

Acts of Survival

Children's Writings During the Holocaust

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Abstract

An analysis of children's writings during the Holocaust in former Yugoslavia reveals that children are active participants in the formation of the social world and retain a sense of agency in spaces that afford them little. Through their diaries, letters, and memoirs, young people produced works of radical nonconformity that aided in their individual and social survival. This paper aims to understand how children and youth aid in the survival of their social environment amid periods of severe systemic oppression by problematizing children as an ideological concept. Conventional perceptions of childhood consign children to passive roles as victims and symbols. As scholarship on the Holocaust and genocide progresses, children's contributions shouldn't be overlooked.

Introduction

The late Júlia Szilágyi (2020), a Hungarian holocaust survivor from North Transylvania and renowned professor, wrote in her memoir that “Whoever wants to eradicate a culture, in another or in himself, must erase the memories. Not the textbooks. Not the legends that have become a treasure trove. No. The most personal, the memories of children...”¹ Szilágyi poignantly illustrated children's importance in transmitting and sustaining culture. When children are viewed as passive actors whose contributions to culture are limited to their capacity to mature, it is easy to diminish their contributions.² By challenging this narrative, it is possible to understand how children aid in the survival of their social environment (sometimes referred to as social worlds), even if they do not live to adulthood. The construction of the social world is an endlessly fluid process made up of individual behaviours. These actions impact the accepted social representations—the values, beliefs, practices, and ideas shared among a group of people that form the basis for their collective identity. Social worlds are intersectional, so a person may be simultaneously present in more than one. For the purposes of this paper, the social world refers both to the individual communities of people that share a physical space with children in camps, ghettos, and neighbourhoods as well as the wider European Jewish community, which is connected through shared beliefs, practices, and histories. In essence, the social environment encompasses the interpersonal and cultural milieu that shapes their attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviour.

Conventional perceptions of childhood position them as passive participants who exist within history but do not shape it. By problematizing children as an ideological concept, this paper aims to understand how children and youth retain a sense of agency and aid in the survival of their social environment amid periods of severe systemic oppression. Through their diaries, letters, and memoirs, young people produced works of radical nonconformity that aided in their individual and social survival. The authors demonstrate that they are active, knowing subjects who are capable of critically evaluating and impacting their social world. Alexandra Zapruder discusses the legacy of Anne Frank's diary. It is seen not just as a testimony of the events that occurred during the war but as “rescuing her generation; and by its seemingly dominant theme of hope for humanity, rescuing all of us in the process.”³ By recording and sharing their authentic experiences, children challenged Nazi propaganda, providing proof of the events that occurred and instilling hope and resilience in their communities.

Any close examination of children and youth as historical subjects necessitates a thorough understanding of how they are viewed—socially and culturally—in the time and space they occupy. As with any other social actor, their actions and worldviews are

¹ Júlia Szilágyi, *Álmatlan könyv* (Kolozsvár: Korunk, 2014), 32, quoted in Louise O. Vasvári, “Culinary Nostalgia and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Addenda to Kinga Király's *Az újrakezdés receptjei* (2019) / *Recipes for a New Beginning* (2020),” *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 14, no.1 (2021): 196.

² Children are regarded as important to the transmission of culture in the sense that they will grow up to carry on the traditions, but not as a child in and of themselves.

³ Alexandra Zapruder, “Introduction,” in *Salvaged Pages*, ed. Alexandra Zapruder (Yale University Press, 2002), 7.

determined, in part, by social climate. Understanding how society viewed and treated children is easier, however, than uncovering the lived experiences of the children themselves. Holocaust studies has grown into a significant discipline, but children and youth continue to occupy a small space. Some barriers are demographic. The aging population of survivors dwindles and the availability of source material in archives and personal collections is inconsistent. Although numerous sources are available in other languages, English is the primary language of publishing for this subject. For academics who are not writing in English, this restricts the resources that are available to them as well as their publishing options. Some are based on research, including the ones covered in further depth below. Scholarship on children and youth employs a wide variety of age ranges, making the research inconsistent. When sources survive, they can be subjected to omission and doctoring, as was the case with Anne Frank's diary. When research is conducted, children are often constrained by age-related ideologies. As I will discuss, this leads to an incomplete and potentially misleading analysis of children's experiences. Similarly, sources directly from children themselves can be limited, so scholars rely on the memories and reflections of adults. While this can be valuable in its own right, it is not a replacement. Finally, the interruption to education as a result of German policies, trauma, and displacement serves as a barrier to effective communication.

