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Captivated by Another Chance: Everyday Practices and Survival Strategies of Jewish Children in the Occupied Mariupol (1941–1943)

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Abstract: In October 1941, about 9,000 Mariupol Jews experienced the last minutes of their lives in anti-tank ditches in the village Ahrobaza. Within a year all that was repeated though on a smaller scale. However, at that time the main target was primarily the descendants of heterogeneous marriages. The proposed research is focused on Jewish children who managed to survive after shootings in Ahrobaza and avoid further extermination in Mariupol Gestapo torture chambers. I will focus on children's understanding of life hazards and death as well as on the transformation thereof as a result of traumatic practices of genocide of Mariupol's Jewish population. Children who were rescued or who escaped the Ahrobaza ditches on their own were forced to hide, lose touch with their homes and families, change their names, lie about their identity and become grown-up much earlier than their coevals before the war. Analysis of oral evidence to all those sufferings makes it possible to identify typical survival strategies of Jewish children in occupied Mariupol, to identify their dependence on types of traumatic experiences and to inscribe it into a broader context of social history of Jewish childhood under the conditions of Nazi occupation.

Keywords: mariupol; holocaust; jewish community; occupation regime; Ukraine; survival strategies

Many of those who survived the Holocaust in Mariupol refer to the city as a railroad deadlock, a point of no return. About 9,000 Jews remained in that deadlock forever. We will hardly ever find out the exact number of the victims of the first wave of shootings in the Ahrobaza anti-tank ditches, since complete exhumation of remnants was not carried out and because the Nazis did not count their victims. We know even less about Jewish children who died in 1941–1943 in Mariupol, since the investigations of the

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Extraordinary State Commission that served as the main source of information intentionally left the nationality of the victims unmentioned.

This brings to the foreground a different set of sources that has recently been found by researchers, such as oral evidence located mainly in the Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation. Just a few decades ago, it was difficult to carry out research on Jewish children in Mariupol during the Nazi occupation due to a lack of sources and the fragmentary character thereof. Because many Holocaust survivors were children at the time, the credibility of their oral testimony was questioned. Even nowadays, researchers ask to what extent can we rely on children's evidence, especially when given by those who have endured such profound psychological trauma (Vromen 2008; Cohen et al 2017; Bartrop and Grimm 2020; Sliwa 2021; Segal 2023; Pataricza 2023; Buser 2025).

Furthermore, the topic of childhood under the conditions of the Holocaust was taboo due to researchers' uncertainty of children's agency, i.e., the uncertainty of their ability to adequately perceive the reality and to respond to it accordingly (Tomchuk 2023, 90–91). I consider that this aspect is not important in the context of my research. I will only attempt to demonstrate the multitude of social roles that Mariupol children "tried on" for themselves in the struggle for survival. The analysis addresses not the agency of the Jewish children as such, but the characteristics of the circumstances that formed this agency or its absence.

Jewish childhood in occupied Mariupol, along with the perceptions of the youngest victims and witnesses of the war and the Holocaust, has not yet been researched. The social history of Mariupol's Jewish population was written mainly by local ethnographers, whose work lacked methodological rigor but still helped to spread knowledge about Nazi genocidal practices in the occupied city (Yarutskyy 1996).

Sections about the history of children are also available in numerous overviews published by Ukrainian historians (Tytarenko 2008; Radchenko 2017; Romantsov et al. 2018). Those overviews present attempts to form an understanding of the scale of anti-Semitic repressions in Mariupol in 1941–1943. This study does not reconstruct the chronology of the genocide in Mariupol, but examines how the youngest victims and witnesses of the Holocaust sensed the tragic reality that confronted the Jewish community in October 1941.

When it comes to the general context of the social history of the Jewish population during the Holocaust in Mariupol and Ukraine as a whole, Anglo-American and German historiography on this issue is extremely concise. In the context of Mariupol, the monograph by Andrej Angrick deserves special mention as the most concise overview of Nazi occupation policy towards the Jews of Mariupol (Angrick 2003). In general, the attention of researchers studying the Holocaust in Ukraine shifted towards the west and south-west of Soviet Ukraine, which was part of the occupation zone of the Third Reich and its allies. For example, there are a large

number of publications concerning Western Ukraine, Transnistria, and Bukovina (Steinhart 2010; Bartov 2014; Tibon 2016; Wade Beorn 2018; Elias 2019; Barbulescu 2025; Abakunova 2025) and literally a few texts about the Holocaust in South-Eastern Ukraine, not to mention the modern Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast (Lada & Monteath 2017). So far, Western scholarship has tended to focus on the Holocaust in western Ukraine. This may be connected to the more rapidly executed extermination of Jews in the eastern part of the country. It is possible that Western researchers were deterred by the limited source base concerning the eastern regions of Soviet Ukraine. A significant part of Nazi documentation was not preserved due to fierce fighting and the rapid retreat of Axis troops. Documentation from western regions has been preserved much better due to its proximity to the capital of the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*.

The hypothesis of the present publication lies in the perception of survival strategies of Mariupol's Jewish children as a set of factors not linked to identifying methods of rescuing children from persecution. I will try to answer the question about how the social contexts in which a child grew up influenced their choice of a particular survival strategy. The study focuses on the thoughts and emotions provoked in children by the sudden disruption of daily life caused by the war and the Nazi occupation of Mariupol, and on the relationships between the behavioral patterns of adults and children.

Children have always had to pay farewell to their childhood and many of them were not glad about another chance their fortune gave them. Joanna Michlic mentioned the despair that children who survived Nazi persecution were faced with. The researcher mentioned attempts of suicide when children understood what exactly they had lost in those years (Michlic 2024, 274). No similar cases have been identified in my research. However, I was trying to avoid the practices of glorification in the public discourse of stories told by children who had survived the Shoah, since reticence of the dark sides in those stories will just facilitate further distortion of the memory of Jewish childhood on the frontline.

