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# **The Jewish Children Hidden in France During the Second World War: A Retrospective Study**

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*This retrospective study focused on the consequences of childhood traumas and mourning among Jewish children who were hidden in France during World War II. Some of these hidden children went on to create a self-help group over a half-century after the end of the war, but most have remained isolated and, in the majority of cases, have difficulties assimilating their traumatic experiences.*

**KEYWORDS** *childhood, mourning, retrospective studies, Shoah, traumas*

The child survivors of the Shoah (i.e., Jewish children, under the age of 16, who survived in Nazi-occupied Europe between 1933 and 1945) have for many years been ignored and neglected by society, historians, and mental health professionals. These child survivors can be subdivided into several different groups: children who emigrated before the borders were closed (with the reticence and refusal of many countries to shelter this population in mortal danger), children who were evacuated from Austria and Germany following the *Kristallnacht* (the “night of broken glass”) in 1938, hidden children in

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occupied Europe, child survivors of the extermination or concentration camps, and children who survived in the ghettos. The survival of children in the camps is exceptional in that, on their arrival, they were in most cases sent immediately to the gas chambers. Few children survived the programmed death due to hunger and sickness in the ghettos, from which surviving captives were systematically sent to extermination camps.

One and a half million Jewish children were murdered during the Shoah. Those who did survive owe their lives to the desperate efforts made by their parents and the resistance organization to spare them from the genocide and hide them, sometimes within their family but most often separated from their parents and sent to foster homes, Christian institutions, orphanages, or fugitive children's homes; others survived nomadically in the forests of eastern Europe. Overnight, they were required to change their identities and lie about their family history, religion, language, and bloodline. These hidden children were constantly in danger of being informed on, arrested, and deported. According to Dwork (1991), at least 200,000 Jewish children were hidden in Europe at one time or another during the Second World War. These child survivors of the Shoah have now grown old and will soon become the last generation of victims to have witnessed the genocide. They have also become the object of studies on the long-term consequences of massive childhood traumas.

In the category of child survivors of the Shoah, the group of hidden children is the largest. Unlike the adult survivors of the Shoah, these children did not seek each other out, staying hidden and invisible for dozens of years, and many of them remain so today (Feldman, 2009). The first international reunion of hidden child survivors of the Shoah was held in New York in 1991, and this was the first time their existence and their specific experiences were authenticated. Since then, numerous hidden children associations have been created in many countries.

Although the traumas of hidden children were multifaceted and repeated, of particular note are those related to the loss, often brutal, of a familiar environment; detachment, often irreversible, from their family and social and cultural groups; and experiences of fear, anguish, and depersonalization. Psychological research on the child survivors of the Shoah began to appear only at the beginning of the 1980s. We owe the pioneering qualitative research in this field to American and Israeli authors; efforts in Europe, although starting late, include (in France) the founding research of Vegh (1979), Fresco (1981), and, more recently, Wilgowicz (1991; Wardi & Wilgowicz, 2002), Landau (2006), and Mouchenik (2006). The recent work of Feldman (2009)—the most important clinical research in France on the psychopathology of hidden children—proposes a comprehensive review of international works and documentation on the subject.

Recent work on the child survivors of the Shoah often highlights persistent psychological vulnerability and important psychological and physical disorders. Immediately after the war, the “hidden children”—orphans of the

Shoah—rarely had access to psychological support, which was virtually nonexistent at that time.