Challenges Faced by Children's Historians

Patricia Herberer Rice challenges historians to "represent these experiences in a meaningful and authentic way."⁴ Reproducing the world as it was seen by children in the past is difficult because the nature of childhood itself is fluid and a social construction defined by adult expectations.⁵ There are legal, cultural, religious and biological definitions of childhood and all of them would situate historical actors in a different way. Even if we were to choose a single definition, there are additional factors to consider. If a time and place have surviving legal definitions of childhood, how do we situate that in a culture that may or may not consider this definition in their everyday lives? Does a 16-year-old girl remain a child because she is under the age of majority and not done growing, or an adult because she has surpassed puberty and is married with children?

To put this into perspective, we can look at the various ways that youth were treated during World War II. The Hitlerjugend, also known as the Hitler Youth, consisted of boys ages 14-18 years old. As members, they were prepared for war but did not participate directly in it until 1943.⁶ The organization defined what it means to be a youth legally, but in practice, the line blurred. A defensive militia known as Volkssturm was set up in the last few months of the war and consisted of boys as young as 16. In this case, the need for soldiers trumped the legal definition of childhood. The dilemma facing historians is

⁴ Patricia Herberer Rice, "In Their Own Words" Children in the World of the Holocaust," in *War and Childhood in the Era of the Two World Wars*, ed. Mischa Honeck and James Marten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 231.

⁵ Mischa Honeck and James Marten, "Introduction," in *War and Childhood in the Era of the Two World Wars*, ed. Mischa Honeck and James Marten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4-6.

⁶ "Hitler Youth," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed May 1, 2025, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/hitler-youth-2#fn_ref-1.

whether to use legal or social definitions to determine when their subjects are considered adults.

Hidden children pose a similar challenge to the definition of childhood. Assuming persons in their late teens and early twenties were sent abroad by their parents at the beginning of the war it can be assumed that they were considered children, to some extent, by their parents and communities. Again, the social perspective is more important than the legal one. Mischa Honeck and James Marten focus on the industrialization of actual and ideological childhood, a process that frequently placed children at the forefront of war and violence. They place fewer limitations on who they consider children for research purposes, including adolescents and older. The same is true for Jefferey Blutinger, who classifies anyone under the age of twenty-five as being a child. Most historians will go up to a maximum age of twenty-five, although it can be as low as sixteen.⁷ In line with Blutinger, this paper situates children and youth (used interchangeably) as any persons under the age of 25 because this is the approximate age when social conventions around childhood appear to stop.

After defining what a child is, based on social conventions, it is critical to assess how scholarship positions them as a historical subject. Conventional discourse constrains children and youth by situating them as passive actors, both within their own lives and their larger social networks. As historical subjects, they occupy a submissive role, experiencing the world around them but not actively participating as sovereign agents. When looking at the literature surrounding the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth), children and youth are depicted as tools of the state, with little regard for the role they are playing in the war. We have often questioned how children are utilized to further political ends, but less so how those children understood and responded to the regime's puppeteering. Further challenges occur when we explore children as perpetrators. Jessica K. Taft argues for a critical approach to child and youth studies that treats young people as "knowing subjects who can offer their own theoretical insights into the social world."⁸ The challenge then is to reconcile our perception of children as innocent with their capacity to critically assess their social position. Children and youth as submissive historical subjects is a discursively constructed narrative with potential implications on age-related ideologies. If children are viewed as inherently passive, we risk overlooking a significant part of history.

The sources left behind by children of the past embody childhood as it is understood by those who are living through it, rather than a narrative that has been reconstructed through the lens of maturity. This does not mean that there is no place for post-war memoirs, interviews, or similar. The reflections of adults on their childhoods provide greater depth to the study of memory. It is important to consider how the experiences of a child are interpreted and valued years later. There is a wealth of sources examining children's experiences from the perspective of their older selves. Many Holocaust survivors documented and archived their experiences soon after the war, while others waited until

⁷ Jefferey Blutinger, "Children and the Holocaust," in *Plight and Fate of Children during and Following Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (Routledge, 2014), 85-86.

