# Children searching for relatives, post-Holocaust

The period at the end of World War II is known by many as the zero hour – *Stunde Null*. This was when the horrific dimensions of the catastrophe that had befallen the countries in Europe became evident; it was also the time when restoration began, with the beginning of a return to life. Were we to try to express this moment in cosmic terms, the zero hour is, to some extent, like the first moment after the Big Bang. On the one hand, there is complete chaos; on the other hand, it saw the emergence of events, movements, organizations, and trends that eventually matured and grew in influence over Europe and the entire world.

From the great destruction caused by the war, the broken people who survived the war began to gather together in an attempt to begin rebuilding their lives.

In Germany alone, there were 11 million refugees and displaced persons at the end of the war. Among these, only a very small number were Jewish Holocaust survivors. The survivors were not only found in Germany; with the liberation of labor and concentration camps in Poland, there were many released prisoners, some of whom were Jews who had managed to survive the war years of oppression and devastation. In my lecture today, I would like to focus on the Jewish children who began to search for their relatives. However, my observations are relevant for other groups of people as well.

Most often, searching for relatives was the first thing that survivors did after the war.

There were two different types of searches:

1. Searches for friends or relatives who were in Europe during the war, in an attempt to learn whether or not they survived;

2. Searches for relatives living abroad (e.g., Palestine [soon-to-be the State of Israel], the United States, or England), who could be located more easily. The purpose of this kind of search was to establish a bond that could help them in their recovery and rehabilitation.

The people doing the searching can also be divided into two categories:

1. Survivors of various types – concentration camp survivors, those who hid or posed as Aryans during the war, fighters, partisans – who sought out their relatives in Europe and abroad.

2. Family members who did not go through the Holocaust but who had relatives in Europe. At the end of the war, they wanted to find out what had happened to them and, if they survived, how to help them.

Among those searching for relatives – both Holocaust survivors and those who did not go through the Holocaust – were children looking for their families; they are the ones I wish to speak about today. For the purpose of this lecture we will define “children” as those who were under the age of 18 at the end of the war.

The search for relatives was usually conducted in two stages. The first stage was that of the independent search. At this stage, the relative would network using personal contacts to find out whether they knew anything about the fate of his relatives. At this stage, many chose to return to their original homes to see if there were any survivors. If that initial search turned up nothing, and no information about the relatives was uncovered, the person searching would turn to the next stage.

The second stage was to turn to the various search authorities, such as the International Red Cross, UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and the Jewish Agency, to search for relatives. These organizations had a network of connections with other organizations as well as their own large databases, and were therefore considered well-equipped to carry out searches, increasing the likelihood of discovering relatives.

When examining the searches carried out by children looking for their family members, we find a number of unusual elements. Before I elaborate on these, however, it is important to note that in the archives I examined, there are very few letters written by or on behalf of children within the age-range mentioned above, which makes it difficult to make unequivocal claims. The distinctions that I will present are proposals and hypotheses – a kind of work in progress, and a call for collaborative thinking.

First, in searches carried out by children, the first stage, i.e., the stage of the independent search, did not necessarily take place. This is perfectly understandable, for the children did not have the connections required for an independent search and it was not always logistically possible for them to reach their parents' original home. Many child survivors were placed in the category of “unaccompanied children” and grouped into children's homes under the auspices of UNRRA. According to Nahum Bogner, only about 5,000 children survived in Poland and were registered in the She'erith Hapleitah lists, some thanks to various organizations that helped save children, such as Irena Sendler’s organization, Zegota. Of these, some 4,500 children were treated by UNRRA or institutions under its auspices, including children's homes and children’s kibbutzim that were staffed by counselors who came from Israel.

For this reason, in the years immediately after the war (1945-1948), many children relied on other people to conduct searches on their behalf, such as counselors in the children's homes or group counselors in the kibbutzim. It was these adults who mediated and managed the correspondence between the search organizations and the children, certainly when the children were young. Only later, when the children became older, could they turn to the organizations on their own and tell their stories in their own words. For example, the following letter was written on behalf of one such child:

"Regarding a young orphan from Lithuania who survived the war without parents and almost no relatives, I know that he has a distant relative on his mother's side and that their family had relatives in America and South Africa. I do not know their family name. The only detail I know is that they came from Vishita, a small town in the north of the country, in the vicinity of Ponevez-Otiani-Vilkomir. That is why I have asked to be informed of an organization or individuals who are originally from this town so that I can try to contact them, and, by means of conversation, perhaps I might learn something of this orphan’s relatives."