## ACTIVITIES OF THE IN MEMORY OF CONVOY Y ASSOCIATION

Our observations are based on our participation in the activities of the In Memory of Convoy Y association,<sup>1</sup> whose activities we monitored over 5 years, carrying out repeated interviews with around 15 participants. This group, composed of hidden children in France during the occupation, came together not because of their shared experience but rather in the name of their parents, who were deported in the same convoy in July 1942. It is thus the shared fate of their parents that brought them together, coupled with a very strong sense that the closeness of their parents (deported in the same convoy, often following a long period of internment in the Loiret camps) forms a family bond, as if they were in fact biological brothers and sisters. Convoy Y included over 900 people, a minority of whom were women,<sup>2</sup> and the first children to be deported from France. Our contact with the group made it possible for us to take part in the association's activities during one of the first founding meetings and to follow the group and its activities over several years, not as therapists but more as members and actively participating observers, whose presence (as well as the research project) was accepted by the group. We were particularly struck by the dynamic that had impelled the group to come together, to join forces in an undertaking that was both collective and personal, and to reclaim the past and the present—similar to the process psychoanalyst Micheline Enriquez called “a shared and communicated rememorization” (1988, p. 189).

The first people who came together to found the In Memory of Convoy Y group soon launched a number of projects, including determining the number of children deported in the convoy (or their relatives scattered around the world) and developing research to provide historical information on the convoy. These activities were coupled with a major act of remembrance: Mobile exhibitions were constructed from the archives and documents of association members and shown at the town halls of Paris and various towns in the Loiret. Furthermore, a major project saw many who had previously refused this type of activity going into schools to tell of their experiences relating to Convoy Y, as well as their involvement in the association. Other activities included audiovisual productions, a radio program, and the production of a DVD about the association.

### Self-Help Aspects of the Group

Such a construction of a social group is not without impact on subjective experiences and their transformations. The people who run the association

organize regular consultation, information, and general meetings at which speakers and historians are invited to give their accounts of the Convoy Y deportees. These events also represent an opportunity for people to come together informally to develop friend networks and build solidarity. Social contact and the friendships that develop provide the framework for real, mutual psychological support, allowing those in greatest difficulty to benefit from talking to others who can truly empathize with their situations. The members of the group had in many cases rejected psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, although not psychiatric treatment or antidepressants prescribed by their doctor.

### The Group as a Family Matrix

The creation of In Memory of Convoy Y can be perceived as the vision of a shared family matrix that can be described as follows: “Our parents who left together, who shared the same convoy, have turned us into a family. Their shared fate brings us together and unites us; it means we can take on and face the process of mourning together<sup>3</sup> in all of its sublimated forms—archive research, hunger for information, and creation and observance of commemorations and new ceremonies. This sentiment is clearly expressed by Marc: “I thought about it, the people in this convoy, they are practically part of my family because they died together, it is more powerful than anything else.”

Unlike other organizations that approach deportation as a global subject, the Convoy Y group, which focuses on the shared fate of their parents, creates a feeling of closeness and intimacy that does not exist elsewhere.

### A Process of Historicization

Historicization is a critical need, stresses François Maspéro, whose father, a political deportee, died in Buchenwald: “Strangely, as time went by, I became more and more obsessed by the need to get a clear picture of what my father’s life was like in the camp” (2002, p. 29). This is also true of the hidden children:

For me, sooner or later, I had to move from the abstract to the concrete. We came together in a small group and my idea for searching the archives met with interest. It turned into a sort of revelation. We went to the National Archives. The person I wanted to find out about was my father, whom I knew and who is now dead. I was searching for my father on microfilm and his whole family appeared on screen; I wasn’t expecting that at all. I did the same for my mother and up came her whole family, and I wasn’t expecting that either. The files were at Beaune-La-Rolande, at Drancy and the police station, etc. The whole experience affected me deeply, because I knew nothing about my father’s history. I vaguely knew that he was at Beaune-La-Rolande and

was deported to Birkenau. I know that my grandparents were also deported, but have no idea of the circumstances. That was when I moved from abstract to concrete. All of a sudden, you're looking at concrete evidence that describes your family's journey. (Gérard)

### The Group's Production of a Book

The association asked the children of the Convoy Y deportees to write a book of memories. This required the construction of a story in narrative form. Marc describes the writing process as being painful and difficult, but also as a form of "therapy." The self-support group therefore became the potential terrain for a type of "healing." The writing of this book about the convoy was an opportunity for communication and transmission:

It's true that I am not a very open person. I don't really show my feelings and I don't think I showed my children that I really loved them very much. I don't know if my wife made the connection to what I experienced in my youth. My children don't know much about my early life. I've never spoken about it. The account I wrote represented a sort of therapy for me. I showed it to my family, to my friends. I have two grown-up children. They'd never asked me about the things I experienced as a child.

