

“IN A SEA OF FIRE, IN A RAIN OF BOMBS.” JEWISH CHILDREN IN WARSAW DURING SEPTEMBER 1939 SIEGE

EYAL GINSBERG

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

Received May 31, 2024; Revised October 7, 2024; Accepted October 16, 2024.

Abstract

The German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, led to the rapid evacuation of the Polish government from Warsaw, with the city eventually surrendering to the Nazis on September 28. The devastating aftermath saw a quarter of Warsaw's houses destroyed and approximately 50,000 people killed or wounded. This article focuses on the experiences of Jewish children during this tumultuous period, a subject often overlooked in historical literature. While extensive research exists on children in Warsaw, particularly during the Ghettoization period, little attention has been given to the crucial initial month marked by both land and air assaults. Drawing from diverse sources such as diaries, archival materials, and oral testimonies, this article provides a comprehensive understanding of how Jewish children navigated the challenges of the siege and their survival strategies. By synthesizing these perspectives, it offers a nuanced analysis of their experiences, shedding light on an important aspect of this historical event.

Keywords: Second World War; siege of Warsaw; Jewish children; survival strategies

DOI: 10.14712/23363231.2024.2

The title of this article is a reference to Wojdyśławski, *Wspomnienia, szkice i refleksje (8.01.1942) Sceny z życia ludności żydowskiej w okresie wojny i okupacji (1939–1942)*, Yad Vashem Archive, AR.I/489.

Eyal Ginsberg is a doctoral student at the Department of Jewish History, Tel Aviv University, Israel. Address correspondence to The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies and Archaeology, The Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities, Tel Aviv University, Chaim Levanon St 55, Tel Aviv-Yafo. E-mail: eyalginsberg@mail.tau.ac.il.

Introduction

“We had the taste of an air raid the likes of which have never taken place till now. The enemy dropped bombs, each of which deafened us, and sometimes it seemed to us that they were exploding over our heads. Women fainted, cowards hid, and little children cried.”¹ These words, penned by Hebrew teacher and diarist Chaim Aron Kaplan² on September 4, 1939, reflect the disruption in the lives of many inhabitants in Warsaw, the capital city of Poland, caused by the outbreak of war and the German occupation of the city. The Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Within a few days, the Polish government fled Warsaw, and on September 28, the capital surrendered to the Nazis. A quarter of the houses in Warsaw had been destroyed, and an estimated 50,000 people were killed or wounded.³ This article delves into the experiences of Jewish children during those days, exploring their survival strategies through their own eyes. While extensive literature exists on Jewish children in Warsaw during the German occupation, scant attention has been devoted to the pivotal initial month marked by both land and air assaults. Therefore, the experiences of children and youth during this critical period remain underexplored.⁴ By examining children as a specific group of victims of the Nazi assault on the Jews, this article aims to

¹ Chaim A. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 24.

² Chaim Aron Kaplan (1880–1942 or 1943), a teacher, publicist, founder of a Hebrew elementary school in Warsaw, author of Hebrew school textbooks and works on pedagogy, murdered at Treblinka death camp. Kaplan’s diary survived outside the ghetto. See Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 824.

³ Israel Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 8.

⁴ The research literature written about non-Jewish Polish children during this period is limited, especially in comparison to the attention given to their experiences in later stages of the occupation. See, for example, Roman Hrabar, Zofia Tokarz and Jacek E. Wilczur, *The Fate of Polish Children During the Last War* (Warsaw: Interpress, 1981); and Janina Kostkiewicz, ed., *Crime without Punishment: The Extermination and Suffering of Polish Children during the German Occupation 1939–1945* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2020). For further literature on children during the Holocaust, see Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children’s Lives under the Nazis* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2006); and Lynn H. Nicholas, *Cruel World: The Children of Europe in the Nazi Web* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2005). For further literature on children in Warsaw ghetto see, for example, Debórah Dwork, *Children with a Star. Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 155–206; Susan M. Kardos, “‘Not Bread Alone’: Clandestine Schooling and Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust,” *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 1 (2002): 33–66, doi: 10.17763/haer.72.1.375234307212611j; and Katarzyna Person, “‘The children ceased to be children’: Day-Care Centres at Refugee Shelters in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry* 30 (2018): 341–352, muse.jhu.edu/article/700125.

shed light on their unique experiences, which have hitherto been mostly analyzed through the lens of adults. This approach is significant because children, like any other group, encountered the war differently from other Varsovians. The Jews of Warsaw “comprised not one but several worlds,” with a plethora of different lifestyles, corresponding to varying degrees of “assimilation and acculturation” and differences in language, dress, religious practice, and social customs.⁵ By focusing on the distinct experiences of Jewish children, we gain a deeper understanding of the varied impacts of the war on different segments of the Jewish community in Warsaw.

What were the personal, family, and social strategies adopted by children in order to survive during the siege? How did the familial dynamics evolve among Jewish children amidst the wartime upheaval? What roles did Jewish children assume within their communities as they faced the siege? What coping mechanisms did Jewish children employ to maintain a sense of normalcy amidst the chaos of the siege? In the following pages I will try to provide a comprehensive understanding of how young individuals navigated this tumultuous period, examining the nuances of their daily lives and probing into their reactions to the radical changes thrust upon them. I will argue that children adopted a multitude of survival strategies to overcome the challenges of siege. To achieve this, the article draws upon a diverse array of sources, including contemporary diaries, archival materials, oral testimonies, and later recollections. By synthesizing these multifaceted perspectives, I seek to offer a nuanced and historically grounded analysis of the unique challenges faced by Jewish children.

I will use writings authored by contemporaries following the events, especially documents collected from the underground archive *Oneg Shabbat*,⁶ founded by Emanuel Ringelblum⁷ to document the experiences of Jews in the

⁵ Philip Boehm, Introduction to *Words to Outlive Us: Eyewitness Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto*, by Michał Grynberg (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 4.

⁶ The *Oneg Shabbat* Archive, led by Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, aimed to document life under Nazi occupation. Recruiting from diverse Jewish society, they captured the German influence on private and communal life in Warsaw and throughout Poland. With the escalating plight of Polish Jewry, efforts intensified to document deportations and extermination. Even after mass deportations to Treblinka in 1942, documentation continued. However, only the initial parts survived the war, now housed in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. These records offer insight into Jewish life amidst suffering, highlighting resilience and spiritual vitality in the face of oppression. For a detailed description of the archive, see Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁷ Emanuel Ringelblum (1900–1944), a historian and social activist, documented the plight of Jews in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. Born in Galicia, he dedicated himself to social justice and scholarly pursuits, advocating for the oppressed. In the Warsaw Ghetto, he founded the *Oneg Shabbat*

Warsaw Ghetto. The testimonies I will be using, which focus on the daily lives and struggles of Jewish residents, are taken from various archives and were mostly collected in the 1990s. While survivor testimonies offer invaluable insights into historical events, it is crucial to acknowledge that some were collected decades after the events they describe, providing a retrospective perspective. Nonetheless, the past few decades have seen a heightened focus on Holocaust research in Eastern Europe and the social history of local communities, underscoring the importance of personal testimonies in reconstructing history.⁸ Of particular significance are children's testimonies, which offer rich insights into neglected aspects of the Holocaust and provide valuable material for analyzing socio-historical identities among young people affected by war.

The article is divided into two parts. The first part explores what children knew or understood about the war before it began, and how they reacted in its initial moments, including their experiences as witnesses to death, particularly the deaths of their loved ones. The second part focuses on the active initiatives taken by children to survive, both within their family circles and in the broader society.

Unrecognizable Life Change

On September 1, 1939, in the early hours of the morning, the German army launched a well-planned attack on Poland codenamed Fall Weiss [Operation White]. Within a few days, the German forces managed to break the backbone of the Polish army, and by the end of the first week, they were at the gates of Warsaw, the capital of Poland. Individual parts of the country were occupied within days. Other areas, including Warsaw, held out for a few weeks before falling into the hands of the occupier.⁹ The siege of the city began on September 8 and concluded on September 28. The Polish capital faced an onslaught from the technologically superior German forces, employing a combination of air raids, artillery

organization, meticulously recording daily life and Nazi atrocities. His efforts culminated in the Oneg Shabbat Archive, a vital repository of firsthand Holocaust testimonies. Despite his bravery, Ringelblum tragically perished in the Holocaust, alongside countless others he sought to honor through his work. See Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, 839.

