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The Holocaust sent thousands of Jewish children into hiding. Decades later, those children — now scattered across the globe — are still searching for their family roots and for the people who helped them survive World War II.



CHILDREN AND WAR: Thousands of Jewish children were put into hiding during the Holocaust; others, such as children associated with the Refugee Children's Movement (right), were placed in countries far from home. Following the war, both hidden and displaced children began to search for their families. For many of them, the search is still on.

BY JENNIFER WILLIS

BY THE END OF WORLD WAR II, as many as 1.5 million Jewish children had been killed in the genocide of the Holocaust. But thousands of Jewish children survived — some were hidden in cellars, barns, attics, or monasteries; others were placed with Christian families and forced to forget their religion and even their names.

Evelyne Haendel was one of those hidden children. She was 4 years old in 1941 when her mother hid her with friends of their landlord in Belgium. She was moved again when her hiding place became too dangerous and by the end of the war, had been hidden in as many as four homes.

Living a Hidden Existence

Jewish children were among the most vulnerable victims of the Holocaust, with an estimated 6 to 11 percent survival rate; by comparison, the survival rate was 33 percent for Jewish adults in Europe. According to Steven Luckert, Ph.D., curator of the permanent exhibit on hidden children for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, it's impossible to know precisely how many Jewish children went into hiding during the war or were reunited with family members.

"Life in hiding was extremely difficult," says Luckert. "It wasn't easy to go into hiding. It wasn't easy to be separated from your family."

Evelyne was no exception. Like many hidden children, she never saw her parents again. Both were killed at Auschwitz. An aunt did return from the camps in 1945 but was unable to care for her.

"I remember how she was in a very poor condition," Evelyne says of her Aunt Sasha. "She didn't have any capacity to take me in. I'm not sure she wanted to. The fact that she had lost her daughter [during the Holocaust] must have made it difficult for her to see her niece there still living."

With no one remaining to care for her, the landlord who had hidden Evelyne during the war adopted her.

"I was only legally adopted when I was 15," she says. "It took a long time in those days. Nobody was sure about who was coming back. Nobody knew exactly if somebody

had died or not, and where."

Despite officially being part of a new family, Evelyne married young to run away from home. Both that marriage and a second failed. "I was busy working far from my roots, far from any emotions, far from myself" she explains. "I had pushed away everything that reminded me or could have reminded me of my origins. That's how I lived."

Mostly, she was alone.

Challenges Faced

Hidden children — particularly those who, like Evelyne, were very young when placed into hiding — faced a number of challenges, says Luckert. Children who had dealt with the pain of separation from their families to go into hiding had to face the same pain again after the war, when they were often separated from their rescuers to be returned to surviving family members or to be turned over to Jewish agencies or orphanages.

"Questions of identity and issues of religion — some of them had in hiding adopted a new religion and then after hiding were told that they actually weren't Christian, to go back to Judaism," Luckert says. "And hiding a portion of yourself, even if you could play with other kids, hiding that from them." All of this meant that identity crises for hidden children immediately following the war or even years later were not uncommon.

Evelyne was no exception. After an emotional breakdown in her late 30s that Evelyne describes as "total disintegration," she started therapy — and also started wondering about her parents. In the 1980s, she started searching.

She found traces of her parents in Belgium, where she was then living, and she visited her birthplace, Vienna, to view her birth certificate and her parents' marriage certificate. But she made little headway.

Then in 2002, things started to happen when Austria began a reparations program. Evelyne was contacted.

"I had to fill in forms," she remembers — and that's when something clicked. "I looked once again [at] my



parents' marriage certificate. This was the first time I saw there was a witness by the name of Haendel. And I thought, okay, who's that guy?"

Evelyne began researching, learning that the witness, Isaac Haendel, had lived on the same street as her grandparents, but even though her surname matched Isaac's, she still couldn't make the family connection. Acting on a hunch that Isaac's living descendants might have applied for restitution, Evelyne asked the Austrian settlement foundation for help. The best they could offer was to write to the family on Evelyne's behalf.

"One day I found a message on my answering machine. It was someone from Paris," she says. "These were the descendants of Isaac Haendel. [A woman said she] ... was my cousin, Lydia. She couldn't believe it."

Evelyne, who was then in her 60s, traveled to Paris to meet her cousins for the first time. A younger cousin had saved family photos and said he had one of a woman who looked just like Evelyne. She looked at the photo. It was her mother.

"We were family," says Evelyne.

Branching Further

Evelyne tracked down her Aunt Sasha's family in Australia and learned she had a maternal uncle, surname Wolfowicz, who had gone to the United States. The family believed he had settled in New York because he had sent copies of the New York-based Jewish newspaper *The Forward* to his sister in Australia. Evelyne contacted the Hidden Child Foundation in New York. They put her in touch with genealogist Gary Mokotoff.

Gary Mokotoff, she learned, is publisher of *Avotaynu: The International Review of Jewish Genealogy* and co-owner of the journal's parent company, Avotaynu, which publishes books on Jewish genealogy and research. He was the founding president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies and the first recipient of that organization's Lifetime Achievement Award. Evelyne was in very good hands.

"When I help people out, I start with Ancestry.com," Gary says of most of the cases he works on. "I start with the 1930 census and work from there. It had such a wealth of information. You can then go backward and sometimes even forward." Evelyne, however, presented a unique challenge.

"I said, 'You want me to find somebody named Wolfowicz who lived in Brooklyn in the 1950s?'" Gary remembers. "She said, 'Yes, that's all I know.'"