The writing of this book also enables externalization, which can lead to communicating with others. The project represents a form of self-reconstruction as well, one that integrates the story of a childhood involving wounds that have never been spoken about. This change can almost be described as a restoration.

This symbolic "laying to rest" on paper is analogous with the necessity for funeral rites that resides at the very basis of humanity. According to Martine:

Summarizing my father's life in a few lines, because I know nothing more about him, was very painful, but once it was done, I said to myself, he will exist for his descendants. We were left with very little, a blurred photo, almost nothing. During this research, I rediscovered his traces. My father did everything he could; he joined the French army when war was declared.

### Remembrance Activities

Remembrance activities—research, encounters, ceremonies, exhibitions, personal accounts, and publications—are both an attempt to give a personal identity to the victims of the Shoah and a symbolic mourning and funeral ritual. Personal investment in the activities linked to the Shoah and in

remembrance activities enables people to work through the grief and mourning of their childhood. This often occurs at a time when their own children have become independent, reawakening the grief of separation from their parents. This narrative activity, which takes many different forms, serves a symbolic function with aspects of self-help (Golse & Missonnier, 2008). Visits to Auschwitz also contributed to the process of working through and overcoming the trauma inflicted by this unbearable reality.

### Reappearance in the Public Arena

The various reappearances of the Shoah in the public arena, whether written, ceremonial, or commemorative, incur certain psychological effects. For Adrienne, the inscription of her parents' names on the Wall of Names at the Shoah Memorial in Paris was particularly significant:

It was very painful for me because I said to myself: There's nothing there, they're just names on a wall and that's all, but this somehow means that my mission is over. I don't know why I use the word mission, maybe because I've always been the one who does everything. So I said to myself, their names are written in the town where I live, and where my son is. So the Memorial was a good thing for me, I can't begin to tell you how much.

Martine also stress the importance of this inscription, even though the absence of the bodies of the deceased makes the situation a little uneasy:

Reducing someone to a single word, and together with others, it's a very mixed sensation, but at least it's a place where we can finally come together. Before that, it was just papers, stuff on a computer, a few photos; it wasn't much. Now, there is a place is where my grandchildren can gather together one day, around the grave of their great-grandfather. There's a place. You know it's just a word, but up until now we had nothing. So we mustn't grumble.

To conclude this brief overview; it appears to us that the self-support group that has sprung up around the In Memory of Convoy Y association is beneficial to the psychological processes of working through and the development of mourning rituals—it not only makes possible the transmission of repeated traumas but also enables them to be sufficiently assimilated and communicated. “You don't recover from the Shoah,” but the group measures created by the hidden children are likely to be beneficial for the process of coming to terms, at both the individual and group levels, with a past marked by massive trauma.

## EXPERIENCES OF HIDDEN CHILDREN WHO HAVE REMAINED IN ISOLATION

The second portion of this research consisted of an encounter with 35 people born in France, between 1929 and 1941, to immigrant parents originating mainly from Central Europe. The general purpose was to ask questions about the effects of events they had experienced during their childhood and the influence of these events on the development of their adult self-identity. For each of the accounts, we identified some common elements: vulnerability traits, consequences of the trauma, and competence factors. Of the vulnerability traits, loss appears as one of the most traumatic factors among the hidden children.