1 Source Selection and Research Question

In this article, I will use key terms from Holocaust studies such as "witnesses," "survivors," and "survival strategies." A detailed analysis of historiographical debates about the essence of these concepts is beyond the scope of my research, but I consider it necessary to define these terms, based on the most authoritative reference works on Holocaust studies (Lexikon des Holocaust 2002; Edelheit et al 2019; Fischel 2020).

According to the *Historical Dictionary of the Holocaust* by Jack R. Fischel, the category "Holocaust survivors" applies to any Jew who lived under the Nazi regime or a regime that collaborated with the Nazis. This also includes Jews who escaped from occupied territories or death camps, were forced to hide with the help of non-Jews, and Jews who participated in the partisan movement (Fischel 2020, 305). Thus, we are talking about categories of the Jewish population that were potentially subject to extermination but managed to avoid it in various ways.

The category of "witness" during the Holocaust applies only to non-Jews who witnessed anti-Jewish repression, including mass killings. My research uses both the testimonies of "survivors" (interviews recorded by the Shoah Foundation) and "witnesses" (interviews recorded as part of the Yahad-In Unum project). Based on the definition of "Holocaust survivors," we can define the category "survival strategy," which boils down to the actions that enabled Jews to stay alive under the Nazi policy of exterminating the Jewish population.

Since most of the source base for my research consists of oral narratives of Holocaust survivors recorded as part of the Shoah Foundation project, it is necessary to analyze the methodology and conditions of interviewing. The interviews used in this article were recorded between October 1996 and October 1998, with most of them collected by Evgenia Litinskaya in towns and villages in the Donetsk Oblast (Ukraine), although the project's geographical scope extended far beyond the borders of the former USSR.

In general terms, the interview outline was as follows: introduction of the narrator and their family, childhood, education, social context, memories of historical events prior to World War II (Jewish pogroms, famine, repression), the Holocaust (the central storyline), post-war life, photos, drawings, memorabilia, and general comments. As a rule, the key questions of the interview were identical for all narrators, which was done to facilitate the processing and presentation of the interviews by linking them to a specific system of tags and metadata. However, it is worth noting the influence of each interviewer's individual style. For example, Evgenia Litinskaya, mentioned above, strictly followed the project questionnaire and all her records are structured in the same way (Braginskaia 1997; Braginskii 1997; Kontareva 1998; Leibovich 1998; Ob'edkova 1998; Pogorelova 1998; Ponomarev 1998; Rykhlikova 1998; Serdiuk 1998; Shabanova 1998; Sidun 1998; Sukhovalov 1998; Tsyganskaia 1997). At the same time, Leonid Smilovitsky, who worked in Israel, interfered minimally in the narrative and allowed interviewees to digress from the main storyline (Kuznetsov 1997).

The range of sources that help shed light on the problem of how the Holocaust was perceived by its youngest victims is not limited to oral testimonies. To recreate as comprehensive a picture as possible of pre-war, occupied Mariupol, I also used

materials from Soviet investigative commissions, narrative sources, regional newspapers, and statistics.

Investigative commissions began working in Mariupol almost immediately after Nazi troops were pushed out of the city in the autumn of 1943. These early examples of Soviet investigations mentioned only "peaceful Soviet citizens" and seldom Jews as victims. Nevertheless, these documents, preserved in several versions, give a general impression about the chronology of the occupation of Mariupol (Akty; Materialy; Materyaly). The materials from the post-war trials of Mariupol collaborators (Nikolai Komrovsky and Petro Bordichevsky) are much more specific in nature, with a significant part of them covering the extermination of children from mixed marriages (autumn 1942). I used German copies of these cases, stored in the German Federal Archives (Aussagen).

Narrative sources include the widely known and frequently published diary of student Sarra Gleikh (Gleikh 1997) and the previously unknown memoirs of Jewish soldier Boris Pruder (Materialy). They present the most complete picture of everyday life in Mariupol under occupation, significantly clarifying and supplementing the chronology of mass shootings covered in the materials of the investigative commissions. The Ukrainian-language newspaper *Mariupol's'ka hazeta*, published by the Mariupol city administration during the Nazi occupation, resolutely distanced itself from and carefully concealed the policy of extermination of Jews pursued by the occupying administration. But the results of the city's census published in the newspaper, compared with pre-war statistics, give grounds for conclusions about the scale of the Holocaust in Mariupol (Mariupol's'ka hazeta 1942). These materials also supplement German reports on the operational situation in Mariupol, stored in the German Federal Archives (Operational situation report).

This research operates with a shift in focus from traditional archival sources to oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors from Mariupol. The range of problems in Jewish children's everyday life under German occupation requires broader personification than can be offered to a researcher by materials from Soviet crime investigation committees. These materials stored in archival collections of the former USSR countries and in Germany remain indispensable in terms of reconstruction of the background and the chronology of mass extermination of Mariupol's Jewish community yet they are too rigid to identify the survival strategies of Jewish children and to reconstruct childhood in the occupied frontline city.

In terms of methodology, I drew on the work of Natalia Aleksiun, who likewise sought to identify thematic patterns in her research on the regional dimension of gender roles during the Holocaust. In particular, Aleksiun ascertained that reconstruction of everyday history of the Jewish population under the conditions of genocidal policy carried out by the Nazi occupation regime could also be based on the existing ego-documents and on oral stories told by survivors (Aleksiun 2014, 39).

In this context, the findings of Peter Suedfeld's team, based on oral narratives from the late 1990s, should be considered. They emphasized that there is a great probability that memories of childhood during of the Holocaust are not impartial reflections of children's feelings since those stories are formed by a mature individual at the time of an interview. Evidence given by individuals who survived the Holocaust create an illusion as though a victim were evaluating various stages of survival, combining their best components for the purpose of choosing the most efficient method of achieving the main goal: preservation of life. The question is whether that was really the way it happened or the decisions to do this or that were most likely to be made spontaneously (Suedfeld et al 1998).