But the more Gary communicated with Evelyne, the more details emerged about her family. She mentioned that

her mother's family had moved from Poland to Dortmund, Germany. With a little research, Gary discovered another person with the surname Wolfowicz that had also relocated from Poland to the same German town.

"I said, 'I guarantee that's your uncle,'" Gary says. "It's too coincidental there would be two families named Wolfowicz arriving in Dortmund, Germany, at the same time and not be related."

Gary was right. The man was indeed Evelyne's uncle, but he had Americanized his name from Abraham Wolfowicz to Adolph Wolf. He was listed in the 1930 census living with his wife in Brooklyn. Bringing his extensive network of contacts to bear, Gary was able to reunite Evelyne with Adolph's descendants, now living in Florida.

Documented Relations

"Virtually every Jewish genealogist considers it his or her obligation to document what happened to members of their family murdered in the Holocaust because there was an attempt to eradicate ... these ... [people's existence]," Gary says. "It memorializes the members of their family who were murdered in the Holocaust."

While researching his own lineage, Gary discovered that more than 400 family members had been lost in World War II Europe. "Virtually every Mokotoff that was living in Poland in 1939 was not alive in 1945," he says. "I know of probably less than 20 survivors."

Now Gary does his best to render assistance to others who are trying to document victims of the Holocaust or to find survivors. "If it's Holocaust-related, I work for free to try and point the person in the right direction," he says. He also tries to help them with the how-tos of family history research so they can embark on the rediscovery on their own.

That's what has happened to Evelyne, says Gary: she is quickly becoming a "fantastic genealogist" in her own right. Not only is she still at work on her own family history, she is also putting her research skills to use for other hidden children, helping them reconnect branches of seemingly convoluted family trees.

"Most of the time, it's people who have been hidden in Belgium," Evelyne says of the hidden children and families she helps. Now living in Liege, Evelyne knows the ins and outs of the Belgian archives and is building a genealogical network of her own. "With bits and pieces, putting two and two together, it's a little bit like detective work. I'm trying to help other people searching," she says. "I've got a little bit of experience now, and I'm using it. I think it's just normal that I also do the same for others."

She describes one case she's working on, that of a man

trying to track down descendants of the people with whom he was hidden as a child. He was reunited with his parents after the war, but the family never discussed the time they'd spent apart.

"He has a void. He lives with it, but with some difficulties also — depression — because of that," she says. "I understand, because I've been through it, so I can grasp what it means for someone to try and reconstruct a life."

Evelyne's personal journey hasn't been an easy one. There were times she lost hope. At one point, she discovered an uncle had denied her very existence. But today she knows kin in France, Israel, Canada, the United States, and England. She is in constant contact with them, and she regularly travels worldwide for holidays, reunions, and bar and bat mitzvahs.

Having family for the first time has been a life-changing

experience for Evelyne. "It's the difference between just existing and being a full person," she says. "The difference between being something like a ghost and a real, living person. Just by searching, you build yourself," she says. Her advice to other researchers? "Turn each stone. Don't let one go by thinking it won't be worth it. Be rigorous. Be perseverant. And try everything."

It's all a far cry from the early years of her search, which included several visits to Auschwitz. "To me, that was the only cemetery I had. The only place I knew where my parents somehow had been," Evelyne says. "I felt the need. I don't anymore, now that I've found family."

JENNIFER WILLIS is a Portland-based freelance writer. She can be reached at rev.jen@gmail.com.



What You Can Do from Home

Searching for Jewish family history records can often mean an in-person trip. But you can do a lot of work from your home computer. The following sites offer details on the whereabouts of integral Jewish genealogy resources.

Routes to Roots <www.rtrfoundation.org/archdta.shtml>. Ever want to know what records you might be able to access about a family hometown in eastern Europe? "Routes to Roots" may have the answer. Plug the town name into the site's database, and you'll get a list of available resources and the location of each. The database includes information on archival holdings in Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, and the Ukraine.

Center for Jewish History <www.cjh.org>. A consortium of five major institutions focused on Jewish history, the Center for Jewish History's catalog links you to the holdings of the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, the Leo Baeck

Institute, the Yeshiva University Museum, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Search results will tell you who holds the documents you're looking for as well as details on the documents' availability.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <www.ushmm.org/research/collections>. Focusing on archival evidence of the Holocaust, the USHMM's holdings include rich collections of life-as-it-happened records, from oral histories to personal artifacts, community records, and even the Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive. Note that not all collections held by the museum are in its online catalog; however, phone numbers and e-mail contacts are provided so researchers can ask more detailed questions.

Yizkor Books at JewishGen <www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/database.html>. Search for Yizkor books (memorials of towns and *shtetls*, life, and residents of each) to find out if one has been created for your ancestral hometown

and where you'll find that book today. While on the site, also check out other resources, message boards, and mailing lists.

Ancestry.com Jewish Family History Collection <<http://landing.ancestry.com/jewishfamilyhistory>>. Through partnerships with groups including JewishGen and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Ancestry.com has amassed a collection of documents specifically pertaining to Jewish family history. The collection, which includes both free and subscription databases, features viewable record images whenever available. While all records in this collection come up during general Ancestry.com searches, going straight to the collection may help you weed through unrelated documents more rapidly. Additionally, you'll find tools to help with your research, such as a community locator, a name variant widget, and Jewish-family-history-specific message boards. Check back often: Ancestry.com is continually adding to the collection.