⁸ Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Havi Dreifuss, 'Anu Yehude Polin?' ["We Polish Jews?" The Relations between Jews and Poles during the Holocaust – the Jewish Perspective"] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), 26–27.

⁹ Jadwiga Biskupska, *Survivors: Warsaw under Nazi Occupation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 22–47.

bombardment, and ground assaults. The city's defenders, largely comprised of Polish soldiers and civilians, exhibited remarkable resilience. Warsaw's extensive fortifications and the determination of its inhabitants initially thwarted the German advance. However, the relentless and systematic attacks, coupled with strategic encirclement, gradually eroded the Polish defenses. The Luftwaffe executed intense aerial bombardments, targeting key infrastructure and civilian areas alike. The Poles, lacking air support and overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the assault, struggled to hold their ground. As the siege intensified, shortages of food, ammunition, and medical supplies further strained the besieged city. On September 17, under the terms of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the Red Army crossed into the eastern Polish territories. Ultimately, facing the grim reality of impending defeat and with the Soviet invasion from the east, Poland surrendered. The fall of Warsaw symbolized the broader tragedy of Poland's defeat and the ruthless efficiency of the Blitzkrieg tactics employed by the German military.¹⁰ Despite the difficulty in verifying the exact death toll in Warsaw during September, it is estimated that about 50,000 people were killed or injured in the bombings and that a quarter of the city's houses were destroyed.

On the eve of the war, some 350,000 Jews resided in Warsaw, tens of thousands of whom were children.¹¹ Against the backdrop of political and military tensions in Europe during the late 1930s, these children faced exposure to the possibility of war between Poland and Germany through various means. Some of

¹⁰ Piotr Rozwadowski and Aneta Ignatowicz, *Boje o Warszawę; Warszawskie Termopile 1939–1945* (Warszawa: Fundacja "Warszawa Walczy 1939–1945," 2007), 10–33; Lucjan Dobroszycki, Marian Drozdowski, Marek Getter and Adam Słomczyński, *Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r.: dokumenty, materiały prasowe, wspomnienia i relacje* (Warszawa: Polska Akademia Nauk. Instytut Historii, 1964), XI–XXVII; Marian Marek Drozdowski, *Alarm dla Warszawy: ludność cywilna w obronie we wrześniu 1939 r.* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1975); Joanna Urbanek, *Lęk i strach: warszawiacy wobec zagrożeń Września 1939 r.* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Aspra-JR, 2009); Wojdysławski, *Wspomnienia, szkice i refleksje (8.01.1942) Sceny z życia ludności żydowskiej w okresie wojny i okupacji (1939–1942)*, Yad Vashem Archive (hereafter YVA), AR.I/489. See also photographs and film made by Julien Hequembourg Bryan (1899–1974) who was a prominent American photographer and filmmaker, known for founding the International Film Foundation in 1945. In September 1939, during the Blitzkrieg invasion of Poland, Bryan was the only photojournalist from a neutral country in Warsaw. He captured the German army's attacks and the resilience of the Polish people, evacuating with other neutrals on September 21. His footage of the assault earned him an Academy Award nomination in 1940. See Roger Moorhouse, *Poland 1939: The Outbreak of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 187–189; Julien Bryan Film Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter USHMM), Accession Number: 2003.214, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1000016>.

¹¹ These numbers are estimates. In August 1939, according to estimates by the Municipal Board, 380,567 Jews were living in Warsaw, constituting 29.1 percent of the capital's inhabitants. See Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, 47.

the child survivors testified that none in their families believed war would break out, as France and England had declared their intention to come to Poland's aid if attacked. Additionally, there was a sense of security that even in the event of war, the Polish army and citizens could stand firm. This sentiment was reinforced by military plane maneuvers, patriotic propaganda, and fundraising efforts in schools for the Air Force.¹²

Others harbored fears regarding the consequences of war and the specific fate of Jews under a potential German occupation. These concerns were fueled by harsh news regarding the Jews of Germany and the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazi regime. Seventeen-year-old Moshe Meler recounted how signs of danger for Polish Jews, such as the deportation of Jews of Polish origin from Germany,¹³ manifested in his surroundings. While acknowledging the threat of war, Meler highlighted a collective tendency to avoid confronting the harsh realities, with many choosing to remain unaware of the unfolding catastrophe.¹⁴

Children could sense the adults' anxiety about the possibility of war. In her testimony, an anonymous woman who was ten years old at the time recounts the atmosphere in the city's streets where groups of anxious people were talking nervously about political events, along with the radio news. She was listening to the conversations of the adults, and realized there is a risk of war. She also felt her mother's restlessness and sadness. "I constantly pestered my mother with questions. Were the rumors about the war really true? My mother convinced me that they were not true, and asked me not to listen to the rumors."¹⁵

Traditional habits continued as usual in July and August of 1939. Many Jewish children spent those months on family vacations in the countryside. In the last days of summer, before the start of the school year in early September,

¹² Testimony of Peretz Hochman, USC Shoah Foundation (hereafter USC), interview code 7343.

¹³ In 1938, the Polish government revoked Polish citizenship from Polish Jews who had lived outside the country for an extended period of time. It was feared that many Polish Jews living in Germany and Austria would want to return en masse to Poland to escape anti-Jewish measures. In response, during the last weekend of October 1938, the German government forced approximately 17,000 Jews with Polish citizenship onto trains and transported them to the German-Polish border. Out of the 17,000 deportees, more than half (over 9,000) were taken to the town of Zbąszyń near the Polish-German border, where an internment camp was created. See Katharina Friedla, "From Nazi Inferno to Soviet Hell": Polish-Jewish children and youth and their trajectories of survival during and after World War II, *Journal of Modern European History* 19, no. 3 (2021): 277-278, doi: 10.1177/161189442110177; and Uta Larkey, "Fear and Terror: The Expulsion of Polish Jews from Saxony/Germany in October 1938," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 3 (2017): 243-260, doi: 10.1080/23256249.2017.1385844.

¹⁴ Testimony of Moshe Meler, USC, interview code 31945.

¹⁵ The Story of an Unknown Woman in the Warsaw Ghetto, Moreshet Archive, 9-1-3/023/000949. See also Testimony of Reva Kibort, USC, interview code 10862.

families planned to return to Warsaw. The end of the last vacation in the summer of 1939 had a different character than previous years because at that time, those Jews learned of the real possibility of war between Germany and Poland. Shimon Frost, a 15-year-old boy who spent the vacation with relatives in a town near Warsaw, told in his testimony that one morning they learned of a secret recruitment of reservists from the Polish army held during the night. "Of course, there was a bit of panic. People started hoarding food. We wanted to go home, but we called father, who was in Warsaw, and he said, 'It's all a war of nerves; there won't be a war.' So, we didn't return until a few days later."¹⁶

In the city of Warsaw, the recruitment of reserves also commenced in those days. On August 30, large advertisements appeared throughout the city announcing a general recruitment for reservists.¹⁷ Yohai Rametz, a 16-year-old boy, was ordered by his parents to prepare a small room as a shelter from toxic gases because they feared that they would be used similarly to the First World War. Within a few hours, they sealed windows, prepared the door for sealing, and taped paper strips on the windows to prevent them from breaking due to bomb blasts.¹⁸ On September 1, in the early morning, Warsaw resonated with loud explosions, and later, the radio officially declared the outbreak of war. These events took many children by surprise. Abrasha, a student of the educator Janusz Korczak, remarked,

A loud conversation woke me up. "What happened?" I asked and immediately felt uneasy. "War, mobilization." My mother replied with a trembling voice. Suddenly, my aunt burst into the room and said that at that moment she said goodbye to her neighbor who was drafted into the army. I noticed that his eyes were red. Father walked around the room and calmed everyone down. But I saw that he was nervous. I dressed quickly and went down to the street. There was movement and confusion. Mothers took their sons to the railway and wives took their husbands. There

¹⁶ Testimony of Shimon Forrest, YVA, O.3/6493.