In researching the problem of Jewish childhood, a selection of interviews cannot be limited by such a strict criterion as age, since the universal markers are invalid in this instance. In the case of Liubov' Veselenko who was referred to as a child from a juridical point of view (16 years old in October 1941) but was already living a "grown-up" life, she faced threats as a young woman rather than as a child (Veselenko 1996). I believe that the distinction between a child and an adult is deeply individual, and this issue cannot be resolved by mechanically excluding persons older than a certain age.

Bertram Cohler, a well-known American psychologist, wrote that emergencies and psycho-emotional traumas make a child much older than his/her biological age. In the context of the Holocaust reality, we cannot even place children in one line with adults. In characterizing the significance of children's survival stories at the time of anti-Semitic persecution campaigns, Cohler emphasized that thoughts born in a child's mind under the conditions of a life hazard are not a child's thoughts any longer. The same refers to feelings that sharpen to the maximum at the time of an emergency (Cohler 2012, 227).

In her famous article concerned with children's everyday life in Zhmerynka ghetto, Lilia Tomchuk also raised the question of who should be considered a child. Tomchuk wrote that she had built her source selection pattern exclusively on the basis of the age criterion presented by the greatest number of stories. But I have sacrificed quantity to quality and thoroughness of answers, since even a 15-year-old teenager's experience in 1941 can happen to be more thorough and illustrative than that of an individual who remained a child during the whole war (Tomchuk 2023, 91).

At the same time, a flexible approach to source selection is essential for researchers studying childhood during the Holocaust. Due to this aspect, the research can be situated within the broader social history of Nazi genocidal policy.

Out of 16 individuals of our selected sources, only four of the interviewees are men. As far as the age, oral stories processed in the course of preparation of the proposed research are divided evenly and make it possible to highlight all the age categories of children, beginning with three-year-old ones. The oldest in the readouts

is the fifteen-year-old Iakov Kuznetsov (Kuznetsov 1997). Limiting the upper age, I resort to assumptions presented in the classical research by Robert Krell who mentioned the research of the traumatic experience of children of under 17 or even 14 years old (Krell 1993, 384). Feldman's eagerness to differentiate children's and teenagers' experiences at the time of the research of the psychological traumas that resulted from surviving the Holocaust tragedy does not seem to us very justifiable, since in our research I do not focus upon the themes of psychic disorders. I am just analyzing the techniques children used in order to survive and the factors from which those techniques were formed (Feldman et al 2010, 548).

It is noteworthy that infants had a much lesser chance of survival because of their dependence on their mothers. The vast majority of Jewish infants died during the shootings in the village of Ahrobaza in Mariupol Vicinity in late October 1941, although their parents might have survived. I will dwell on this controversial situation in more detail in the related part of our research.

The theme of childhood often makes researchers stay away from it because of a lack of sources and representative sources. In this context, it is worth mentioning one of the latest publications by the aforementioned Cohler who describes teenagers' everyday life in the ghettos of Vilnius and Lodz on the basis of just two diaries (Cohler 2012). Hence, given the limited amount of sources containing oral evidence given by children who suffered from the Holocaust, it is their gender/age representation, not the quantity, that is in the foreground.

Reconstructing survival strategies requires a social context in which the children of Mariupol's Jews grew up before and during the Nazi occupation. Using oral testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, I identified key variables that help to reconstruct their everyday life under occupation. The following variable thematic sections include the dilemma of self-identity, characteristics of the family and the environment, the child's place in interethnic tension, games and transformation thereof, everyday needs, penal practices and finally, survival strategies that can be determined as a result of a sort of synthesis of information in accordance with the aforementioned themes.

In defining the range of variables that need analysis, I resorted to the experience of other scientists who have been researching the problem of Jewish childhood during the Holocaust. In particular, Joanna Beata Michlic mentioned the features that can be recognized as the "minimal" set of requirements for a "normal" childhood, such as available parents, family, home, regular sleep and meals. These universal features can be found on the basis of our sources (Michlic 2024, 281).

Regarding the self-identification dilemma, what matters is the child's awareness of their Jewish origin rather than the mere fact of being born into a Jewish family. I aim to determine whether children of Mariupol's Jewish community asked such questions and how they learned the answers, whether from parents, friends,

teachers, or through personal discovery. I also seek to understand how significant this knowledge was to them and what emotions they experienced upon learning about their Jewish identity. The necessity to characterize the environment where a child grows up is closely connected with the self-identification problem. I am interested not in the parents only. I am also interested in the oldest family members (grandmothers and grandfathers) as well as in family stories and memories of Jewish families' past.

In dwelling on the problem of interethnic tension, I do not mean anti-Semitism only since this phenomenon had not actually been found in Mariupol until World War II broke out and was formed more systemically only after the war was over. I will try to find out to what extent a child was living a comfortable life, understanding their Jewish identity, to find out how this identity was perceived by his/her friends, school teachers and, which is even more important, by representatives of other ethnic communities in the city. An extremely diverse ethno-cultural landscape of Mariupol became one of the most essential factors that made it possible to rescue a great number of Jews from the genocide of 1941–1943.

Children remain children even when they experience the biggest tragedy of their lives, because they continue to play despite the lack of familiar toys and reasons for joy. Reconstructing game practices of Jewish children is highly relevant for the research of childhood during the Holocaust since it offers to draw conclusions about a child's perception in a changing surrounding. I will analyze how external circumstances transformed children's basic daily needs such as food, hygiene, medical care, and communication in relation to their living and emotional conditions.

In the section concerned with penal practices, I will first analyze the punishments exercised by parents and then the child's perception of violence exercised by the occupant troops. I will find out how and for what parents punished their children and to what extent it was connected with anti-Semitic repressions carried out in Mariupol. An understanding of death was associated with penal practices, since right at the time of Holocaust, Jewish children were faced by the fear of death or by its lack thereof, which created the additional necessity of interpreting the concept of death.

2 Self-Identification, Family, Social Background

I purposely characterized the problem of Jewish children's self-identity in Mariupol as a dilemma since most parents did their best to hide their Jewish origin from them. There were a number of reasons behind this. A great number of Jewish families had arrived in the city, hiding from massacres that in the early 20th century spread widely across the territory that is the central part of Ukraine nowadays. Memory of persecution and murders during the period of the Ukrainian Revolution was fresh.