### Other Traumatic Life Journeys

Dominique was born in 1939. In 1942, the threat was so great that his parents decided to entrust him to the care of a family in Chambon-sur-Lignon. The separation was brutal, never spoken about. Between the ages of 3 and 5, Dominique had no news of his parents. In 1944, his parents came back to find him. He did not recognize them. The return to his parents was marked by a heavy silence. For him, his experience at Chambon-sur-Lignon felt like “being a suitcase in left luggage.” Dominique was on hold, in transit, not knowing when or where he was going, totally dependent on those who owned him or at the mercy of his new owners. His parents, like others who had lived under the threat of death, did not want to talk about this. Dominique feels very bitter toward his parents for abandoning him. At the age of 36, Dominique was diagnosed as a manic-depressive and spends regular spells in a psychiatric hospital.

Régine was born in 1936. She was 5 years old when she was taken to Sarthe to be hidden. Her parents were deported. Régine was “fostered” by several families. After the liberation, one of her aunts tried to take her back. The couple with whom Régine was living, in the Paris region, did not want to let her go. They were childless. Following a court case and a judge’s decision, they obtained custody of Régine, and the aunt was named as her legal guardian. Régine was raised as a Catholic. In 1955, at the age of 19, she suffered an episode of decompensation and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Régine does not remember her parents, nor does she remember the families with whom she lived in Sarthe, the names of the villages, or how she felt about the people who cared for her. As an adult, Régine wiped out the traces of her existence. Régine’s Jewish sounding name was a source of suffering for her and she ended up changing it, in 1990, to a French name. Since she has retired, she has been trying to reconstruct her childhood by researching the archives, refusing to say who she is or reveal her contact details. It would appear that Régine is still living underground.



## The Disappearances

Following the liberation, the children discovered that their parents and families had disappeared. These losses were not spoken of, and the traces of those who had gone were nonexistent. Until the publication in 1978 of Klarsfeld's work, the only issue was "disappearance." However, by the time *Mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France* was published, these hidden children were already adults. During childhood, they therefore constructed their identities based on these disappearances.

## CONCLUSION

Hidden Jewish children have been trying to mourn multiple losses for over 60 years: loss of a familiar world, through the loss of their parents—a separation that was often brutal and sometimes irreversible—but also the loss of their family, their cultural group, and their previous lives, meaning the lives they had led before the persecutions began.

Being forced underground had an impact on the development of the hidden children. Whatever their age, the children felt let go, abandoned by their parents, their social group, and their familiar environment. The hidden Jewish children, of whom many became orphans of the Shoah after the liberation, have been exposed to cumulative traumas. In the present research, one of the elements that served as a therapeutic lever for their reconstruction was the support provided by their peers. Encountering others in the same condition is reassuring and necessary. Moreover, the group allows everyone to exist in the real world. The individual and collective dynamics, supported by the group that came together around Convoy Y, in which their parents were deported to Auschwitz, demonstrate that some have been able to find the necessary resources to ease their pain. Affiliation to a group remains a common step for most of the hidden children, whether they are the children of deportees or children of survivors. Affiliation or reaffiliation to Judaism, participation in speakers' groups, and participation in collective commemoration ceremonies are attempts to deal with the isolation that has existed since 1942 and has reinforced the traumatic impact of their experiences. However, as our research underlines, when the process is undergone alone, the path taken is more fraught with personal risk and is more difficult.

The identity of the Jewish children hidden during the war was put "on hold" for 47 years until, in 1991, united for the first time, these hidden children officially broke their silence. This collective recognition helped them, but to varying degrees: Some were able to carve a doorway through the first wall, while others managed to shatter the immutability of the second (in particular, where this recognition was the result of working within the self-help group). Ending the isolation by allowing words to be spoken and acts to be observed was necessary in the difficult and painful mourning process undertaken by the "hidden children."

## NOTES

1. The name of the association and the names of its participants have been changed to protect their privacy.
2. The deportees were in many cases foreigners of Polish origin who had come to France during the 1920s and 1930s.
3. The process of mourning in a situation of genocide, bereft of information and with no body or coffin, is particularly difficult: "When there is no grave, the mourning process goes on forever. . . . For me, the word grave does not refer to a plot in a cemetery, but to the certain knowledge of a death, of how a loved one died." (Klüger, 1997, p. 110).

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