¹⁷ During the September defense, over 120,000 Jews fought in the ranks of the Polish Army against the German invader. 32,216 of them died and 61,000 were taken prisoner. In 1938, Jewish soldiers made up 6.08 percent of the Polish Army. In 1939, almost 100,000 Jewish citizens were drafted, making up roughly 10 percent of the total number of deployed soldiers (approximately 7,000 were killed). This was about equal to the percentage of Jewish people to the general population in Poland in 1939. See Tomasz Gąsowski, "Żydzi w siłach zbrojnych II Rzeczypospolitej: czas pokoju i wojny," in *Udział mniejszości narodowych w różnych formacjach wojskowych w kampanii wrześniowej 1939 r.* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2009), 16; Marian Fuks, *Z dziejów wielkiej katastrofy narodu żydowskiego* (Poznań: Sorus, 1999), 313.

¹⁸ Yohai Remetz, *Remetz* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2006), 30–31.

were people standing everywhere talking about politics. I moved on. Suddenly, a car stopped at the corner and two Polish officers got out. They stopped all traffic and started taking horses and bicycles. There was the roar of sirens and the distant roar of a motorbike. “Raid, raid”!!! ... I started running home as fast as I could. I heard the sound of an exploding bomb and the response of machine guns and anti-aircraft guns. It was the first enemy raid. The next morning there was a second raid.¹⁹

During this period, the radio broadcasted warnings such as “Pay attention, pay attention, N-6, BD-23 is approaching” countless times. The townspeople were initially unfamiliar with these codes, but they quickly grasped that the Germans were advancing, seemingly without facing any resistance. Despite anticipating a response from the Allies, it was delayed. On September 3, the radio announced the imminent declarations of war by England and France, urging the public to demonstrate near the embassies of the Allies, a call heeded by many.²⁰ Frequent bombings confined them mostly to their homes, with communication limited to telephone conversations with family and friends. Obtaining information from the radio became impossible, and a few days later, newspapers ceased publication, leaving only short one or two-page leaflets. Simultaneously, stores quickly depleted their merchandise and shuttered.²¹

In the ensuing days, families hastily departed Warsaw. Some Jewish refugees fell victim to German plane attacks targeting masses of evacuees in the woods surrounding the city, while others managed to hide in ditches along the roads. Tragically, many families lost members, including children orphaned in the chaos.²² Additionally, waves of refugees arrived in Warsaw from cities and towns on the left side of the Vistula River, surviving machine gun fire from low-flying planes. Seeking safety away from the battlefield, refugees and their children embarked on journeys to find refuge. While some sought solace with family relatives, others believed a large city offered greater safety compared to smaller towns.²³ A committee report from 23 Nalewki Street recounted refugees witnessing horrific scenes, where bullets struck children before their eyes, forcing women to abandon wounded and deceased children in fields and seek refuge in

¹⁹ Abrasza, a pupil of Janusz Korczak’s Orphan Home (January 1941, Warsaw Ghetto), essay entitled “My Experiences from the War.” September 1939, YVA, AR.I/1066.

²⁰ Moorhouse, *Poland 1939*, 98–99.

²¹ Remetz, *Remetz*, 31–32.

²² Testimony of Nomi Kapel, USC, interview code 13162.

²³ Testimony of Bracha Kraverser, YVA, O.3/7691; Ada Rakots, USC, interview code 46055.

roadside ditches. Many children arrived without parents, having become separated on the journey, uncertain of their parents' fate.²⁴

On September 6, Colonel Roman Umiastowski, the chief officer in the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief, called all men able to carry arms to head east to organize resistance. Rumors of German brutality prompted even youths to depart.²⁵ It was not an easy decision for fathers, husbands and sons to leave their family beyond, but many were encouraged by their families to flee.²⁶ The father of 12-year-old Lili Binstock initially left but returned in the evening, asserting that whatever happened to his family would happen to him as well.²⁷ Some children experienced prolonged separation from fathers recruited for reserve service in the Polish army. Yehuda Glass, whose father was drafted weeks before the war, recalls the unsettling time when he was separated from his father. Only in the third week of the war did his father manage to return to Warsaw, summoned by a hospital.²⁸ Lidiyah Stamler, who was four at the time, recalls how even as a little girl she could feel the tension as her father, drafted into the Polish army, returned after the Germans had occupied Warsaw: "The paradise of the previous era ceased. My lively father became unhappy and tired. The atmosphere at home changed from joy to worry and fear. The pre-war happiness vanished, replaced by a confused, unsympathetic, and painful time."²⁹

The departure of fathers who either fled or were conscripted disrupted the childhoods of many children, bidding them farewell amidst the turmoil of war. Seven-year-old Ruth Levin's father fled due to rumors that men would be taken

²⁴ [Celina Lewin?], a memoir "W obleżonej Warszawie. Komitet Lokatorów przy ul. Nalewki 23" [In Warsaw besieged. The House Committee at Nalewki Street 23] (Warsaw ghetto, 1942), YVA, AR.I/209; Lea Preiss, *Displaced Persons at Home: Refugees in the Fabric of Jewish Life in Warsaw September 1939 – July 1942* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2015), 54–64.

²⁵ The mass flight from Warsaw to the east began on September 7. It was a spontaneous, panicked escape of civilians with no clear destination in mind. Most of the refugees in this flood of hundreds of thousands were young men, who left parents, wives, and young children behind in the city. A strong urge to flee also gripped the helpless Polish government. Rumor spread that under cover of darkness, and without giving a hint of their intentions, the government and senior officials had abandoned the capital. There were also special motives to escape the city. Some of the refugees, especially the young people, among them Jews who were active in the youth movements, moved eastward on the assumption that the Polish retreat would be halted in the eastern provinces and the front would stabilize there. In addition, most of the Jews who fled assumed even then that they would be particularly vulnerable to harm under the Nazi occupation and must therefore escape. See Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, 4.

²⁶ Binem Molyl, "To My Eventual Readers," memories, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (hereafter AŻIH) 302/206.

²⁷ Testimony of Lili Binstock, USC, interview code 59230.

²⁸ Testimony of Yehuda Glass, YVA, O.3/9112.

²⁹ Testimony of Lidiyah Stamler, USC, interview code 41787.

for forced labor upon the Germans' arrival. The sudden separation hurt her a lot: "Since then, I remember myself as grown up. My memory as a child end at the time of my father's departure. Actually, this is my short childhood – of a seven-year-old girl who had a good but very short childhood."³⁰ There were also children whose separation from their father was, in fact, a final farewell, and they never saw them again.³¹

Some of the children felt great pride in their father's enlistment and participation in the defense of Poland. Hanah Shori, who was five years old, recalls that one day her father came home and said that they had decided to recruit him. "We were happy, very proud. He wore a uniform and looked important and very handsome. Father was young and looked powerful and authoritative, with a belt and strap on his chest and a hat. He had shiny shoes."³² But there were children who were concerned, such as children of fathers who lacked military training. Roma Ben Atar, who was 13 years old, says that her father was drafted even though "he didn't know which side the gun was shooting from." Concerned for their loved ones' safety and facing limited communication, Ben Atar and her mother received a message about the father's whereabouts a few days after his enlistment. They walked a long distance together to bring him soap and food. Later, the mother went alone to deliver groceries to her partner but was unable to find him. When she retraced her steps, the bombings started again, and she lost her shoes while running away. "When she entered the house, she looked like a child who had never cut her nails or combed her hair. Her hair stood up and was black. We were all already sitting and crying because we thought she had been killed. Grandma and I started washing her hair, and she calmed down."³³

Other children had different experiences those days. Hana Avrutzki, who was eight years old, wrote in her memoirs that upon the arrival of the first news about the possibility of war, she wondered, "What is 'war'? Why should a war in Warsaw worry father and mother so much?" Later, she asked her family, "Why is Warsaw being attacked? What do the pilots flying over the city want from us? Why are they dropping bombs on us?"³⁴ Rachel Rotem, who was ten years old, encountered the war for the first time when she did not eat lunch at home, but

³⁰ Testimony of Ruth Levin, USC, interview code 46304.