⁸ Jessica K. Taft, "Is It Okay to Critique Youth Activists? Notes on the Power and Danger of Complexity," in *Children and Youth as Subjects, Objects, Agents: Innovative Approaches Across Time and Space*, ed. Deborah Levinson, Mary Jo Maynes, and Frances Vavrus (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 194.

old age. Both cases reflect the belief that memory is valuable and worthy of preservation. In a uniquely reflective article, historian Elena Jackson Albarrán challenges her perceptions of scholarship and childhood. Jackson submits her childhood diary for historical scrutiny by herself and a class of undergraduate students. Through this process, two interesting things emerge. The assumptions made by the undergraduate students were at times wildly incorrect, especially when only given a fraction of the diary to work from. Secondly, Jackson was faced with questions about her diary that she did not have answers for or had not considered, even as an adult. Jackson writes that the experience “prompted me to take a second, more objectively distanced, look at a childhood I thought I understood” in response to observations that her parents worked more than average.⁹ The experiment points to the challenge that historians and subjects face when remembering the past. The affective practices of the child and the adult are different as they situate themselves uniquely within the social environment.

When written sources from children do exist, they may be subject to partial omission or doctoring, as in the case of Anne Frank’s diary. This leaves scholars to rely on the interpretations and manipulations of powerful adults.¹⁰ Omission is also seen in a different but equally important way in cases of hidden children. Throughout the war, children were being transported across borders in an attempt to save them from the horrors occurring at home. Children, especially those rehomed through private means, were not always returned to their biological families after the war. In many cases, these children did not know they were hidden children until much later in life. Blutinger points to this phenomenon as a key reason for a lack of documentation from child survivors.¹¹ In both instances of omission, the history and agency of the children are removed from themselves and the historical record.

The last issue faced by historians is simply the lack of evidence to begin with. Many individuals would have been too young to write, and many experienced interruptions to their education. In 1933, the national government instituted a quota on the number of non-Aryan students admitted to German schools, and the tenth supplementary decree to the Reich Citizenship Law in 1935 disbanded Jewish educational institutions and Jewish teacher-training centers. While there were regional differences in legislation, by 1938, Jewish students were banned from all public schools throughout Germany and Austria.¹² Many students continued to attend segregated schools, however their education was likely interrupted by the trauma of current events. Others faced interruption when their families fled their country of origin. Felicitas and Thomas Gumpel’s letter is an example of this interruption. The siblings were among hundreds of Jewish children who fled Germany for unoccupied France. Along with their mother, Gertrud Gumpel, the siblings were caught during roundups in Vichy and transported to the Drancy transit camp near Paris. Felicitas

⁹ Elena Jackson Albarrán, ““So How’s Your Childhood Going?” A Historian of Childhood Confronts Her Own Archive,” in *Children and Youth as Subjects, Objects, Agents: Innovative Approaches Across Time and Space*, ed. Deborah Levinson, Mary Jo Maynes, and Frances Vavrus (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 21.

¹⁰ Mona Gleason and Tamara Myers, eds., *Bringing Children and Youth into Canadian History: The difference kids make* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

¹¹ Blutinger, “Children and the Holocaust,” 93.

¹² Karl A. Schleunes, ed., *Legislating the Holocaust: The Bernhard Loesener Memoirs and Supporting Documents*, trans. Carol Scherer (Routledge, 2018).

and Thomas wrote to their grandmother after their mother and older brother were deported to Auschwitz. The imperfect German reflects the limited education they received before the war.¹³

Excerpt 1: A letter written by Felicitas Gumpel and Thomas Gumpel from the Drancy transit camp to their grandmother, 1942. Translated from German by Patricia Herberer Rice.

July 14, 1942

Dear Grandma,

Now don't be shocked about the newest thing that I have to tell you: this morning Mama and Kurt were taken away with others to work. But they are staying in France, they are still in Tours in order that they will be examined [by a doctor]. Those that are sick will come back here. We children all remained here and are in good hands; they are taking good care of us. We have good things to eat, better than normal anyway: cookies, bread with butter, etc. We even sleep at night with a family that Mama had befriended before; they are very kind to us. At nine-thirty we must all assemble again in our barracks, and then we will get to hear news; I hope good news. Just don't excite yourself too much; this is all only for the time being. Share this letter with the entire family, because I cannot write to everyone. It is very sad in the camp because only the old men and women are here. They each have a suitcase a piece and 200 francs and a comforter, a thick one from us. This evening we haven't heard any more [news]. I must close for today. Many, many greetings and kisses,

