# **Missing Persons and the Second World War: Between Personal Loss and National Loss**

## **Prelude**

Sergio Simon was only six-years-old when he was deported from Italy to Auschwitz. The fact that his father was Catholic did not help the young son of a Jewish mother, and, together with his mother Gisella, and several members of her family, Sergio arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau on the 4th of April. At first Sergio and his mother remained together, but he was soon taken to an unknown location. At the end of the war, Gisella and Sergio’s father, Eduardo, were reunited, and began searching tirelessly for their son. They sought the help of the Italian authorities, of international aid organizations, and of the Jewish Agency, hoping against hope that their son had somehow made it to Mandatory Palestine. Yet it was of no avail; no trace of Sergio could be found. Only in the 1980s was it discovered that, together with 19 other children, Sergio had been taken to a school in the town of Bullenhuser Damm outside of Hamburg, where they were subjected to cruel experiments. On the 20th of April 1945, Sergio and the other children were murdered, together with their four caretakers, prisoners from Holland and France, and 26 Soviet prisoners of war.

Sergio’s mother, Gisella never accepted that her son had been murdered, and, until her dying day, continued hoping that he would return.

Sergio was not alone. Millions of other civilians and soldiers — men, women, and children — vanished during the war. When the dust began to settle, it became apparent that post-war Europe had become the scene of a massive, desperate chase led by family members, friends and governments to discover the fates of wartime missing persons. We need to recognize that wars and armed conflicts have a consequence that only recently has begun receiving some, but not sufficient attention: the countless missing persons created by the unpredictable events and predicaments of war. This phenomenon afflicts all combatants and parties involved in violent conflicts, irrespective of their allegiances or positions. The Second World War, lasting over five years and fought in multiple theatres of war, from Russia through North Africa and the Mediterranean and to the Pacific, resulted in a widespread and significant phenomenon of missing persons.

In this article, I argue that missing persons should be considered as a distinct category when discussing the results of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The extent of the personal, national, and international efforts devoted to the solution of this problem, as well as its influence on both personal and national post-war rehabilitation, merit treating this issue as an independent field of research. To support this position, I will review the problem of missing persons after World War II, establishing the reasons for the phenomenon, and showing the ways in which various organizations tried to address it. In the conclusions, I will discuss the meaning and significance of the phenomenon of wartime missing persons within the totality of the results of the Second World War. Due to limits of space, certain aspects of the phenomenon, such as its influence on the establishment of new families in the post-war period, and on commemoration and memory, cannot be examined here.