Parents and the oldest family members thought that it would be safer for a child not to know about his/her origin. Mariupol's Jews, who had suffered material losses at the time of the policy of nationalization, also deemed it best to hide their national identity away.

There is the case of nine-year-old Boris Sukhovalov, whose mother was the daughter of the city's well-known Hebrew businessman Freiman and whose big house had been nationalized. Even though the housemaid working for the Freiman-Sukhovalovs was Jewish, the boy did not even guess his origins. At home his parents spoke only Russian to him. The family did not observe any Jewish holidays. Nor did they cook matzo. The Freiman family managed to do an unbelievable thing: they managed to avoid wearing a Star of David in the first weeks of Nazi occupation not because no one could identify them as Jewish family (Sukhovalov 1998).

Another, more traumatic example concerning self-identity is the example of Liliia Kontareva who was 5 years old during the German occupation of Mariupol. Together with her mother and grandmother, the girl was forced to hide in the basement owned by the family's friends. Liliia often heard her mother and grandmother speaking Yiddish, a language she did not understand. However, communication with the child was carried out exclusively in Ukrainian or Russian (Kontareva 1998).

At the same time, let us recall the instances when associating oneself with the Jews did not require any traumatic experience and/or become a great discovery. It is quite typical of children learning at a Jewish school or of children who had an opportunity to watch some particular traditions in their families. For boys, the national identity was more apparent due to circumcision, but the eight-year-old Veniamin Boriskovskii for example, emphasized that in his case, associating oneself with the Jewish community required obligatory knowledge of Yiddish. Veniamin himself did not know the language and therefore did not identify himself as a Jew. His parents spoke Russian to the boy although they used Yiddish between themselves, which was rather infrequent in Mariupol (Boriskovskii 1996).

Analysis of the family environment shows that there were actually no Jewish families who adhered to the traditions of Judaism in Mariupol on the eve of the Nazi occupation. To be more exact, not all of them managed to evade the first wave of repressions that resulted in the shootings in Ahrobaza Vicinity in October 1941. Formally, the families of Mariupol's Jewish community could be divided into completely Russian-speaking families and families where only the oldest family members (grandmothers and grandfathers) adhered to traditions. Most of Mariupol's Jews were unwilling to demonstrate their ethnic identity very apparently, which was reflected in their circle of communication with Russians, Ukrainians and Azov Greeks.

Apart from others, there were Jewish families who adhered to religious traditions though children did not become part of the ritual life because of the desire to keep them away from possible harassment (I am speaking about the period prior to 1941). There is the case of Tat'iana Sidun who was 13 years old at the time of Nazi occupation. Her parents were Jewish and had come to Mariupol in 1932 in search of jobs. They lived in a Jewish yard, went to the synagogue, her mother baked matzo and took it to her sister where a big Jewish family gathered at one table. It was forbidden for the children to turn up at those celebrations. In the children's presence, grownups spoke only Russian, whereas Tat'iana herself went to a Russian-speaking school and did not get along with Jewish children (Sidun 1998).

This apparent separation of children from Jewish traditional life was found in many families where the both parents were Jewish by origin. The reason was to keep children away from possible problems on their life paths that might be caused by their ethnic origin. This was relevant to families who were not original inhabitants of Mariupol, since local Jewish families were used to the ethnic tolerance that characterized Mariupol before World War II: their children went to local Jewish schools and their families got along with other Jewish families.

A similar example was demonstrated by the family of Vera Kirilina. I can classify this family as a mixed one, since Vera's father was Greek, whereas her mother came from a very pious traditional Jewish family. In order to marry Vera's mother, her father even called himself a Jew and invented the name Anatoliy instead of his true name Ivan that was specified in his passport. Vera's father was also very pious and brought up his daughter the same way. However, the youngest family members did not know the fundamentals of Yiddish, whereas the whole family of Vera's mother spoke only Yiddish in everyday life. Again, the answer should be sought in the family story: the Kirilins had come to Mariupol from Orikhiv (nowadays the Zaporizhzhia Region of Ukraine), hiding from the massacres exercised by Makhno detachments. Nestor Makhno was the leader of left-wing anarchist detachments in 1918–1921. However, the involvement of Makhno's troops in large-scale Jewish pogroms in southern Ukraine is considered controversial (Litvinov 1984; Darch 2020; Toker 2020; Allison 2023). The parents did not want their children to face the same tragedy due to their origins (Kirilina 1998).

It was the family, and especially its oldest members, that formed the incorrect belief that "noble Germans" were incapable of crimes against the Jews. This concept was formed due to the extrapolation of World War I experiences on current events. During the World War I, German troops in the south-western periphery of the Russian Empire did not pursue a policy of exterminating any population groups. In fact, members of Mariupol's Jewish community did not realize that they were dealing with different Germans compared with the Germans they knew quite a few decades earlier. An understanding of the danger came too late. According to Jeremy Hicks, the

Soviet film *Professor Mamlock*, released in 1938, played a major role in disseminating knowledge about Nazi ideology (Hicks 2012, 29).

I can agree with Hicks's conclusions just partially. The plot of the movie was based on the story of a famous Jewish doctor who tried to ignore the anti-Semitic nature of the Third Reich's national policy until it affected his family. *Professor Mamlock* was repeatedly mentioned in the stories of children who survived the Holocaust in Mariupol. However, they would hardly have remembered the movie if they had not been asked a specific question about it. Against the backdrop of a large number of movies glorifying Soviet–German friendship in 1939–1941, the anti-Nazi message of *Professor Mamlock* was simply lost (Braginskii 1997; Veselenko 1996).

In describing the interethnic tension in Mariupol, it is necessary to highlight the striking differences between the pre-war period and the city's occupation. Mariupol was characterized by a mosaic ethno-cultural landscape and high living standards since the city had a seaport of its own and was abundant in industrial production. Before the war, Mariupol residents did not suffer unemployment and furthermore, they received those seeking for jobs, including Jews, from other regions of the Soviet Union. Thus, there were no reasons for outbreaks of anti-Semitism since there had always been some economic background to those manifestations.