³¹ Giora Bar Nir, *Hanura Hayeruka* [The Green Bulb], memories, Ghetto Fighters House Archive, 43502, 16–17.

³² Testimony of Hanah Shori, USC, interview code 47353.

³³ Testimony of Roma Ben Atar, YVA, O.3/7762.

³⁴ Hana Avrutzki and Gideon Greif, *Kochav Bin Tzlavim* [A Star Between Crosses] (Tel Aviv: Kineret, 1995), 16.

somewhere else, and when she returned home, she discovered that windows had been covered. According to her, “There was great excitement, great fear, which I did not understand.”³⁵

At 12, Vera Winnick experienced her first encounter with bombs and airplanes, vividly describing the unsettling event. Reflecting on the moment, she remarked, “I had never seen airplanes before, and when three of them came together, I thought at first: how nice. They made a terrible noise and threw bombs around our house.”³⁶ Six-year-old Halinah Saban, confused by the bombing, shared, “I didn’t understand what was happening. When the first bomb fell near our house, creating a large crater in the road, we all ran afterward to see it. That’s all I knew and felt about the change that had taken place.”³⁷

The children’s initial lack of understanding quickly turned into fear and anxiety as they were exposed to the noise of the bombs, the sirens of the alarms, and the whistles of the missiles. Florah Marder, who was eight years old, remembers the whistle, expressing the fear of the sounds: “When we heard the whistle, the heart also made a whistling sound.”³⁸ The children’s realization that reality had changed brought diverse reactions. Some viewed the beginning of the siege as an adventure. Arthur Ney, aged nine, recalls seeing German planes on the first day, finding it more thrilling than anything else. The subsequent stay in the basement and stairwell was seen as an exciting experience for him.³⁹ Others, like Yoram Mor, age nine, understood the war through a world of rich images drawn from books and movies: “I understood that it was a war like we saw in the movies, a lot of fire and shooting. My hobby was reading books, and that’s how I knew what war was.”⁴⁰

Christine Ranes, aged ten, noted that while adults screamed and were scared when bombs fell, for kids, it was kind of fun with gas masks and exciting games.⁴¹ The adults, finding themselves tasked with mediating the new reality to the children, also observed the younger generation’s enthusiasm for the war, highlighting a generational gap in understanding and internalizing the events. For instance, in his diary, the engineer Henryk Bryskier wrote:

³⁵ Testimony of Rachel Rotem, USC, interview code 39463.

³⁶ Testimony of Vera Winnick, USC, interview code 33075.

³⁷ Testimony of Halinah Saban, USC, interview code 25483.

³⁸ Testimony of Florah Marder, USC, interview code 37780.

³⁹ Testimony of Arthur Ney, USC, interview code 54493.

⁴⁰ Testimony of Yoram Mor, USC, interview code 33005.

⁴¹ Testimony of Christine Ranes, USC, interview code 31495.

The youth, as usual agitated and full of enthusiasm, did not sufficiently understand the danger, tragedy, sacrifices, and destruction that war brings... But the older ones, who had already been through one war, and even without being knowledgeable, could appreciate the enemy's power – continuously increasing its armament for years – showed no enthusiasm.⁴²

Many days after the shelling began, some children played games, sometimes encouraged by their parents. These games convey how children's play mirrored the reality of their surroundings. Shmuel Szajnkinder mentioned that on September 18, a few quiet hours from the bombings lifted everyone's mood in the building. "Even women went out into the sun with their children. People became refreshed, fed and gained courage. This is especially noticeable among children, they play and make noise as if they were at home."⁴³

The children were intrigued by the physical destruction, their attention captured by the scenes of devastation. Avraham Gopher, aged 12, was impressed by the intensity of the war's impact on buildings: "Houses of five or six stories were cut as if by a razor. I saw half a house spread out, all the bricks on the ground, and the rest of the house exposed. There were even pictures inside still hanging and not moving. These are amazing things, especially for a child."⁴⁴ Also, the postponement of the school year, which was a disappointment for some pupils, was good news for others.⁴⁵ Masha Putermilch, 15 years old at the time, recounted her early reaction: "My mother said, 'Why are you so happy? You don't know what war is.' I replied, 'So what, the war will continue for a while, and it will be over.' ... As a child, I couldn't describe what war is, but slowly I understood. That was my first encounter with the war."⁴⁶

The scope of the bombings and their devastating results quickly changed children's perception. Children in the siege devised various methods to handle the horrors and challenges they faced. They were compelled to grow up rapidly in the harsh conditions, leading them to adopt practical and sensible approaches. Despite their inability to alter their circumstances, children exhibited impressive resourcefulness in dealing with the difficulties and fears they confronted.

⁴² Henryk Bryskier, *Yehudey Varsha tachat tzalav ha'keres* [Jews Under the Swastika: The Warsaw Ghetto in the 20th century] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018), 41–42.

⁴³ Sz. Szajnkinder, Warsaw Ghetto (June 1942), *Zapiski dzienne z kampanii wrześniowej* (18–21.09.1939 r.), YVA, AR.I/252.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Avraham Gopher, YVA, O.3/9149.

⁴⁵ Testimony of Anna Mierzejewska, YVA, O.3/1257.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Masha Putermilch, YVA, O.3/7635.

Children reacted to the new conditions based on changed family circumstances and their interpretation of reality. This strategy for survival during the siege, both physically and psychologically, was to maintain a sense of inner rationality and normalcy. However, adhering to prewar standards of normality instead of the principles of rational behavior mandated by wartime conditions did not necessarily facilitate survival.

Jewish children found themselves cut off from their schooling frameworks, friends, and the rooms where they spent their childhood. The impact of war, for some, extended beyond mere physical displacement, ushering in an unexpected interruption to their carefree years and imposing new, weighty responsibilities. Reflecting on the stark transition, ten-year-old Estelle Laughlin recalled the moment of the first bombing: “In one second, I stopped being a child and took on myself the burden, the sad burden, of life. Inside, I remained a child. I am happy to report that, in my experience, children remain children at heart. That is the wonderful and magical thing about children.”⁴⁷

Many families, no longer feeling safe in their homes amidst the bombardment, sought refuge in various makeshift locations such as neighbors’ apartments, stairwells, building gates, and basements. Despite frequent relocations between these spaces, the ill-equipped basements, originally used for storing coal and wood, struggled to accommodate the influx of people.⁴⁸ The unfamiliarity of faces and the pervasive stench in these crowded areas troubled children. Some families, like Janina Bauman’s, initially resisted leaving their apartments. However, after enduring ten days of continuous bombings that disrupted utilities and shattered windows, they were compelled to abandon their homes. Describing the conditions in the prepared basement, Bauman highlighted the crowded, dirty, and cold environment where families from upper floors and homeless strangers were forced to share space on mattresses or sheets. The subterranean life began in musty air, lacking water and hot meals, with the constant awareness of the looming threat of fire or burial alive under an avalanche. The diverse group of people, both Jews and non-Jews, with varying means and circumstances, shared a common horror.⁴⁹

The new conditions and chaos forced parents not only to protect the physical well-being of their children but also to provide emotional and mental support. Bauman recounted an incident during a bombing where the stairwell was

⁴⁷ Testimony of Estelle Laughlin, USHMM, RG-50.999.0448.

⁴⁸ Testimony of Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman, USC, interview code 55228; Testimony of Arthur Ney, USC, interview code 54493.

⁴⁹ Janina Bauman, *Choref Baboker* [Winter in the Morning] (Tel Aviv: Zmura-Bitan, 1990), 36.

filled with homeless people seeking shelter. She vividly recalled the moans of women, the cries of children, and a mother standing nearby, embracing her three-year-old daughter while repeating almost mechanically, “Don’t cry, honey, you’re protected. Mother is with you.”⁵⁰ Other parents calmed their crying children, believing the pilots might hear them.⁵¹

Hana Avrutzki described the tension and anxiety that filled her heart following the sound of alarms. To feel safe during bombings, she held her mother’s hand.⁵² Children, in turn, tried to provide emotional support to their siblings. Thirteen-year-old Adam Mintz shared an experience in which his 17-year-old brother, not known for displays of concern, hugged and kissed him during heavy shelling. Facing the possibility of not surviving, his brother uttered a farewell statement: “We might die here.”⁵³ These instances highlight the limited options children had to protect themselves and their families, mirroring the challenges faced by their parents. Despite the dire circumstances, the support of the family circle proved significant for those grappling with helplessness and the inability to control the chaotic reality.

