Children of The Holocaust: Common Games, Play, and Pastimes in Uncommon Times

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Several years ago when I was living in Farmville, Virginia, and teaching at Longwood College, now Longwood University, I was involved in an adult Bible study class, composed of college professors and other, well-educated professionals who lived there. One evening, for some reason, the topic of the Holocaust came up. I cannot remember why we strayed off the subject we were studying, how we arrived at that one, or even what was being said about it until one woman said, "I wonder why almost none of the survivors have ever written about how they managed to survive." Others mentioned that, because those who would have survived were getting on in years, one would expect more of what they were calling survival literature to have been written.

I was stunned because I had read numerous books on the subject, almost all of them first-hand accounts from the lives of the authors themselves, and then it struck me. I was, at the time, teaching children's literature, and I worked in a children's bookstore on the weekends. All of the books, but one, that I had read and, in fact, owned had been, thanks to an eye for marketing, published as children's books. Those who wrote them had been children and had written about the experiences they had had as children when they lived through and ultimately, sometimes by extraordinary means, survived those awful years of the late 1930's and early 1940's in various countries in Europe.

The one notable exception is *In the Mouth of the Wolf* (1983) by Rose Zar, which is well worth reading. At nineteen Rose, Ruszka Guterman, was urged by her father to save herself by hiding "in the mouth of the wolf." Traveling alone with false papers under the name of Wanda Gajda, she escaped from the Piotrkow ghetto, dug ditches for the German army, and worked as a laundress, a cleaning woman, a nurse's aide, and ultimately, as the war ended, a housekeeper for an SS officer, even traveling with the man's wife when she returned to Germany for the birth of her second child.

At our next meeting, I brought several bins of the books that I owned to share with those who were interested. Even I had to admit, however, that the books for children and young adults had only been written somewhat recently. Why was it that they waited for so long? Perhaps Doris Orgel, whose book *The Devil in Vienna* (1978) gave me the idea for this paper, explains it best:

> I knew I needed to write it. Why did I keep putting it off? Wonder about that reminded me of friends I had in high school—close friends, all refugees like me. We talked endlessly about any subject, except one: Where we'd come from, what happened there, and how we got out (in my case nearly not!).

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> The deepest reason for our friendship was the background we shared. Yet talking about it was taboo. We were probably scared, even though our lives in Europe were behind us. I know *I* had fears locked up inside—fears all the scarier because they were vague, dating back to Vienna and things I'd only dimly understood.
>
> Most of all, we wanted to be popular, do well, and have fun, like everybody else. We pushed aside what made us different, and told ourselves it didn't matter. We were Americans now.
>
> So for many years, I did not write this book.
>
> Belatedly, after writing other books, and visiting Austria twice as a tourist, with my American husband and kids, I pulled my head out of the sand and faced the truth: What happened when the devil came to Vienna mattered very much to me.
>
> I started doing historical research. Then I interviewed my parents and everyone else I knew who had experienced that time in Austria. Finally, I was ready to write about what living under Nazism was like.
>
> It happened a long time ago, but it still matters. I hope it makes readers ask themselves: "If someone like Hitler came to power here and now, how would I feel? What would *I* think and do?" (242-43).

Hearing the words *children* and *Holocaust*, one's thoughts are almost immediately and invariably drawn to those children who did not survive, particularly to the plight of Anne Frank and her family. There were, however, many who did survive, and the autobiographical and biographical stories of their survival, published predominantly as children's or young adult fiction because the protagonist is a child or young adult, although the content is far from fiction, provide interesting and poignant insights of their lives in the most difficult of times.

The details of how these young people managed to escape, not only from occupied cities and countries but also the work details and concentration camps, were provided safe passage on the Kindertransports, were hidden, sometimes for years, by sympathetic friends or neighbors, were taken in by religious organizations for "safe keeping," were able to pass as non-Jewish, or endured the camps until liberation are only part of their stories. They were, after all, children, and, as such, when possible, they participated in common games, play, and pastimes.

Somewhat ironically, when one considers the subject matter, a number of these accounts appear in books whose titles refer to children's games or practices or, in one case, a children's song. Among these are *Hide and Seek* (1991) by Ida Vos, translated by Terese Edelstein and Inez Smith; *Touch Wood: A Girlhood in Occupied France* (1988) by Renee Roth-Hano; *Tug of War* (1989) by Joan Lingard;

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and *Dancing on the Bridge of Avignon* (1995), also by Ida Vos, taken from the French children's song "Sur le Pont d'Avignon":

> Sur le pont d'Avignon l'on y danse, l'on y danse.
> Sur le pont d'Avignon l'on y danse tout en rond.
>
> On the bridge of Avignon, they are dancing, they are dancing.
> On the bridge of Avignon, they are dancing in a ring.