The situation gradually changed with the advance of Nazi troops deeper into the Soviet territory, the introduction of food restrictions, flows of refugees, and growing competition for jobs in the territory of the Donetsk Region. Outbreaks of explicit anti-Semitism and massacres began as early as on the first day of the city's occupation (October 8, 1941). This transformation of the situation with interethnic tension can be heard in most of the stories told by both adult members of Mariupol's Jewish community and children.

Until 1941, the children of Mariupol's Jews grew up normally, in a well-meaning atmosphere, and were not exposed to ethnic intolerance (Leibovich 1998; Sidun 1998). It is noteworthy that most of them say that they got along with Ukrainians and Russians, whereas Jewish surroundings were rather infrequent. Ten-year old Ol'ga Tsyganskaia who grew up in a mono-ethnic Jewish environment did not actually hear from parents about anti-Semitism and did not feel any interethnic tension getting along with other children (Tsyganskaia 1997).

When the occupation began, Russians and Ukrainians who stayed in the city gave shelter to Jewish children though they did not do it as willingly as Greeks and Mennonite Germans. Greeks united with Jews, since there was an opinion that after extermination of Jews, the Greek community would start becoming extinct, whereas Mennonite Germans enjoyed their *Volksdeutsche* privilege. With the outbreak of war, the *Volksdeutsche* (German minority) faced a wave of repression from Stalin's regime, as they were considered potential collaborators. The main distinction in giving Jewish children shelter by representatives of other national minorities lay in

the specificity of compact residence. Shelter in the city could be found only with Greek families, since Mennonites lived in their separate ethnic villages sometimes referred to as colonies. However, other strategies were dominant in the city. Those strategies were linked to hiding in Greek villages, since Mennonite colonies were usually overcrowded with Nazi soldiers, including Waffen-SS detachments quartered therein (Boriskovskii 1996; Kirilina 1998; Ponomarev 1998).

3 Games and Food

The term "games" in this chapter should not solely be understood literally. I am not describing the practice of games found in the occupied city. Instead, I am trying to understand the way games reflected a child's response to the change of their surrounding reality, a reality that was becoming more and more dangerous. Children did not just play with toys. Children also played in roles that were new to their lives, the roles of defenders, food seekers, guardians of their younger siblings and friends. That was the game of paying farewell to childhood, the last game in their lives after which a child became an adult ahead of time. Lilia Tomchuk wrote about the game as a method of overcoming trauma, not just a child's desire to spend time somehow. Children used the game to numb the feeling of "being without," which had recently occurred, such as regular daily meals (Tomchuk 2023, 92, 100–101).

We have information about Jewish children's games in occupied Mariupol, primarily due to evidence given by children aged 3, the youngest age group. The issue is that children of that age group were not actively involved, by their parents, in particular roles of survival strategy, i.e., those children couldn't seek food, they couldn't protect others, they couldn't do any work. On the contrary, the efforts exerted by people around them were aimed at maintaining the existence of the youngest community members because those children were the community's future. We have already mentioned that in the case of preschool children, games performed a function of distraction, i.e., those games were used to spend time so that children should think less about reality. Those games also performed another function: very young children could easily reveal a hiding place by crying or making other sounds that could betray the whole family. Therefore, finding a child something to do was a vital survival measure.

Children who had an opportunity of living in more or less comfortable conditions did not essentially change their traditional game practices. For example, Galina Serdiuk and her elder brother kept playing a car driver and a passenger with the help of an upturned chair. The girl with a doll in her arms took a seat behind her brother. This was a child's subconscious desire to be a part of a family where there was a father and a mother. Galina grew up with no mother, although she knew that she was

alive and would come back soon. Nevertheless, the three-year-old girl lacked a mother's love, therefore, she spent all her time playing with her brother pretending to have a standard family, a family with a father and a mother. There is no doubt that Galina played her family, since her father had worked as a car driver before the war (Serdiuk 1998).

Galina Serdiuk had a doll and things to play with, whereas other children who were forced to hide in basements could not boast of that luxury. Dolls were made from improvised materials that remained the main thing to play with. They were made from various cloths, straw or corncobs, and decorated with a pencil. A girl's doll symbolized the girl herself; other things associated with a good life were often made to accessorize the doll. For example, five-year-old Liliia Kontareva's grandmother made a dog from a corncob for the doll to have someone to play with. Liliia also mentioned a game with small stones though she could not describe that game in detail. Obviously, that was a game of "taws" briefly described by Borys Hrinchenko as tossing up a small stone, and before the stone fell to the ground, it was necessary to pick up five other stones (Hrinchenko 1909, 302; Kontareva 1998; Rykhlikova 1998).

The everyday needs of Mariupol Jews' children also underwent drastic changes in the way game practices did. The transformation of everyday life was caused by the impossibility to live at home first of all, the loss of home, or the inaccessibility of home due to the danger of the occupation authorities turning up. Like adults, Mariupol children tried to avoid being thrown into a ghetto located in the barracks of the city's former infantry regiment by hiding in relatives' houses and basements. The latter was the most traumatic since little children always had to live in impenetrable darkness. Therefore, they could not look at the sun for a long time and wore filets over their eyes. In basements, basic conveniences were out of the question: old newspapers, straw or waste left after heating the furnace (the so called "slag") served as the floor. People slept, ate, and met their physical needs there (Kontareva 1998; Rykhlikova 1998; Karpenko 1997).

Memories of the Holocaust victims who were children at the time of Mariupol's occupation are abundant in detail about food, especially delicacies that were inaccessible every day. Some children recalled that before the war sweets were not extraordinary to them. Therefore, starvation during their wartime hardships was firmly imprinted in their memories. After the war began, any plain food could be considered a delicacy. Among those "special delicacies," they mentioned "dumplings" (based on dough mixed with sour milk), carrot cutlets, cornmeal gruel, ayran, etc. Delicacies were often associated with a different ethnic environment where children were hiding, primarily with the Greek community (Karpenko 1997; Shabanova 1998; Kirilina 1998).