The search for protection extended beyond verbal and physical closeness to various attempts to stay in safe compounds. Some children believed that being near Polish soldiers stationed in yards and buildings would provide protection.⁵⁴ Others, however, thought being near Polish forces posed a risk and pleaded with their parents to seek shelter elsewhere.⁵⁵ The search for a safe place likely stemmed not only from fear but also from exposure to death, dead bodies, and mass graves. The children’s first encounter with death, in such a tangible and graphic way, became one of their most complex experiences during the siege.

Adam Mintz witnessed a gruesome incident where a Jewish man on the street was killed by a piece of iron from a shell. He also saw horse-drawn carts laden with the corpses of those killed by bombs or extracted from beneath the ruins of houses.⁵⁶ Ten-year-old Kalman Ofir similarly recalled the horror of seeing dead and martyred Poles gathered in the streets and transported away on

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁵¹ Testimony of Vera Winnick, USC, interview code 33075; Testimony of Anna Mierzejewska, YVA, O.3/1257.

⁵² Avrutzki and Greif, *Kochav Bin Tzlavim*, 17.

⁵³ Testimony of Adam Mintz, YVA, O.3/7278.

⁵⁴ Testimony of Jerzy Czyżewski, USHMM, RG-50.488.0139.

⁵⁵ See the interview of Pani K.R.: Cecylia Ślapakowa, Study: “The Jewish Woman in Warsaw from September 1939 to the Present [1942]” (Warsaw Ghetto, 1942), YVA, AR.I/49.

⁵⁶ Testimony of Adam Mintz, YVA, O.3/7278.

carts, an experience that deeply affected him as a child.⁵⁷ Basements, meant to provide refuge, housed children who survived bombings, while those in close proximity were not as fortunate, including strangers. Witnessing a dead person for the first time shocked and surprised the children. Hanah Shori, five years old, recounted an incident during a bombing when she sought shelter under a gate with strangers. It wasn't until later that she realized the woman next to her was already dead.⁵⁸ The encounter with death was an unfamiliar and unsettling experience for a child. Arthur Ney also shared his first encounter with death, recalling a wounded man bleeding, screaming, and crying. Although a bed was prepared for him near a wall, he passed away the morning the siege ended. Ney expressed the profound impact of seeing a dead body for the first time, highlighting the contrast with childhood games where pretend violence never resulted in actual death.⁵⁹

The experiences of war forced children not only to witness the tragic deaths of their relatives but also, in some instances, actively participate in their mass burials. Renata Zajdman, at age 13, helped burying her brother's fiancée in a courtyard because access to the Jewish cemetery was blocked.⁶⁰ Nine-year-old Mark Mandel participated in his father's body identification process and burial in a mass grave. "It was a traumatic experience for me; I was only nine years old, hearing shouts, cries, and screams, unable to comprehend living without a father. At that age, I suddenly grew up."⁶¹

Peretz Opoczyński⁶² referred in his records to children who lost both their parents. According to him, the bombs that fell on the streets where Jews lived "killed thousands of Jewish fathers and mothers... Only the children remained, confused, scared, torn, thrown into some kind of musty shelters; their eyes were wide open, large; they watched and did not understand, frantically searching for their validation..."⁶³ The children had not yet had time to digest the terrible loss and the first encounter with death and were already required to provide

⁵⁷ Testimony of Kalman Ofir, YVA, O.3/7493.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Hanah Shori, USC, interview code 47353.

⁵⁹ Testimony of Arthur Ney, USC, interview code 54493.

⁶⁰ Testimony of Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman, USC, interview code 55228.

⁶¹ Testimony of Mark Mandel, USHMM, RG-50.156.0035.

⁶² Peretz Opoczyński (1892–1943), a poet, writer, born in Lutomiersk near Łódź; in 1935 moved to Warsaw. In the interwar period he published in Yiddish and Hebrew. In the Warsaw ghetto he kept a diary, and wrote reports and stories about ghetto life. See the Introduction in Samuel D. Kassow, *In Those Nightmarish Days: The Ghetto Reportage of Peretz Opoczyński and Josef Zelkowitz* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2015), vii–li.

⁶³ Peretz Opoczyński, *Reshimot Migetto Varsha* [Sketches from the Warsaw ghetto] (Tel Aviv: Lochamei Hagetaot and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 1970), 160.

themselves with security and protection. The siege not only robbed them of the protections they needed, but also introduced them to a world where death became present at all times.

This also reflected in taking care of pets. Since animals disappeared, ran away, or hid, the children had to deal with the forced separation and were prevented from looking for the animal due to the danger of the bombings. Tova Peeri recalls that her nine-year-old sister had a cat. “She sat there the whole time with the cat in her arms, and every time a bomb fell, she said the Jewish prayer ‘Shema Israel’ without stopping. Suddenly the cat ran away from her, and she started crying, but she found him.”⁶⁴ Miriam Wexler, who was seven years old, recalls that during the bombings, she hid in the basement of her house along with many people. She remembers the crowding, the stench, and how she slept on a blanket spread on the floor. Along with all of this, she emphasized that “what saddened me the most was that my cat stayed upstairs. They didn’t agree to bring it down to the basement.”⁶⁵

Separation of children from their pet also occurred when the latter died in the bombings. Casimir Biebers, who was eight years old, says that on the last day of the bombings, he returned with his family to their home. “When we got home, I looked for my dog and I couldn’t find it. I cried. Someone left a note that the dog was buried in the yard.”⁶⁶ Nina Dinar, who was 13 years old, said that they had to kill her dog, because he howled non-stop, like a wolf. Her mother asked Polish soldiers who were in the yard to shoot the dog because it was impossible to keep it at home. For Dinar, this caused feelings of sadness and resentment. With the help of the gatekeeper’s son, she buried the dog on the corner of the street in a hole created by a bomb. According to her, “This is the first time I felt the war in my flesh. I loved him very much; I got him for my birthday at the age of eight. What do you mean my dog had to be killed? It hurt me.”⁶⁷

Amid these challenges, children endured days and hours in hiding, utterly defenseless against the threat of bombings. They coped with scarcity, hunger, and the fear of impending attacks. Whether alone, with one parent, or within a wider family circle, these resourceful children took initiatives that not only saved their own lives but sometimes the lives of surviving relatives. Even within their own community, children sought ways to support one another during this wartime period.

⁶⁴ Testimony of Tova Peeri, USC, interview code 16905.

⁶⁵ Testimony of Miriam Wexler, USC, interview code 43888.

⁶⁶ Testimony of Casimir Biebers, USC, interview code 12311.

⁶⁷ Testimony of Nina Dinar, USC, interview code 21898.

Various Struggles under the Siege

Many children who lost their families or couldn't return home had to seek temporary shelter. Some children escaped from burning and demolished houses, seeking refuge in buildings that were still intact, only to flee further afield within a few hours. Alone or with family, they moved from one hideout to another, sometimes for days. Some found refuge in basements, while others sought shelter with complete strangers.⁶⁸

Additionally, children took on active roles in their communities, often providing first-aid. Sometimes, children themselves took part in evacuating the wounded.⁶⁹ Thaddeus Gubala, who was 10 years old, tried together with others to rescue a man who was trapped behind locked doors. The attempt to pick the lock failed, and they were unable to save his life. He also participated in an attempt to save the life of a wounded man using improvised means. He located the rubber tubes from the gas stoves and used them as tourniquets to stop the bleeding. "We tried to save lives. People, wounded... we carried some of the wounded to the hospital... but every time we took them to the hospital, most of them bled to death. We couldn't save them."⁷⁰

There were also children who saved the life of one of the family members or relatives. Hana Avrutzki described how on the day of Warsaw's surrender, at the end of the bombings, she went to her cousin's house to locate her. She found that only half of the house was left intact and decided to go inside. She climbed the wreckage, wires, as bricks, planks, and building parts crumbled beneath her. After great efforts, she reached the second floor and entered what was left of the apartment. There, under an iron sink in the kitchen, she found her infant relative, who was left alone in the ruins and survived the siege. "I don't know where I had the strength to rescue one-year-old Tonka from that place and put her in my arms," she wrote. With the baby, she very carefully descended the falling stairs and managed to reach the street.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Testimony of Miriam Saadia, USC, interview code 5137; Blat Fajga, Responses to a survey ("What changes did we experience during the war?") from children from the half-boarding school in the Warsaw Ghetto at 25 Nowolipki Street (After September 1941), YVA, AR.I/39.