In *Hide and Seek*, based on her family's life, Ida Vos relates how, as an eight-year-old Jewish girl living in Holland, she cannot understand why there are restrictions on her all of a sudden. She has to go to a different school and wear a gold star on her sleeve, she cannot sit on certain benches in the park, and when a group of Jewish children are taken away, she and her family go into hiding.

Renee Roth-Hano, writing in *Touch Wood*, tells her story and that of her family, who, living in occupied France, flee their home in Alsace and live a precarious existence in Paris until Renee and her sister escape to the shelter of a Catholic school in Normandy.

One finds that not all of the children who were affected by the events of the Holocaust and World War II were Jewish. Joan Lingard, for example, writes about her husband and his family and follows the ordeal of fourteen-year-old twins Astra and Hugo Petersons, as members of the family flee their native Latvia in late 1944 before the advancing Russian armies and find themselves homeless refugees in war-torn Germany. These stories and others provide amazing insight into how their authors, or the author's subjects, lived, played, and survived the Holocaust.

Based on his own childhood, Uri Orlev writes in *The Island on Bird Street* (1984) of Alex who, alone at eleven except for a pet white mouse named Snow, struggles to survive in a nearly deserted, bombed-out Polish ghetto. Waiting for his father to return after his being taken to a work camp, he lives by his wits and hides from the Nazis in an abandoned house. "For as long as we'd been living in the ghetto, we children from Bird Street had gone to Number 78 to play hide-and-seek and all kinds of 'secret' war games" (26).

In *Run, Boy, Run* (2003), another book by Orlev, there are at least two examples of children being able to play games by making do with available materials. Eight-year-old Srulik Frydman finds himself on his own when the rest of his family is killed following their escape from the ghetto and takes the Polish name Jurek Staniak. He goes from village to village seeking refuge and sometimes lives with a band of boys in the forest. In one place a woman takes him in who needs someone to lead the cows and the sheep to pasture. There he meets a girl who takes her family's two cows to pasture and teaches him to play jacks with stones:

> After they ate, Marisza led him to the footpath that ran between the meadow and the wheat field. They sat on the hard earth and she taught him to play jacks with stones. She was awfully good at it.

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> "It's a girl's game," she said. "But what do you care?"
>
> Srulik tried flipping the stones in the air and catching them like Marisza. It was hard (58).

In another village, taken in by a Christian family, Srulik plays soccer with some boys in the village. The boys, however, lack an actual ball but had made one from rags:

> Jurek excelled at rag-ball soccer, … There were also spitting and peeing contests. Spitting was no problem. In peeing, though, he had to be careful not to let no one see that he was circumcised. Fortunately, everyone was looking at where the pee landed. And at running Jurek was the champion. No one was faster (79).

Run, Boy, Run is the fourth of Uri Orlev's books about children in or suffering the effects of the Holocaust to win the prestigious Mildred L. Batchelder Award. This award, given each year by the American Library Association, honors the most outstanding children's book originally published in a foreign language, translated into English, and published in the United States. His others of equal merit are *The Island on Bird Street* (1984), *The Man from the Other Side* (1991), and *The Lady with the Hat* (1995), which won the award in 1985, 1992, and 1996, respectively.

It is in *The Devil in Vienna* (1978) by Doris Orgel that I found, perhaps, more examples of folk games and folklore than in others of these books. Orgel writes of Inge Dornenwald, who is Jewish and is based in part on her sister and partly on herself. Inge and her best friend Lieselotte, a Roman Catholic and daughter of an SS officer, play Heaven and Hell, a game similar to hopscotch, which she occasionally plays with Evi, a younger child who lives upstairs. It may be inferred from what she writes that the game is usually played with another. The game is mentioned more than once.

> Anyway, she wanted to play Heaven and Hell. She always does, she's at that age.
>
> "All right." I got my coat. I checked to see if Lieselotte's lucky pebble was in the pocket. It was.
>
> We went down to the courtyard.
>
> The little bit of snow had melted. The ground was dry enough. Evi had chalk and drew the boxes.
>
> Heaven is where you rest. Hell is when you miss…
>
> Lieselotte never used to miss, except when a dog came anywhere near. Then her pebble would land in the wrong box, or she'd lose her balance, almost on purpose, so she could pet it (Orgel 43-44).