On the contrary, plain food was normally less exquisite. The food was composed of miscellaneous gruels (often based on corn) and vegetables stored in the basements

where Jewish families and some children were hiding. Liliia Kontareva mentioned cold boiled potatoes, cabbages and beets. Galina Rykhlikova mentioned potato peels fried on an oil lamp. That smell of fried potato peels was imprinted in the girl's memory forever and created a distinct association with fear for her life and fear of persecution. Children who were hiding in basements often complained of lack of fresh water, which was given to them by acquaintances or relatives. Sometimes they had to melt snow in order to get water. They drank that liquid and washed themselves with it for the purpose of basic hygiene (Kontareva 1998; Rykhlikova 1998).

Some foods or dishes were directly associated with repressive practices and those associations were not always negative. In particular, Galina Serdiuk recalled Romanian soldiers who treated her to some chocolate (Serdiuk 1998). Similar memories of the military who indulged children were often found in the occupation zone operated by the Third Reich's allies. Stories about everyday practices used by children who were forced to hide and to be always on the move are less informative and are normally filled with memories of staying the night in haystacks or in landlords' houses, about mice, and water they had to drink straight from puddles (Leibovich 1998; Sidun 1998).

4 Violence, Danger and Death

The identification of such a category as "penal practices" found in the evidence given by the Holocaust victims is an extremely difficult task, since the whole survival history is an individual's response to penal measures taken by the apparatus of coercion. Nevertheless, among Jewish children in Mariupol, two distinct fears of punishment emerge: fear of parental or guardian discipline, and fear of the state or occupying authorities. Parents punished their children for violations of the security regime established in the family, such as loud talking, shouting, games, leaving the hiding place with no permission, etc. However, there were exceptions to the rule as well. Some restrictions were linked with violations of some particular moral principles accepted in a particular family. For example, in recalling instances of looting that accompanied the first days of the city's Nazi occupation, Tat'iana Sidun told us that she had picked up an umbrella and cigarettes near a burgled shop and that her father had ordered her to get rid of the items right away. As a whole, one can assume that Jews did not participate in looting, because they felt the threat of similar acts against themselves (Sidun 1998).

The lack of regular food often urged children to do mindless things that caused a risk of being discovered. That was about the younger children who were unaware of their Jewish identity. A vivid example is the four-year-old Leonid Ponomarev. The boy grew up in a family of teachers and did not experience starvation before the war. His

father was Greek, and a well-known and respected Communist party member in the city, so the family never faced the necessity of showing the Jewish origin of Leonid's mother. The situation changed drastically after his father's arrest as a Communist activist, which put the family on the edge of starvation. Leonid admits he used to go outside and ask for food at a field kitchen arranged nearby for Nazi soldiers, without having asked for his mother's permission. His mother strictly prohibited him to do it, but he did not understand the danger at his age (Ponomarev 1998).

One way or another, all Mariupol children faced violence exercised by penal agencies, such auxiliary police representatives, Waffen-SS detachments, or the military. I am not speaking about physical violence. I am speaking about the practice of violence against others. In this respect, the understanding of punishment is combined with a fear and understanding of death.

Given the traumatic experiences endured by children during the Holocaust, the issue of how they understood the concept of death is among the most revealing in terms of the adequacy of information found in oral testimonies. First, it is necessary to clearly outline what content the category of understanding death is composed of. According to the aforementioned Canadian psychiatrist Robert Krell, there are three stages of a child's understanding of the death of family members:

1. Acceptance. A child understands the meaning of the word "dead," including the physical aspects of dying, clearly identifying causes of death and the transformation of the body caused thereby;
2. Mourning. A loved one who died becomes inaccessible to a child's love; the connection with that person gradually fades away as well. At this stage of understanding death, Krell introduces the concept of the "anchor of mourning," referring to tangible and intangible things that make it possible for a child to support this mourning. These symbolic "anchors" are information about the date of death, location of the grave, etc. For people who survived the tragedy of the Holocaust, this anchor is normally unavailable, which largely reflects on a child's further psychological condition;
3. Renovation. The lack of "anchors" that would permanently remind a child of the death of a loved one brings about the situation when the trauma caused by the death of a relative is survived better and heals faster. This rule "works" even if children watched a loved one dying (Krell 1993, 386).

The selected oral stories which the present research is based on gives us every reason to divide children who suffered during the Holocaust into those who had already been familiar with death before the Nazi occupation of Mariupol and those who understood death in the course of the Nazi administration's genocidal policy. As far as the former is concerned, death is mostly associated with disease, primarily with the illness of a loved one. For example, Boris Sukhovalov says that he experienced

death at the time of his mother's illness, who died in 1939 as a result of consequences of a hypertonic disease. That event really mattered to Boris not only because he had lost a loved one but also because until he became seven years old, he did not even understand what death meant (Sukhovalov 1998).

Olga Tsyganskaia learned what death was from her mother's stories about the killing of her uncles during the massacres of the early 20th century, an experience that was not typical for Mariupol. For Ol'ga, such concepts as "anti-Semitism," "massacres," and "death" were part of one logical circuit (Tsyganskaia 1997). Those logical circuits were often created by parents or relatives when they explained to a child the necessity of hiding or confining himself/herself to something. This technique was used by parents of very young children who did not always realize what was going on around them. Having spent many months hiding in a basement, three-year-old Galina Rykhlikova's mother told her daughter that they were in hiding because they might be killed, but she did not explain who would kill them or why. This remained a mystery to the girl (Rykhlikova 1998).

Sometimes death or the danger of death was associated with usual things that acquired a negative connotation during the war or anti-Semitic policies carried out by the Nazi powers. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the story told by twelve-year-old Galina Leibovich who was panic-stricken not only when seeing Nazi soldiers but also when hearing German spoken from a distance (Leibovich 1998).