⁶⁹ It is estimated that during the siege of Warsaw, about 21,000 wounded were treated in hospitals. Approximately 12–15,000 others were outpatients. Among the wounded were civilian casualties and 16,000 soldiers, and many died of their wounds. Unclaimed bodies were buried in the hospital gardens. See Maria Ciesielska et al., *The Doctors of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2022), 60, doi: 10.1515/9781644697276.

⁷⁰ Testimony of Thaddeus Gubala, USHMM, RG-50.030.0783.

⁷¹ Avrutzki and Greif, *Kochav Bin Tzlavim*, 19–20.

Adult roles were played by children in the siege, like obtaining food.⁷² In the days leading up to the war, some Jews stockpiled enough food for the initial days or two weeks of the siege.⁷³ Others with means managed to store a significant amount of food from before the war. In some households, there were cherries specially bought for Rosh Hashanah Jewish holiday, which falls in September. In the first days of the bombings, stores began to be emptied and closed. While bakeries continued to operate, people lined up from early morning until the early hours to receive bread, facing life-threatening situations due to exposure to German planes. Sometimes those in line for bread were killed, yet others continued to queue next to the deceased.⁷⁴ Under these circumstances, children took initiatives to obtain food, making a crucial contribution to feeding their families. Agile and determined, these children's qualities served them in earning bread.

For example, Erner York, aged ten, mentioned that while his father and sister stood in line for hours with minimal success, he, being more resourceful, always managed to push forward.⁷⁵ Zeev Pachter, aged 17, felt obligated as the oldest sibling, standing in line at night to acquire food. This was also dangerous at times of bombing.⁷⁶ Esther Gluzman, a student, recounted an instance when she and her sister stood in line for bread during an alarm. The noise of approaching planes caused panic, and they rushed home under gunfire, leaving their anxious mother waiting.⁷⁷

Jewish children obtained food from various other sources, such as by entering bombed and abandoned food factories. Abraham Lewent, who was 15 years old, collected cans of pickles from a factory with his sister. The pickles were hot due to the fire that was burning, but he and his family managed to survive thanks to this for two weeks.⁷⁸ Moshe Meler, who was 17 years old, and his sister found

⁷² Jewish public organizations and institutions initiated urgent aid operations for the thousands of Jews affected. Adolf Berman, a public activist, noted that CENTOS launched a feverish action to assist new orphans, homeless Jewish children, and refugee children. The immediate task was to provide children with food and shelter. For instance, the house committee at 23 Nalewki Street set up a kitchen and sanitary center to serve refugees, and tenants donated money for these efforts in the first ten days of the war. See Adolf Berman, *Bamakom Asher Yeed Li Hagoral* [In the Place Destined for me by Fate] (Lohamei HaGeta'ot: Beit Lohamei HaGeta'ot, 1977), 51.

⁷³ Testimony of Tula Khodin, YVA, O.3/6628.

⁷⁴ Testimony of Moshe Meler, USC, interview code 31945.

⁷⁵ Hanan Elstein, *Yaldey Hamilchama: 1944–1948* [The Children of War 1944–1948: Children's Testimonies of the Holocaust] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, Hemed, Aliyat Gag, 2014), 30–31.

⁷⁶ Testimony of Zeev Pachter, USC, interview code 31902.

⁷⁷ Esther Gluzman (After October 1, 1941), Essays written by students of the public primary school at ul. Nowolipki 68, Warsaw Ghetto, YVA, AR.I/337.

⁷⁸ Testimony of Abraham Lewent, USC, interview code 13308.

an abandoned food factory and managed to enter it, but they couldn't carry the food with them. "I began to think in terms of an adult... I had a personal initiative for the first time. I had a long coat, opened a section on the inside, in the lining under the sleeves, and pushed food in there. It just shows how quickly a person is able to absorb such things."⁷⁹

Many of the starving city residents were fed the meat of horses killed in the bombings. The sight of the dead horses on the side of the road shocked children who saw this sight repeatedly, and they were reluctant to take the meat to eat. Adelya Zilbershats, who was 14 years old, saw someone cutting meat from a dead horse and did not want to take the meat herself. She finally took a piece with great trepidation and brought it to her mother. The mother cooked the meat outside and let people with small children eat it.⁸⁰

Getting drinking water was also difficult since the water pipes in the buildings had burst. Sometimes water came out of the pits caused by the bombings, and the tenants would boil and drink it. Zilbershats had a broken bucket to which she tied an iron, and she went with her brother to the Vistula River to fetch water, a long distance from their home. They succeeded in this only partially because the bucket was heavy, and some of the water spilled on the way. Jewish children carrying buckets of water encountered Polish children or bullies who would attack them, beat them, steal the buckets or spilt the water.⁸¹ The food situation was critical. Scavenging, even pilfering, were commonplace.⁸²

Although the water they managed to bring was boiled, it was not safe to drink, and some children contracted dysentery. Water was also essential for maintaining hygiene and cleaning the body, but due to the shortage, many were prevented from bathing for weeks. Avrutzki's grandmother made sure that the family members cleaned themselves using the one bowl of water that was available to them. They dipped a towel and rubbed the body with it in turns: first the child, followed by the grandmother, the mother, and finally the father.⁸³ Only some of the Jews washed their clothes because they had no clothes to change. In houses that were not damaged, there was a kind of large "kettle" for washing, which was done by women. The men stood in a line, and together they took the pots and walked in long lines to the Vistula. Eight-year-old Stanislaw Soszynski

⁷⁹ Testimony of Moshe Meler, USC, interview code 31945.

⁸⁰ Testimony of Adelya Zilbershats, USC, interview code 7861. See also testimony of Zeev Rozenberg, USC, interview code 48786.

⁸¹ Testimony of Adelya Zilbershats, USC, interview code 7861.

⁸² Moorhouse, *Poland 1939*, 240.

⁸³ Avrutzki and Greif, *Kochav Bin Tzlavim*, 17.

said that “these problems made people all the stronger; nothing unites like misfortune. Joy can divide, while unhappiness brings people together. This scene was as if from a shocking dream.”⁸⁴

Children also played an important part in removing family belongings and possessions from the burning apartments. However, this possibility was not faced by every child, as there were some who fled their burning homes and were left with only the clothes on their bodies. Some of those items had sentimental or financial value to one or more family members. The rescue of the property was initially done while running away from the house, under the bombs. Nechama Fahan also remembers that at the last moment before the house burned down, her father jumped into the burning house to take out a picture of her sister who was in mandatory Palestine.⁸⁵ Zilbershats told that immediately after a bomb hit their house, their apartment on the first floor began to burn. She wanted to go inside the house to take some things, and even though she couldn’t, she refused to give up:

I had some rope, I tied it to the iron, and I went up to the house. I closed my mouth and took a few things: a pot, flour and salt, a blanket and clothes. What I could get, I put in a bag. Also, potatoes and bread that I threw to my brother and sister. There was a lot of smoke, and everything was burning. I took a few things that could be saved, and then I got down from the window. I wanted to go up again, but I couldn’t because everything caught fire.⁸⁶

Children also participated in removing goods from their families’ stores and factories. Abraham Lewent testified that his father sent him to help relatives save items from the textile factory they owned. They walked down the street with the soles of their shoes burning from the heat but managed to get the goods out in a cart.⁸⁷ Even during breaks from the bombs, there were children who went into their houses to look for objects, clothes, or kitchen utensils. Peretz Hochman recalled how his mother sent him to their apartment on the fourth floor to get something. Then a shell fell in the house, and he fell a floor and a half. After he recovered, he went down to the basement and told his family about what happened.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Testimony of Stanislaw Soszynski, USHMM, RG-50.030.0217.