The role of the adult was to pass on the child's search request to the appropriate organizations, together with the child's personal information. But the adult could help in the search by adding information that he or she personally had about the child's family. This combination made the search more effective because the more information that the search authorities had – and the more accurate it was – the greater the likelihood that the search could be initiated and perhaps succeed.

Another problem that is evident in the children's letters is the fragmentary information. The searching child usually did not have all the information needed for the search, and his or her memory of the events was probably lacking, since the children were often quite young. Sometimes the child did not have the name of the relative whom she or he was seeking, and sometimes even the most basic information was missing, like the child’s name at birth or the child’s true age.

For example, this note is from a girl who learned that her mother was looking for her:

"With regard to the question of my age, I have to say that because I moved so many times, I sometimes had to make up my age, so I don’t know it exactly what it is. But I am a year older than my brother, and that fits exactly with the information that my mother gave. Also, I should add that my brother is with me, and at home they called him Yosef – or Ze'ev. I don’t really know how he was called in our house, but now his name is Aryeh.”

An additional challenge that came up when children were the ones searching was that they were often moved from one place to another, which made it very hard to identify their relatives. This heartbreaking letter, received by a relatives’ search committee, in 1953 is a good example:

“I am asking for your help to find my relatives.

My name is Rivka…I am looking for my mother, my siblings and my uncles. My mother’s name is Rosa. My sister’s name is Aliza, but at home she was also called Leah. My brother’s name is Chaim.

I was born in Poland in 1934 or 1935. My father placed me in a children’s home together with my brother Chaim, who was then 12 years old. I was four or five. The war started and my father died in the hospital and they began sending the children in homes to Russia. My mother came to the children’s home and told us that we should tell the woman in charge that we want to stay in Poland with our mother. My brother forgot to tell them. We were put on a train to Russia, and when it stopped at one of the stations, my brother got off for a moment. Before he could get back on, the train started moving, and I haven’t seen him since.

I came back to Poland when I was nine. When I was ten, we moved to France. When I was twelve, we moved to Israel.”

From a careful examination of the searches conducted by children, it becomes clear that the main challenge lay in their difficulty supplying the requisite information. Adults faced similar challenges but the situations were much more difficult when it was children who were doing the searching.

Another issue that becomes clear in the letters was the question of changes to the child’s name and/or age. The war and its repercussions forced the children and their rescuers to obscure identifying details, such as their original name or their age. Sometimes the original name was lost forever, which made it very difficult for family members to locate the child.

In Conclusion:

The search for relatives was one of the first actions that people took after the Holocaust; people today do the same thing after disasters and catastrophes. The reasons for this are understandable – relatives are perceived as an island of stability within the chaos, and they can serve as an anchor for rehabilitation. In particular, connecting with family can reduce the feelings of isolation and loneliness experienced by survivors. This is an important and necessary stage in personal and community rehabilitation after disasters, and is recognized by the United Nations and the Red Cross as a necessary action in the rehabilitation of communities.

When thinking about practical matters in the search for relatives and reunification of families, it is important to note the obvious: For there to be a chance that family members will be reunited, it is crucial to find out and keep the original identification details given to the child, those that they were known by in their community. This was done, for example, by Irena Sendler of the Zegota organization, which maintained hidden lists containing the children’s original names, alongside their new pseudonym.

Second, the letters demonstrate the important role played by the adults who accompanied the child in the search process – whether these were professionals or distant relatives who were in contact with the child who could help in the search for other relatives. Since these adults served as the mediators between the child and the search authorities, their role was twofold: To extract as much information as possible from the child in a sensitive way, and to serve as a stable agent whom the search authorities could contact if and when relevant information was found.

I believe that some of these things may be possible to implement nowadays as well.