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A bit later in the book:

> I happened to have a piece of chalk in my pocket. I stooped down, drew a line, just to test if the pavement was dry. And before I knew it, I'd drawn a whole set of Heaven and Hell boxes.
>
> The pebble happened to be still in my pocket, from playing with Evi yesterday. Quickly I threw it into Box One, skipped to there, picket it up; into Box Two; and so on. I felt a little foolish playing alone. But I'd already decided that if I got through all the boxes without missing, the wonderful something would all the more certainly happen.
>
> I was up to Box Eight, usually a lucky one for me, when I heard footsteps down the stairs, looked around—and missed. … Interference, it doesn't count, I tried to think, but that was stupid. I quit… (60).

In attempting to determine the actual, graphic pattern for this particular game, I came across the following, which may link this version of the game to the cult of Mithra:

> In the Mithriac mysteries, adepts finally reached an eighth portal, the Gate of Light, where they stood naked, divested of all material qualities and ready to be reborn in the spiritual world. … It may be that a children's game something like hopscotch contains a dim memory of this mystery cult, which came to Germany and Britain along with Roman soldiers: in this game (which is still played), one leaps through a ladder-like figure drawn on the ground, and the last station in the eighth square is variously called heaven or hell (Schimmel 1993, 143).

Inge's Uncle Herbert on one occasion said, "'Teu, teu, teu,' … and knocked three times on wood—that's a joking thing one does to keep the Devil away" (Orgel 1978, 36). This practice is used in much the same way today to keep the opposite of what has been verbally expressed from happening, but according to folklorist Stephen Roud, it may actually be a transfer from children's games of tag where one is free or safe if touching wood.

There is also a reference to the pastime or game of ball where one throws a ball against a wall and performs various routines, including clapping hands and turning around before catching it again. After Lieselotte and her family move to Munich, Inge goes to her old house in an attempt to learn of her address from the janitor, Herr Magrutsch, and remembers, "…, he used to yell at us for playing ball against the side of the house …" (Orgel 1978, 37).

The two girls become "blood sisters," based on something Lieselotte has learned from a book, *Beneath Distant Skies*, that belongs to her brother Heinz:

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> "Now let's drink blood brotherhood," said Lieselotte.
>
> I'd never heard of that. But I wanted to.
>
> She took down a bottle of cooking wine. She poured a little into a glass. "We need a needle."
>
> She went to get one. "Now we prick our fingers."
>
> "How do you know?"
>
> "I read it in a book Heinz has. Want to be first?"
>
> "No, you."
>
> She stuck the needle in her finger. She didn't even wince. She squeezed two drops of her blood into the wine.
>
> I pricked my finger. I didn't wince either. I squeezed my blood in.
>
> We stirred up the wine with the blood.
>
> "Now we link arms," Lieslelotte lifted the glass. "Now we drink blood brotherhood."
>
> "Shouldn't that be blood *sister*hood?"
>
> "I don't know. Heinz says there's no such thing. But you're right. If we drink blood sisterhood, then there will be such a thing. Let's" (Orgel 1978, 28).

When Lieselotte and her family are preparing to leave Vienna for Germany, she gives Inge Heinz's book, where she reads:

> Then Trapper Charlie unsheathed his trusty hunting knife and pricked his finger with it; the noble Apache, Swift Eagle, unflinchingly did likewise; whereupon they mingled their blood in a cup of firewater, linked arms, raised the cup to their lips and drank. Thus it came to pass that these two, though from worlds apart, became blood brothers. And blood brothers they remained unto their dying days (Orgel 1978, 51).

Liesellotte then signs her letters to Inge, "Much B. S. L.," for Much Blood Sister Love."

There is also mention of that favorite childhood prank of ringing someone's doorbell and then running before the homeowner is able to answer. One day

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at the skating rink, seeing someone who looks like Heinz, and believing that Lieselotte and her family have returned to Vienna, Inge goes to their old home and rings the bell. When she hears a dog bark that could not have been theirs, she runs before anyone can answer the door:

> By the time someone opened the door, I was already down on the first floor.
>
> "You wait, next time I'll catch you," a man's voice shouted. He thought it was children playing the old game Ring a Doorbell and Run. (Orgel 1978, 65)

It appears that anyone seeing a bride's dress, not merely the groom seeing the bride, before the wedding would bring bad luck. Mitzi, the Dornenwalds' maid, was planning to marry, and Inge, who would soon be leaving with her family for Yugoslavia, wanted to see her dress. "Are you crazy? Don't you know that's bad luck?" (Orgel 1978, 106)

These are but a few of the wealth of childhood memories that one might find in reading the books of and about those who survived the Holocaust as children and have somewhat recently written about them or told their stories to others who have written them for them. This paper, which is a portion of a larger work in progress based on the books for children and young adults about these survivors and exactly how they survived, hopes to serve as a record of their activities and, where possible, an analysis of the games, play, and pastimes in which they participated.