Your Fee

Dear Grandma,

With this news I think I have cried as never before, but this I show it is, so [many] fathers done from their children, mothers done from their children. I write these lines with tears in my eyes. Many greetings and kisses,

Your Tommy¹⁴

Felicitas and Thomas were able to communicate with distant relatives, but many children had not learned the skills necessary to do so after being separated from their parents. Even with these skills, many children did not survive long enough to author letters and diaries. In many ways, children were at a disadvantage due to their age, limited education, and poor health. However, in some cases, like that of Felicitas and Thomas, their ages—thirteen and eleven, respectively—allowed them to communicate at least once with their family. Prior to

¹³ Patricia Herberer, *Children during the Holocaust* (Lanham: AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011), 96-97.

¹⁴ Letter for Felicitas and Thomas Gumpel, July 14, 1942, in Reiner Lehberger and Ursula Randt, eds., *„Aus Kindern Werden Briefe“: Dokumente zum Schicksal Jüdischer Kinder und Jugendlicher in der NS-Zeit* (Hamburg: Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg Behörde für Schule, Jugend und Berufsbildung, 1999), 52-53 (translated from the German), quoted in Patricia Herberer, *Children during the Holocaust* (Lanham: AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011), 97.

1942, policy in France largely forbade juveniles from being deported to concentration camps. This policy spared the lives of the siblings until September 23, 1942, when the two were transported to Auschwitz.¹⁵

Despite their circumstances, their letter conveys hope and resilience. They aim to reassure their loved ones and share their experiences with a wider community. The writing is nuanced and emotional. The goal of the Nazi regime was not to instill hope in Jewish children but rather the opposite. Whether intentional or not, Felicitas' letter serves as an example of radical nonconformity. Felicitas saw the events happening around her as something of importance that needed to be shared. She did not write exclusively about her family but about all the mothers and fathers who were separated from their children. Their record of the events that took place subverts the Nazi's attempt to control and erase Jewish history.

Children's writings from the Sajmište concentration camp and Vilna ghetto

On the bank of the Sana River stands an exhibition centre built in the 1930s known as Sajmište. In 1941, the site was converted by the German army into a concentration camp for Serbian Jewish women and children. The conditions in the camp were especially heinous, with buildings that were broken and leaking in the middle of winter. Food rations were so poor that the SS medical officer, Dr. Jung, attempted to intervene. His plea was denied by the administration, and many died well before the gas vans arrived in 1942.¹⁶ Sajmište was a relatively small camp with very few survivors, making it particularly remarkable that sources were produced and survived. Unlike Drancy, prisoners in Sajmište were not permitted to communicate with the outside world. The stories of Đura Rajs and Hilda Dajč provide a glimpse into the lives of children during severe systemic oppression.

The Diary of Đura Rajs was written by an eleven-year-old boy during his internment in the Sajmište concentration camp. Đura was among the approximately 7,500 Jewish women and children from the Banat region of modern-day Serbia to be forcibly transported to Belgrade in 1941. Along with descriptions of his experiences, Đura filled the pages with drawings of the things and places he saw. Taken together, it is possible to inquire into the everyday life of a child in the Sajmište camp, but also what children value and the experiences that they find worthy of recording at a time when resources are scarce. Written on grid-lined paper, Đura has dated and titled the work, given it a dedication, and signed it.

The diary's author pays great attention to detail. The image shows black smoke billowing from the engines of double-masted ships; the pen drawings give substance through the use of wavy lines and cross-hatching. Đura's work likely served as a way to externalize the trauma and rapid changes faced by him and his family. While many children were forced to or chose to take on forced labour jobs in camps and ghettos, Đura and other children "were able to play to our heart's content all day long."¹⁷ Play does not feature in the

¹⁵ Herberer, *Children During the Holocaust*, 97.

¹⁶ Menachem Shelach, "Sajmište — An Extermination Camp in Serbia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 2, no. 2 (1987): 243-260, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/2.2.243>.

¹⁷ Đura Rajs, *Diary of Đura Rajs*, August 11, 1941, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, last accessed April 7, 2023, <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-dura-rajs>.

short diary; rather, Đura takes the time to assure the reader that his accounts are real, lived experiences. He is intent on recording the harsh realities of life in the camp, both for himself and the adults. The work is dedicated to the *Lager*, a word that the author makes a note of translating. Meaning *camp* in German, Đura makes it clear that he is aware of the situation he is in. The introduction, written in Sajmište, sets a scene wrought with disease and sadness. His otherwise pragmatic retelling is interrupted briefly, expressing remorse that, at the age of eleven, he cannot produce a work of fiction.

