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 11, 1997, especially the article by two American psychologists Gail S. Goodman and Jennifer M. Schaff, 'Over a Decade of Research on Children's Eyewitness Testimony: What Have We Learned? Where Do We Go From Here?,' 5-20 and Josef Perner, 'Children's Competency in Understanding the Role of a Witness: Truth, Lies and Moral Ties,' 21-35.
17. Browning, *Collected Memories. Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony*, 44-45.
18. In a discussion of his current project on the *Multi-ethnic History of Buczacz*, Omer Bartov provides discerning reflections about the limitations of the testimonies and about the integration of information that emerges from a critical analysis of the testimonies into a wider historical context. See Bartov, *From the Holocaust in Galicia to Contemporary Genocide. Common Ground- Historical Differences*, 17-18.
19. Omer Bartov, 'Interethnic Relations in the Holocaust as Seen through Postwar Testimonies: Buczacz, East Galicia, 1941-44,' in *Lessons and Legacies VIII*, ed. Doris Bergen, Northwestern University Press, forthcoming publication. This article was published in French 'Les relations interethniques à Buczacz (Galicie orientale) durant la Shoah selon les témoignages d'après guerre,' in: *Cultures d'Europe Centrale*, 5: 'La Destruction des confins,' ed. Delphine Bechtel and Xavier Gamiche, Paris, Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches Centre-Européennes, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2005, 47-67. I would like to thank Prof. O. Bartov for giving me a copy of his article.
20. Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War. Children's Lives under the Nazis*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2005