The human body also signaled the danger of death, which was vividly revealed by the victims of shootings of Mariupol's Jewish community in October 1941. Children fell down into the anti-tank ditch long before the shooting began. This was the way in which the human body revealed the first stage of the adaptation syndrome (according to Hans Selye). As the human body enters a state of shock, the blood pressure decreases and a child could fall unconscious (Selye 1998).

In our view however, not all the survival techniques were a sort of external manifestation of the survival mechanism that did not depend on a child's desire. Some children understood the causative-consecutive connection between a gunshot (a bullet) and pain (death). In particular, they saw mothers throwing their children to the anti-tank ditch so that bullets would not hit them, even though children died anyway, lying underneath the dead when the ditch was filled in (Gleikh 1997; Materyaly 11). Similar strategies connected with preventive falling into a common grave are typical of "the Holocaust by bullets." This happened to children at the time of Łódź Ghetto, for example (Krell 1993, 387).

However, the most unique and at the time the most chimeric associations were formed by children who survived Mariupol's Gestapo cells in 1942 during the operation aimed at exterminating children born from heterogeneous marriages, an action not highlighted in the materials of the Soviet investigation. In this context, vivid examples are stories told by Donata Pogorelova and Galina Serdiuk. At the time

of the 1942 act, children were extinguished in gas vans.[1] The perpetrators were more often local auxiliary policemen who concealed the truth of their victims' fate from them. Thus, Donata recalled that children vanished after they were taken to "mobile shower facilities," the term used by the Nazi police for the gas vans. Four-year-old Galina Serdiuk remembers that before being sent to a gas van, children soaked their lips with a special mixture that accelerated the poison's impact. The Nazi police called it "making up the lips." As a result, both victims associated disappearance and death with a shower and makeup (Pogorelova 1998; Serdiuk 1998).

5 Social Context and Survival Strategies

Given the direct link between the social context in which the children grew up and their survival strategies under Nazi occupation, it is worth taking a look at the overall picture of the Holocaust in Mariupol. First of all, it should be noted that even before the start of the Second World War, there were many Jewish migrants in the city from all corners of the former Russian Empire. Mariupol, as an industrial and commercial city on the shores of the Sea of Azov, was extremely attractive to the Jewish population in terms of employment. This statement is true for the entire eastern part of Soviet Ukraine. In Mariupol, it was easy to find work in the heavy industry enterprises that were built in the 1930s, in the port and in commercial establishments throughout the city. The "native" Mariupol Jews also engaged in their own crafts – shoemaking, glassmaking, and tannery work. As for the educated class, there were many accountants and doctors among the Jews of Mariupol.

Before the occupation of the city, the Jews of Mariupol did not live in isolation and practically did not encounter anti-Semitism. The social circle of Jewish families was also not strictly differentiated. Although there were six synagogues in Mariupol, only one of them functioned due to the Soviet anti-religious policy. Of the 66 schools in the city, only one was Jewish. For comparison, it is worth mentioning that of the other national schools in the city, there were six Greek and one German. The percentage of Jewish teachers was small, and there were only two Jewish headmasters. Many Jews worked in medical institutions – half of the 224 doctors were Jews (Operational situation report, 234–238).

According to the 1939 census, the population of Mariupol was 222,427 (R & A Report 2256, 7). Despite the controversial nature of this census, I consider these figures to be reliable as they correlate with German statistics which estimated the

1 A mobile instrument for the mass destruction of people in the occupied territories. The principle of operation was to divert exhaust gases into the vehicle's cabin, where people were kept (usually several dozen people). Death of the victims occurred within 10–15 min.

population of Mariupol in 1941 at 220–230 thousand people (Operational situation report, 234; Angrick 2003, 311–312). As of 1939, there were 10,444 Jews living in the city, which accounted for almost 16 % of the total Jewish population of Donetsk Oblast (Tytarenko 2008, 27). As for the number of Jews living in the city at the time of the Nazi occupation, the figures are not very accurate and are known only from German sources – from 9,000 to 18,000 people (Operational situation report, 234; Angrick 2003, 311–312). Considering that Jewish refugees from the west were constantly arriving in Mariupol at the outbreak of the war and many settled there, the second figure seems more plausible.

On October 8, 1941, Mariupol was occupied by Nazi troops almost without a struggle. There was no organized evacuation of the Jewish population, and within a few days the city was completely closed to entry and exit. Between October 9–12, all Mariupol Jews were registered and required to wear special distinctive marks on their clothing, although not everyone complied with this order from the occupation administration. Several *Judenräte* were organized in Mariupol to monitor the implementation of all the new authorities' orders. By October 16, the vast majority of the Jewish population of the city had been concentrated in the improvised ghetto – the old Soviet barracks of one of the infantry regiments.

On October 18, mass shootings began in anti-tank ditches in the village of Ahrobaza outside the city and continued for several days. As a result of the first wave of the Holocaust in Mariupol, according to my estimates, 9,000 people were killed – this was the number of Jews registered in the census conducted by the occupying authorities in the first days after the city was captured. This valuable source has not been preserved and was most likely lost in the autumn of 1943 during the retreat of German troops. A year after the first wave of mass shootings, an operation was carried out to liquidate children from mixed marriages, resulting in the deaths of up to 800 people (according to data from Soviet investigative commissions). The children were killed by the local auxiliary police in gas vans (Akty, 1–2; Aussagen zu Verbrechen in Mariupol).

The main and in fact unique survival strategy of Mariupol's Jewish children was the hiding strategy: hiding in houses owned by relatives or family friends or even strangers. In the latter case, hiding was normally accompanied by a change of name and identity. However, it is noteworthy that there were a few instances when children managed to survive persecution without leaving their families. Those instances were associated with a change of religious identity. As far as the strategy that envisages an invented name, personality and religious identity, following Peter Suedfeld, use the definition "explicit hiding" to mean relatively safe living as a result of an artificially invented identity. No doubt, it is necessary to take into account that the feeling of danger was rather biased (Suedfeld et al 1998, 325–326).