Rather than playing with his peers, Đura spends time drawing meticulous maps and diagrams. He details the living conditions and harsh realities of those around him in an attempt to show the reader how he “sees and imagines” the camp.¹⁸ Đura’s attention to detail mirrors the literary writings of children across Nazi-occupied Europe. In the Vilna and Łódź ghettos, young people poured hours into learning, documenting, and creating. Vilna-born Yitskhok Rudashevskin was 14 years old when he was transported to the Vilna ghetto along with his parents and maternal grandmother. Yitskhok kept a diary that documented his experiences over the two years he was interned. The Vilna ghetto boasted two youth organizations that served as spaces where fragments of childhood could be preserved. Along with his peers, Yitskhok compiled a history of the ghetto.¹⁹ In response to a folklore project, Yitskhok wrote: “In the ghetto dozens of sayings, ghetto curses, and ghetto blessings are created before our eyes... [T]he ghetto folklore... must be collected and cherished as a treasure for the future.”²⁰ He relayed a sense of responsibility for future generations and an understanding that resistance is located in the survival of culture. At ages when interest in make-believe is quickly fading, children such as Đura and Yitskhok transcend the restraints placed upon them through biographical pursuits. Much like children’s play mimics the social environment, the diaries of camp and ghetto children reproduce the experiences of those around them. A sense of purpose and agency is sustained through these endeavours, contributing to their emotional survival. Yitskhok writes in his diary that “...if we did not go to school, to the club, did not read books. We would die of dejection inside the ghetto walls.”²¹ The individual survival of youth in the ghetto relied not only on food and shelter but the creation and transmission of culture, to which these children were essential. The two boys are not passively experiencing history but creating it. In addition to their individual survival, the sources subvert attempts to modify and erase history.

¹⁸ Đura Rajs, *Diary of Đura Rajs*, August 11, 1941, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, last accessed April 7, 2023, <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-dura-rajs>.

¹⁹ Herberer Rice, “In Their Own Words,” 231-232.

²⁰ Yitskhok Rudashevskin, diary entry, October 17, 1942, in *Salvaged Pages*, ed. Alexandra Zapruder (Yale University Press, 2002), 192.

²¹ Yitskhok Rudashevskin, diary entry, October 17, 1942, in *Salvaged Pages*, ed. Alexandra Zapruder (Yale University Press, 2002), 208.

Excerpt 3: Excerpt from a diary written by Đura Rajs during his time in the Sajmište concentration camp (1941). Translation from Serbo-Croatian by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Introduction

I have dedicated this book to the "Lager." Readers will be surprised and will wonder what a "Lager" is, and what kind of word that is. It's a German word, which, translated into Serbo-Croatian, means camp. All Jews of Petrovgrad were resettled into that camp. Earlier the camp was an army barracks, which had been totally neglected and thus full of lice and bedbugs. Before the Jews were moved into the barracks, it was a breeding place for infectious diseases. The courtyard was full of various military things which the retreating Yugoslav army left in great disorder. In the rooms, soldiers unloaded their things from suitcases, trunks, etc. Bedbugs promenaded among those things just like people taking an evening stroll in town. In a word, there was a big mess in this building, and the only inhabitants were lice and bedbugs. We, the children, still lived relatively well because we were together, and we were able to play to our hearts' content all day long. But the adults could not boast anything like that. They worked and sweated very hard, and when they returned, the commissar would harass them. And so it went. This book cannot be written in the form of a novel, because it wouldn't have any content, and therefore I am writing in the form of short stories. The stories in this book are not fabrications but rather the plain truth which I lived through. Readers will see how a young boy of 11 feels and imagines the Lager. Because I am writing this book when I am only 11 years old.

So, let's begin...²²

Hilda Dajč was born in 1922 in Belgrade, where she studied architecture before the invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941. Hilda chose to volunteer as a nurse after her studies were interrupted, a venture that she would continue throughout her internment in the Sajmište concentration camp. Hilda's father, Emil Dajč, took on the role of vice president of the representative body of the Jewish community in Belgrade. Emil's position granted him and his family leniency under antisemitic legislation, notably during orders for deportation. Despite this protection and her family's misgivings, in December of 1941, Hilda volunteered to join a group of Jews destined for Sajmište to "put [herself] wholly at the service of others."²³ Her experiences in Sajmište were recorded in a series of smuggled letters written to her friend, Mirjana.