⁸⁵ Testimony of Nechama Fahan, YVA, O.3/7006.

⁸⁶ Testimony of Adelya Zilbershats, USC, interview code 7861.

⁸⁷ Testimony of Abraham Lewent, USC, interview code 13308.

⁸⁸ Testimony of Peretz Hochman, USC, interview code 7343.

Throughout the month of September, children found ways to cope up with the new situation. Children kept playing, for example, even few days before the end of the siege, on September 25, when bombardment from planes and guns began and continued non-stop throughout the day, night and the next day and night. According to diarist Stanisław Sznapman, “Women lamented and children cried. They prayed aloud, kneeling on the doorsteps of their homes.”⁸⁹

There were children whose prayers helped them cope with the difficulty. Pnina Weiss wrote in her memoirs that on the second day of the war, she was playing with her son Moshe at their home when the noise of airplanes and an alarm sounded. “Moshe was afraid, but he was quiet. I told him that there was nothing to be afraid of, and I said with him a prayer that he used to say before going to bed since he was three years old – ‘God will save us and protect from all evil’ (and kissed the Mezuzah).” She believed this helped him overcome his fear, and from then on, when he heard the noises, he repeated the prayer.⁹⁰ Older children participated in public prayers and kept the Jewish traditions with their family as a sort of attempt to maintain a certain routine, especially because in those days, the Jewish Tishrei holidays took place. The attack during the holy days, on late September, was centered on the northern part of Warsaw, especially on the Jewish district, leading many Jews to believe the Germans bombed the Jewish district with intention.⁹¹

Poria Sokel, who was 13 years old, fasted on the Day of Atonement, and she remembers that before the fast, she was given a slice of bread. However, the bombings made the halachic existence of these religious practices difficult for Jews. Ten-year-old Rachel Rotem participated in a prayer held in her home when the Germans bombed massively the Jewish streets. “I was seized with anxiety. People wrapped in prayer shawls, women in the kitchen praying. Suddenly bombs fell, and people didn’t know what to do during prayer.”⁹²

⁸⁹ Stanisław Sznapman, “Diary from the Ghetto,” AŻIH, 302/198.

⁹⁰ Pnina Weiss, *Zichronot: 1939–1940* [Memories: 1939–1940] (Jerusalem: The Family Publishing, 2011), 75.

⁹¹ Testimony of Shlomo Gazit, YVA, O.3/8262. Before World War II, there was no precisely defined “Jewish district” in Warsaw; in the nineteenth century, bans on Jews settling in some city streets were lifted. In 1919, the percentage of the Jewish population only in Muranów exceeded 90% of the inhabitants, in Powązki it reached 80%, and in Grzybów, Leszno and the vicinity of the Town Hall it fluctuated around 50%. A large concentration of Jewish people also lived in the area of Grzybowska, Krochmalna and Twarda streets further south. The name of the Jewish district or the northern district was only customary – Jews lived in all other districts of left-bank and right-bank Warsaw. The most densely populated area of Nalewki Street was an easy and large target for German bomb attacks. See Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, 5–6.

⁹² Testimony of Rachel Rotem, USC, interview code 39463.

Children also took an active role in civil defense, digging trenches or building barricades and carrying messages.⁹³ Already in the days leading up to the outbreak of war, Jewish youth were mobilized to defend the city against a potential German invasion. Alongside men and women of various ages, both Jewish and non-Jewish, many actively participated in the construction of barricades in the streets. Nine-year-old Renata Zajdman, for example, spent days during August 1939 digging trenches with a shovel and learning how to wear a gas mask.⁹⁴ This mobilization wasn't merely spontaneous; it was organized and guided by the Air Defense League [Liga Obrony Powietrznej i Przeciwgazowej, LOPP] that had existed in Poland between the two world wars. Military Training [PW] was introduced as a compulsory subject in high schools in 1937, with the aim of preparing young people of pre-conscription age so that they could perform shortened military service in the future.⁹⁵ Another organization that played a significant role in preparing society for war was the Polish Scouting Association. This was a national-civic education and a patriotic activity. In 1938, this organization had 290,000 members aged ten to nineteen. The scouting movement focused on preparing youth to defend the country in the event of war, with particular attention given to training young people in observation and reporting, firefighting, and emergency response. These are just a few examples of how Warsaw had been anticipating war for years.⁹⁶

Through radio broadcasts, the mayor rallied citizens to defend themselves, especially as the city's police force had been mobilized for battle. As a result, virtually every apartment building was turned into an anti-aircraft defense unit, and volunteers were organized to distribute food.⁹⁷ Each quarter or block had volunteers with armbands who had the authority to distribute instructions. Before the siege commenced, they could compel tenants to evacuate their apartments and seek shelter in the basements, enforce blackout conditions, and monitor those suspected of collaborating with the enemy, such as tenants who violated lighting restrictions – viewed as signals to German planes. They also ensured the presence of sandbags and water on staircases in case of fires, and guarded against

⁹³ Richard C. Lukas, *Did the Children Cry? Hitler's War Against Jewish and Polish Children, 1939–1945* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 12–13.

⁹⁴ Testimony of Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman, USC, interview code 37068.

⁹⁵ Rozwadowski and Ignatowicz, *Boje o Warszawę*, 35.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38. See also Biskupska, *Survivors*, 26–27, 38–39.

⁹⁷ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 216.

looting in abandoned apartments.⁹⁸ Individuals like Mordechai Goldhacht, affiliated with the Scouts youth movement and volunteering for LOPP, found a sense of purpose and military duty at the war's onset. He was issuing orders and participating in various tasks related to defense.⁹⁹ This voluntary activity was fraught with danger. Nathan Janower, who was 16 years old, spent a month in a Polish hospital after being injured while digging in the street. "The nurse said later that everyone on the street was quiet, but I screamed, and that's how they realized I was alive... I couldn't walk and move my arm... The doctor said I was lucky my bones weren't hurt."¹⁰⁰

For many children and teens, war brought with it exciting opportunities and the chance to prove themselves as full adult members of society, to enact the heroic ideals on which they had been raised, and to play a role in the latest act of Poland's struggle to remain an autonomous and independent state.¹⁰¹ In writings addressing Jewish-Polish relations during the war, Emanuel Ringelblum, the founder of the underground archive *Oneg Shabbat*, emphasized the significant role played by the youth in defending the city. He described how youths in various blocks, including numerous Jews, combated relentless attic fires using sand and water collected from bathrooms. Under German pilot attacks, they removed incendiary bombs, fostering unity amidst wartime chaos.¹⁰² The immense willingness of Jewish children to participate in the defense of the city demonstrates not only their unique characteristics as a group, but also reflects broader connections between Jews and Poles in Warsaw and Poland as a whole. Both Jews and Poles cooperated together, and for some Jewish youths, this was their first encounter with gentiles, including young Poles.¹⁰³

The issue of Jewish children during the siege is closely connected to the special character that Jewish-Polish relations took on during those days. At the

⁹⁸ See more about LOPP in Paweł Piotrowski, "Liga Obrony Powietrznej i Przeciwigazowej na Mazowszu w latach 1928–1939," *Rocznik Towarzystwa Naukowego Płockiego* 7 (2015): 222–252.

⁹⁹ Testimony of Mordechai Goldhacht, YVA, O.3/8471.

¹⁰⁰ Testimony of Nathan Janower, USC, interview code 54389.

¹⁰¹ Erica L. Tucker, *Remembering Occupied Warsaw: Polish Narratives of World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 51.

¹⁰² Emanuel Ringelblum et al., *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974), 26.