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Lingard, Joan. 1989. *Tug of War*. New York: Dutton.
This book follows the ordeal of fourteen-year-old twins Astra and Hugo Petersons, as they and their family flee their native Latvia before the advancing Russian armies in late 1944 and find themselves homeless refugees in a war-torn Germany.

Orgel, Doris. 1978. *The Devil in Vienna*. New York: The Dial Press.
This novel is about two best friends in pre-World War II Austria—one whose father is a Nazi SS officer and the other who is Jewish—and has surprising truths to tell about individual acts of bravery and love in the face of mass betrayal.

Orlev, Uri. 1984. *The Island on Bird Street*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Based on the author's childhood, this is the story of a young Jewish boy's struggle to survive in a bombed-out Polish village during the Second World War. Eleven-year-old Alex has to live by his wits as he hides from the Nazis, searches for his father, and tries to find a way to safety and freedom.

______. 1995. *The Lady with the Hat*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Seventeen-year-old Yulek is the only member of his family to survive life in the concentration camps of the Holocaust. He moves to Palestine, where he meets Theresa, a Jewish girl saved from the Nazis by Catholic nuns. Meanwhile, an elegant lady in England has seen a photograph of Yulek in the paper and recognizes him at once. She is Yulek's aunt--long estranged from her family when she married a Christian and moved to Britain. As Yulek and Theresa try to determine their places in the postwar world, the aunt begins her efforts to be reunited with Yulek.

______. 1991. *The Man from the Other Side*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Like many Poles, fourteen-year-old Marek shares a prejudice against Jews, but that does not stop him from helping his stepfather smuggle goods to the Jews trapped in the ghetto. Stunned to find that his own father was Jewish, Marek feels compelled to act, helping Jozek, a Jewish medical student, escape, learning to love Jozek as a father.

______. 2003. *Run, Boy, Run*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
This novel tells the true story of Srulik Frydman, an eight-year-old Jewish orphan living on his own in Poland during the time of the Holocaust.

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Roth-Hano, Renee. 1988. *Touch Wood*. New York: Four Winds Press.
In this autobiographical novel set in Nazi-occupied France, Renee, a young Jewish girl, and her family flee their home in Alsace and live a precarious existence in Paris until Renee and her sister escape to the shelter of a Catholic school in Normandy.

Vos, Ida. 1991. *Hide and Seek*. Tr. Terese Edelstein and Inez Smith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Eight-year-old Rachel Hartog, a Jewish girl living in Holland, can't understand why there are restrictions on Jews all of a sudden--she must go to a different school, she must wear a gold star on her sleeve, she can't sit in certain benches in the park--and when a group of Jewish children are taken away, she and her family go into hiding. Separated from her parents, she has to change her name and move from family to family, constantly in dread of discovery. Rachel describes the horror of those years, how she lived in fear, couldn't speak to anybody, and wondered whether she would ever see her family again

______. 1993. *Anna Is Still Here*. Tr. Terese Edelstein and Inez Smith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Thirteen-year-old Anna, a Jewish girl, has recently been reunited with her parents after hiding from the Nazis for three years. Being free is not as easy as Anna thought--she's troubled by nightmares, finds it difficult to speak after being silent for three years, and knows that her parents are hiding what they went through during those terrible years. Anna finds she can only open up to Mrs. Neumann, a fellow survivor who is hoping to be reunited with her daughter, who she believes must still be alive. Anna also finds that, although the war is over, the feelings of anti-Semitism are still present.

______. 1995. *Dancing on the Bridge of Avingnon*. Tr. Terese Edelstein and Inez Smith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Relates the experiences of a young Jewish girl and her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

Zar, Rose. 1983. *In the Mouth of the Wolf*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 5743.
Ruszka Guterman, at age eighteen, knows that to be a Jew in Poland in 1942 is a death warrant. Her father knows this too, and convinces Ruska and her brother Benek to flee the ghetto and try to find safe haven in one of the larger cities in Poland. Luckily, Ruszka has learned that to show fear is to give herself away. Bold, brash, and defiant, Ruszka becomes Wanda Gajda, working for an SS Kommandant, and remains safe in the mouth of the wolf.

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