The need to retain a sense of agency and control over her destiny is evident in Hilda's letters. Her experience challenges the myth that young people passively absorb

²² Đura Rajs, *Diary of Đura Rajs*, August 11, 1941, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, last accessed April 7, 2023, <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-dura-rajs>.

²³ Hilda Dajč to Nada Novak, December 7, 1941, in "Semlin Judenlager: In Serbian Public Memory," *The Letters of Hilda Dajč*, last accessed April 9, 2023, <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php>.

history. Hilda's letters were smuggled out by medical staff travelling between Sajmište and Belgrade. These pieces of paper stitched together the reality faced by inmates, but they provide something more. Throughout her four short letters, Hilda chronicles her changing mental and emotional state. Even in her most sombre letter, Hilda reveals that her writing gives her hope and strength. Her survival in the camp hinges on her connection through writing and her work as a nurse. Both were radical acts of agency that subverted the goals of the Nazi regime. She influenced her social world by creating a record of the events she witnessed, humanizing a tragedy despite attempts by the regime to control the dominant narrative. Her immediate social environment is impacted through her work; caring for her community in a place meant to break it apart. The date and manner of Hilda's death are not recorded, but it is assumed that she perished along with 6,000 other Jewish inmates in mobile gas vans in March of 1942.²⁴

Excerpt 4: Excerpt of a letter from Hilda Dajč to Mirjana Petrović on December 9, 1941.

My Dear Mirjana,

...Dear Mirjana, there are now 2,000 women and children here, including nearly a hundred babies for whom we can't boil any milk as there's no fuel and you can imagine what the temperature is towards the top of the pavilion with the Kosheva wind blowing as hard as it does. I'm reading Heine and that does me good, even though the latrine is half a kilometre away and fifteen of us go at the same time, and even though by four o'clock we've only been given a bit of cabbage which has obviously been boiled in water, and even though I have only a little straw to lie on, and there are children everywhere and the light is on all night, and even though they shout 'idiotische Saubande' [stupid bunch of pigs] and so on all the time, and even though they keep on having roll calls and anyone missing these is 'severely punished'. There are walls everywhere. Today I started to work in the surgery, which consists of a table with a few bottles and some gauze, behind which there is just one doctor, one pharmacist and me. There's a lot to do, believe me - with women fainting and goodness knows what else. But in most cases, they put up with it all more than heroically...²⁵

Excerpts of a letter written by Hilda Dajč to Mirjana Petrović in February 1942.

My dear,

I could never have imagined that our meeting, even though I was expecting it, would arouse in me such a flurry of emotion and create even more unrest in my already frenzied soul which simply won't calm down... That reality is unsurpassable, our immense misery; every phrase describing the strength of the soul is dispersed by tears of hunger and cold; all hope of leaving here soon disappears before the monotonous

²⁴ "The Letter of Hilda Dajč," Semlin Judenlager: In Serbian Public Memory, accessed April 9, 2023, <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php>.

²⁵ "The Letter of Hilda Dajč," Semlin Judenlager: In Serbian Public Memory, accessed April 9, 2023, <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php>.

perspective of passive existence which, whatever you compare it with, bears no resemblance to life...

... we're all becoming cynical and count everyone else's mouthfuls - everyone is desperate - but in spite of this, no one kills anyone because we're all just a bunch of animals that I despise. I hate every single one of us because we've all fallen as low as we can go....

... It's the people that get on my nerves. Not the hunger that makes you weep, not the cold that freezes the water in your glass and the blood in your veins, nor the stench of the latrines, nor the Kosheva wind - nothing is so repulsive as the crowd of people who deserve to be pitied, but who you are unable to help and can do nothing else than put yourself above them and despise them....

... Mirjana, my dear, we are imprisoned slaves, in fact even lower than that - we're not so much wretched as a despised and starving horde, and when from this position one sees a little of life - meaning you - then one senses so many of life's juices that flow through it. Only - yes that eternal only - to wrench oneself away from that life afterwards is so painful and bitter that not even the sea of tears that one sheds can express it. I cry and they all start laughing: How can you, who conducts yourself like a man, allow yourself to cry like a sentimental teenager?!