¹⁰³ According to Jeff Koerber, Jewish children grew increasingly isolated from their gentile neighbors' children once they entered school. Only those attending an integrated Polish public school spent time with gentiles. See Jeff Koerber, "Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Prewar Poland as Holocaust Sources," in *Agency and the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Deborah Dwork*, ed. Thomas Kühne and Mary Jane (Cham: Springer International, 2020), 23, 26, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-38998-7.

onset of the war, the majority of Jews in Poland set aside previous conflicts and stood alongside the Polish populace to defend their struggling homeland. They fostered a deep sense of unity with the Polish nation. Jews perceived the days of the campaign as a collective experience shared by both Jews and Poles, now confronting a common enemy.¹⁰⁴ The siege intermingled Varsovians in ways unimaginable in peacetime. Old antagonisms were temporarily suspended of necessity and pre-war political parties, social classes, and ethnic groups cooperated under siege. Polish antisemitism fluctuated as Christian and Jewish communities cooperated.¹⁰⁵ Jews joined in the military and civil mobilization and were relieved to note that, at least in this supreme crisis, they could find a degree of acceptance as fellow citizens.¹⁰⁶ They believed that equality between Jews and Poles, which would certainly develop further during the course of the war, would change the face of Poland and strengthen the position of the Jews in the country.¹⁰⁷

Although the issue of Polish-Jewish relations is truly complex and multi-layered, its dynamics before and during the siege are crucial for understanding the broader context. Polish Jews represented the second-largest minority in pre-war Poland, a community with 800 years of history, and, in many cases, were considered both a religious and national minority by themselves and the Poles. On the eve of World War II, the Jewish population in Poland was the largest in Europe, constituting about ten percent of the total population.¹⁰⁸ Between the two world wars, Polish Jews maintained complex and often tense relations with the majority society. Tensions heightened, especially in the second half of the 1930s, as antisemitism grew.¹⁰⁹ However, this tension eased somewhat in the year before the war began, as Poland came to see Nazi Germany, with its immediate threat to the country's borders, as the true enemy.

As the siege neared its end, the spirit of the populace had been devastated. The people of Warsaw not only denounced the Germans but also complained

¹⁰⁴ Havi Dreifuss (Ben-Sasson), *Relations between Jews and Poles during the Holocaust: The Jewish Perspective* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2017), 39–41.

¹⁰⁵ Biskupska, *Survivors*, 22, 40.

¹⁰⁶ Bernard Wasserstein, *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 425.

¹⁰⁷ Dreifuss, *Relations between Jews and Poles*, 45.

¹⁰⁸ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution: 1933–1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 217–218.

¹⁰⁹ Jews experienced economic oppression in Poland during those years. For example, a 1938 Polish law made it nearly impossible for Jews to enter the legal profession. The boycott of Jewish businesses intensified, and Jewish workers were increasingly excluded from employment. Discriminatory enforcement of regulations against Jewish bakers, porters, and slaughterhouse workers, among others, further pushed Jews out of these trades. See Wasserstein, *On the Eve*, 404.

about their own administration for abandoning and forsaking its citizens to face their grim fate. The prevailing sentiment appeared to be that continuing was futile, as within a few days, the whole city would be inundated with devastation and mortality. It was in this time of resentment and hopelessness that the brief occurrence of Jewish-Polish solidarity, which had emerged from the prewar political turmoil and peaked during the construction of the trenches, began to show signs of fracture. In the closing days of the siege, hostility resurfaced.¹¹⁰

Warsaw's month-long resistance against the German airstrikes ultimately fell short, yet it cultivated a profound sense of solidarity among the residents, instilling in them a feeling of valorous and distinctive struggle.¹¹¹ Warsaw's Jewish residents believed that the stand during the siege was possible, among other factors owing to the cooperation between Jewish and Polish members in city's civil forces and in part to the many Jews who volunteered for help.¹¹² Similar to the Jewish soldiers in the Polish army who demonstrated loyalty to Poland through their participation in the war, Jewish children took on semi-military roles and volunteered for the struggle for Warsaw. This is important because this active involvement of children reflects another aspect of Jewish-Polish relations during that period.

On September 28 the guns fell silent. The German army had not yet entered the city, and Warsaw was in the grip of chaos and anxious expectation. As the citizens of Warsaw left their shelters and poured into the streets, the scene that spread out before them was shattering. About 25 percent of the city's buildings had been totally destroyed or badly damaged. It is estimated that about fifty thousand people had been killed or injured. The streets were covered with dust, heaps of ruins, and the carcasses of horses. Diaries and memoirs of the period repeat over and over again the lament that arose when the full extent of the damage was finally assimilated: the beautiful Warsaw all had known was lost forever.¹¹³ Two days after the city had fallen, the Nazi forces still had not entered Warsaw. Mobs broke into warehouses and made off with anything that came to hand. The homeless went out in search of shelter, and those fortunate enough to have a roof over their heads scrambled around in search of food for their families.¹¹⁴ Following the German occupation of the city, they immediately initiated anti-Jewish measures that disrupted the communal urban environment. In the

¹¹⁰ Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, 7.

¹¹¹ Biskupska, *Survivors*, 23.

¹¹² Dreifuss, *Relations between Jews and Poles*, 50–51.

¹¹³ Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, 8.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

early weeks and months, they enforced a new racial and spatial hierarchy that marginalized Jewish Varsovians and deepened the divide between them and the gentile population.

Conclusion

Children survivors often identified themselves as adults, aware of the responsibilities they had undertaken despite their young age. These children, unaccustomed to death, faced its harsh reality for the first time during the siege. Born after the First World War, they had only heard about the horrors of war but had never experienced it firsthand. The testimonies of those who were children during this period reveal the significant impact of the siege, marking a month of extreme transition from a free life to one under occupation.

During the siege of Warsaw in September 1939, Jewish children employed various survival strategies to cope with the harrowing conditions. The relentless bombings and artillery attacks forced many to constantly seek temporary shelters, moving from one hideout to another, often with their families but sometimes alone. Basements and makeshift shelters with strangers became common refuges. The resilience and resourcefulness of these children were remarkable, as they adapted quickly to their new reality.

This period of upheaval was a critical breaking point for Jewish children in Warsaw. Not only were their lifestyles severely disrupted, but many also experienced separation from at least one parent, usually the father. This initial month, between the summer of 1939 and the beginning of German rule, forced children to rapidly adapt to new and harsh realities. As we examine the survival strategies that emerged, it becomes clear that children played crucial roles in their families' survival efforts.

Children felt a profound sense of responsibility towards their families, a stark contrast to their lives before the war. They demonstrated agency, making choices and taking actions that significantly impacted their survival and that of their loved ones. Separated from friends, dislocated from their homes, and often witnessing the suffering of family members, Jewish children in Warsaw endured a profound disruption of their childhood.

These experiences also reveal the bravery and significant initiatives taken by the children. They sought solace and strength, demonstrating a deep understanding of their circumstances and taking practical actions to ensure their survival and help others. Through their perspective, we gain a unique insight into their daily struggles and resilience during the Holocaust.

This article has provided a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of children during the Holocaust, focusing on their survival strategies. By highlighting their efforts to survive the challenges of the Second World War, we see how they rose to these challenges and played a crucial role in their family's survival. This discussion emphasizes the varied survival strategies employed by children and the importance of their testimonies in understanding this period.

The experiences of these children during the siege also increased their knowledge and strategies for survival, which became crucial once the Germans took over Warsaw. Their ability to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity showcases their remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Children also took on active roles within their communities, providing first aid, tending to the wounded, and assisting in makeshift hospitals set up in the ruins of the city. The combination of mobility, community involvement, and resourcefulness defined the survival strategies of Jewish children during the siege, showcasing their ability to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity.

The comprehensive picture presented here is a starting point for further exploration of the diverse experiences during the Holocaust. The validity of these conclusions should be examined in relation to broader circles of experience, such as comparing the topic with other cities under siege. There is potential for further research that could present a more expansive picture of the diverse experiences during the Holocaust, narrating a broad and intricate story that needs to be explored, deepened, and expanded. This approach allows us to pave the way for investigating the history of Jewish children in Poland during the Holocaust, particularly in times of crisis.