

Introduction

“**M**arshal Pétain, here we are!”¹—but not because of you or your followers. We are here because of those who—spontaneously or after reflection, willingly or somewhat reluctantly, paid or unpaid—refused to accept Nazi barbarianism and the complicity of zealous collaboration. We are here because of those who—sometimes without even being fully aware—refused, either passively or actively, to collaborate with genocide and who helped save the Jewish children condemned by the Nazis to death solely because of their origin—as were their parents and families—and who were pursued and tracked as we were in the occupied countries during the war.

The situations endured by these “hidden children” are portrayed in the testimonies that follow, each with its major issues. Each began as a taped interview and emerges, rewritten or not, according to a style selected by the witnesses themselves.

These stories, less tragic than those of the death camps (although the children often felt the tragic loss, through extermination, of one or both of their parents or the entire family), are an integral part of the Holocaust and carry their personal share of misery. How could it be otherwise when a young person, especially a very young person, has to change identity and live in fear and incomprehension—usually separated from his or her own family? How could he or she emerge unscarred?

We do not intend to write an objective page of the history of that war and the attempts to exterminate, particularly the Jews, that it entailed. The work of historians is well known, and historical documentation has established a truth that denial can never erase. A number of other personal testimonies have also been published that bring a subjective vision of that historic period. But all has not been said. There is much more because it is only now, because of repression and suffering,

that a number of witnesses, feeling the approach of age, are ready to give testimony and are finding the strength to tell about their war. It is not easy to establish a connection between the childhoods that were uniquely ours and the values that inform our lives as adults.

Each of the specific “inner films” portrayed in this volume has its own truth (even if on some minor points, reworked by memory over the years, a flaw or error may have slipped in). Furthermore, there is a dimension that escapes truth and historic rigor: a dimension that comes from the meaning the subjects give to the lives they have lived. Sense and meaning, as constructed by these actors from their own experiences and now reinterpreted by them after the events, hold lessons for everyone’s future if we want to prevent repetition of the past in the same form or in any other. After all, as we know, while the Holocaust was characterized by its radical uniqueness, barbarianism and genocide have not disappeared from the earth.

My own motive for collecting these testimonies can be summed up in a single word: urgency. The members of our group are now in our mid-sixties and seventies. Before passing away, and often after a lifetime of silence, we now must speak. Our descendants as well as the whole society must know. Only we—the deported, the children of deportees, the hidden children, all the diverse victims—can tell what we experienced during those years. Aside from the historical studies, who will really know, with the heart as well as the mind, what it was like for the victims of the Nazi and collaborator genocide? Thousands of testimonies remain to be collected; it is urgent to collect these personal memories.

This collection of testimonies does not claim to be a scientific or exhaustive representation of all “hidden children,” for it essentially came about through the connections of friendships, professional encounters, family ties, from person to person. For this reason, the work is characterized by a certain bias: completely Ashkenazi, mostly Parisian, often politically connected. This is unimportant; other groups of witnesses can be formed with different biases and they can then contribute balance to the overall group. Clearly the testimonies are diverse—each life unique; even the concept of a representative group remains of secondary importance. The juxtaposition of these intimate and very different accounts tempers any potential bias and contributes to an overall expression of truth.

Eighteen stories of hidden children (sixteen in France, two in Belgium) are told. For some, both parents were deported without returning; for others, it was a father or a mother; for others still, one or both parents returned from the camps weak and extremely traumatized. For all these witnesses, the family—whether closely or distantly related—was decimated. All were separated from their parents while hidden except two, and there is a visible contrast between those who were separated and these two for whom the security so vital to psychological development was maintained. The accounts are arranged according to the age of the witness: from youngest (born in 1941) to oldest (born in 1929). This grouping shows how experiences differed according to the child's age. The experiences of the very young children who lacked understanding first resulted in more or less fantasy effects—such as feeling that to be hidden was to be abandoned—and later on sometimes exhibited itself in persistent trauma and identity crises. The preadolescents perceived more lucidly the reality of the Occupation and the experience of being hunted through the ambience of what was left unsaid. Old before their time, yet too young to be a Resistance fighter—armed only with the confidence of youth—they relied on intelligence and self-control to save themselves and help others.

The testimonies of the contributors who chose to keep the original form of an oral interview—a simple transcript minimally edited—illustrate the information requested of each one of them: 1) description of the place of origin and the obstacles encountered by the emigrant family; 2) chronology and perception of the events lived by the child-witness, from before the war—depending on his or her age—and especially during the war (the hiding, the hunt, the protection, the environment); 3) reconstruction of life after the war; 4) personality and values of the witness as an adult, in connection with this childhood.

For the contributors who chose to give a straightforward autobiographic narrative, whether or not it began as an interview, the more distanced writing enables them to give a more self-controlled account. In all cases each contributor maintained complete control over the version of his or her testimony as it appears in the book.

With one exception, each testimony begins with a photo of the narrator as a child during the war. At the end of the book the reader will find a succinct history of that time period, an annotated listing of acronyms, a glossary, and a selected bibliography.

In reading these stories, one discerns each one's irreducible uniqueness, despite the common fate of the Jews. Everything played a role in the course of events for each individual: origin (Jews from Eastern Europe, French Jews), social class, family structure, geographic region of refuge, chance, small miracles or shameful betrayals. Equally varied are the "rebirths" after the war—the consequences and the life choices. Nevertheless, a common characteristic unites us: our will to rebound. Educated or not, each of us has emerged with similar vitality, with strong support for the families we have started and for society. All of our messages carry the imprint of this same vital force. And starting from our wounded Jewishness or from the attack perpetrated on our human condition, each of us turns to humanism or universalism.

I hope that these messages, coming out of a twentieth century that knew such absolute savagery in the very heart of our extremely civilized European continent, can speak to readers of the present century that has begun with so many uncertainties.

I take pleasure in thanking my friend Ariane Kalfa, editor of the Judaic Studies series at L'Harmattan Publishing, who put complete confidence in us and gave us wise counsel; the great historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who did us the honor and friendship of writing a foreword for our book; Marie-France Dupuy, who transcribed our audio cassettes with patience and competence; Danièle Menès and Éliane Séravalle, who backed me throughout the work; Gaby and Serge Netchine, who helped put together the bibliography and the chronology; Nicole Eizner, who first put us in contact with Pierre Vidal-Naquet. And I emphasize that this collective effort was made in the warmest of friendships and by listening attentively to one another.

This book, originally written in French, mainly addressed a French reading public. For this reason we ask our American readers to forgive us for referring to a historical context so far from them in time and space, and for occasionally simply alluding to events, people, and places familiar to us and foreign to you.

Despite our awareness of these special characteristics of the book, our group wanted to see it translated into English as soon as possible—not only to transmit facts about the tragedies of the Second World War long after others had done so, but because we believe the individual experiences recounted here have importance across borders. We especially want to communicate with you—citizens of a country particularly dedicated to democracy and liberty and fortunate not to have experienced

this war directly on your soil nor to have been occupied by or subjected to dictators. Motivated by these same values of democracy and liberty, Americans contributed greatly to our liberation from oppression. We believe, as you do, that resistance to the forces of destruction and collective misery is one of the universal ethical values. Unfortunately, vigilance in protecting these values is just as urgent today.

When our group had the good fortune to meet Betty Becker-Theye, through contacts at Mount Holyoke College where I was a Fulbright scholar in 1955–1956, she offered to translate our book into English in a spirit of solidarity with our fractured childhoods. For this we express our appreciation and gratitude.

—Danielle Bailly
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