But what can I do when in the depths of my heart everything is so horrible. That's the refrain I repeat to myself all night. I know there's no hope of our getting out soon, and outside are you and Nada, all that binds me to Belgrade which, by some incomprehensible contradiction, I deeply hate and deeply love at one and the same time. You don't know, just as I didn't know, what it's like to be here. I hope you will never find out. Way back when I was a child, I was afraid they would bury me alive. And now this is some sort of vision of death. Will there be some sort of resurrection? I've never thought so much about the two of you as I do now. I continually talk with you and yearn to see you, because to me you are that 'paradise lost'.²⁶

Through their production and transmission of culture, as well as the optimism and resilience they instilled in people around them, children like Đura, Yitskhok, and Hilda had an impact on the environment in which they lived. Through acts of nonconformity, "yesterday's agent becomes through her actions a part of tomorrow's structure."²⁷ Children's writings aid in a more democratic understanding of the past, building an imagined social world by documenting its history. Without this history, there is little identity from which to build a culture or community. Genocide seeks to break the ties between the present and the imagined social world by destroying embodiments of social representations, the people, the land, the art, and the texts. Yitskhok's collection of ghetto

²⁶ "The Letter of Hilda Dajč," Semlin Judenlager: In Serbian Public Memory, accessed April 9, 2023, <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semelin/en/letters.php>.

²⁷ Daniel Little, "The Social World," *Understanding Society* (blog), April 26, 2014. <https://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2014/04/the-social-world.html>.

folklore shows that culture and language continued to evolve and sustain even in spaces where it was meant to wither. The tragedy of the Holocaust is brought to relief through the lives of children. Their experiences contrast more effectively against oppression because of their perceived innocence. Dura's drawings are not viewed as simple childhood doodles but evoke an emotional reaction to the situations in which a young person was subjected. Although each of these situations has been examined separately, taken as a whole, they also have special significance. The variety of sources detailing the loss of Jewish life is proof of the extent of the genocide.

Conclusion

Children, youth, and adolescents remain on the fringes of Holocaust writing. The discipline has archival and internalized constraints that have downplayed children's contributions to the ongoing social survival of their communities. Children turned to writing and archiving as a feasible alternative to imaginative play when it became impossible for them to cope with their devastating realities. These records, which at first served as a means of personal survival, affected the imagined social world, subverting the mechanisms that aimed to control them. In their short letter, Felicitas and Thomas Gumpel reflected on the conditions that they and their peers were facing. They had lost their parents, but so had many other children. The effects of genocide are magnified in their letter through their emotions. The impact of a child explaining that their family was ripped away from them is greater than if it were described from an outside perspective. The evidence of their experiences and the hope they attempted to instill in their family had an impact on social survival.

Dura and Yitskhok retained a sense of agency through their biographical endeavours. While nonconformity is not difficult under a system that makes most aspects of life illegal, both boys made active and deliberate choices to record the genocide that was occurring. Dura described the sorrow he felt at not being able to write fiction, an effort that shows a loss of childhood innocence and feelings of responsibility for the survival of the culture. Yitskhok similarly undertook significant endeavours in recording culture as it existed around him. This act of individual agency contributed to his everyday, individual survival. Reporting and writing were important outlets that allowed him to cope with life in the ghetto, but it was also an act of rebellion. He strived to ensure that the lives of the people around him were not erased. Hilda's experience was uncommon in that she chose to go to Sajmište as a nurse. In a world where people's lives and choices were rapidly being stripped away, Hilda strived to make a difference in whatever way she could. This allowed her to retain a sense of agency and control while attempting to support her community. Her letters are the best description of a camp with very few survivors.

Children, youth, and adolescents remain on the fringes of Holocaust writing, but when we situate them as active participants, it becomes clear that they make a significant impact on the world around them. The discipline has archival and internalized constraints that have downplayed children's contributions to the ongoing social survival of their communities. Ideological perceptions of children as passive do not allow for a holistic and nuanced understanding of their impact. Children turned to writing and archiving as a

feasible alternative to imaginative play when it became impossible for them to cope with their devastating realities. They sought to record the culture and experiences of those around them despite their suffering, which have become invaluable sources for historians and scholars. These records, which at first served as a means of personal survival, affected the imagined social world, subverting the mechanisms that aimed to control them.

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