Baptism was one of the widespread methods of self-rescue before the persecution of children born from heterogeneous marriages began in autumn 1942. In this context, a vivid example is Donata Pogorelova who was brought up in a heterogeneous family where her mother was Jewish and her father was Russian. After her mother's death in 1939, Donata's father remarried a Jewish woman. After the emergence of rumors about the mass shooting of Jews in the village of Ahrobaza, Donata was baptized like all the other children in the family. The rite was arranged in a separate apartment where 13 persons got together, i.e., all the relatives and the family's friends. A similar strategy was found only in a number of heterogeneous families. Family members had to be genuinely convinced of their non-Jewish origins, and not merely conceal them. In particular, this was the way the foster mother of Donata Pogorelova and Boris Sukhovalov behaved: she did not wear the Star of David on her clothes, because she considered herself Russian (Pogorelova 1998; Sukhovalov 1998).

As far as the details of hiding strategies are concerned, they were very different and depended on the extent that a Jewish child's origin was evident. Hiding strategies also depended on the extent to which the family's friends and people living in the neighborhood knew about it. Hiding strategies also depended on how great the danger of disclosure was. It is not a secret that since Mariupol's occupation began, Jews were continuously given up to the auxiliary police, because people hoped for relief, such as improved living conditions, a better job or an additional food ration. Another factor was the experience of someone being taken to the ghetto or fleeing right from the shooting site. Those children were more precautious, resourceful, and courageous at the same time.

A young child who had got to the anti-tank ditches in Ahrobaza could hide in their relatives' houses. Their relatives hid them in basements or told others that they were their own children. That was important if the people living nearby did not know all the family members well enough, i.e., the "odd" child could not be handed over to the auxiliary police. Children who ran away from Ahrobaza or on the way there often demonstrated the experience of changing their national identity. Circumstances also forced them to live a nomadic life, i.e., they walked around the villages in Mariupol Vicinity looking for someone to give them shelter.

It is worthwhile dwelling on a few specific cases of children who were rescued during the first wave of shootings in October 1941. In those cases, a child's parents or other relatives played a great role. Residents of villages in Mariupol Vicinity, eye-witnesses to the genocide, recalled instances when children were in fact pushed away from convoys moving on foot to the shooting sites. This came about because there were few convoy guards and it was easy to push a child away. However, it was necessary to understand the fate that could befall someone if they did this. For many of Mariupol's Jews, belief in the German incapability of the physical extermination of such a great number of people was still ironclad. On the contrary, other people (not

Jews) living in the neighborhood understood what awaited those people in the convoys, because they chased away their children who watched the doomed Jews on the move (YIU/U1176 2011; YIU/U1177 2011).

Due to a lack of sources, I cannot trace any stories of children's survival, or stories of children who found themselves in local residents' homes because their parents pushed them away from convoys. Usually, even local residents did not know that there was a rescued Jewish child in another family. Instances when parents were ready to pay farewell to a child forever in order to rescue them are found far beyond Mariupol. Let us recall the historical facts of the Lublin Ghetto's liquidation when parents left their children at someone else's door in the hope of rescue (Michlic 2024, 279). However, taking into consideration fatalism, families often made the opposite decision: to die all together. The decision was announced to the children but was never explained (Karpenko 1997).

Sometimes there were incredible cases of survival. For example, Iakov Kuznetsov was rescued right from the shooting ditches by a German military motorcycle driver. Using body language, the German soldier instructed the boy to jump into his motorcycle sidecar. Iakov leaned against the bottom of the sidecar and was lying flat all the way to the city where the soldier let him get off on the city's outskirts, telling the child his name and recommending him to do his best to survive (Kuznetsov 1997).

Children who were hiding in other families' homes often imitated their being members of the environment where they had found shelter. Normally, those were Greek, Mennonite, Ukrainian, and Russian families (the latter two being the minority). Azov Greeks usually received teenage Jewish runaways, since Greek national characteristics made it possible to safely hide Jews. I mean the special accent, hair color, and lineaments. Ukrainian and Russian families considered these practices more risky for them. Therefore, children living in those families often hid in basements, unable to live a normal life (Braginskaia 1997; Kirilina 1998; Karpenko 1997; Sidun 1998; Ob'edkova 1998).

6 Conclusions

Having analyzed the experiences of Jewish children in Mariupol, I can identify three stages in the process of accepting the inevitable change in everyday practices and the transformation of "life" into "survival." I should note that the events of the Second World War, before it reached Soviet territory, largely passed the children by – they hardly noticed any change in their surroundings or daily routines. Mentions of the awareness of the Holocaust in Europe should hardly be taken into account, because the emphasis on these moments in oral narratives is, in my opinion, a consequence of the construction of the narrative directly during the interview.

Thus, the first stage of the transformation of reality covers June–October 1941 (the period from the invasion of Nazi troops to the occupation of Mariupol). Here, children encountered the concept of "war" for the first time and, as a result, "separation" from their relatives (e.g., due to mobilization, evacuation, etc.). This alone shattered the framework of children's perception of the world. A radical change in everyday practices occurred during the short period from the beginning of the occupation of Mariupol to the first wave of mass shootings (October 8–18, 1941). Children realized and accepted the connection between their Jewish origin and the threat to their lives, directly facing hunger, the need to hide, and taking on the roles of older family members. Here, there is a sharp transition from everyday "life" to "survival," which is most evident in the third stage of the transformation of daily life (October 1941–September 1943). During this period, children underwent rapid (if not instantaneous) psychological maturation in conditions of constant threat to their lives.

A well-structured analysis of stories of Mariupol community children's survival under the conditions of the Holocaust evidences the crucial impact on the survival context where a child's personality was formed. Theoretically, I can talk about Jewish children with lost identity. Children who were conscious of manifestations of traditionalism in their families before World War II were usually more precautious in revealing their typical behavioral peculiarities. Persons who were unconscious of their identity as a result of the conditions of their upbringing were actually dependent on the oldest family members, i.e., the burden of the choice of survival strategy was transferred to others. At the same time, children with a concealed identity, including younger ones, had many fewer chances. Children under three years of age either perished in the Ahrobaza ditches or died as a result of malnutrition, starvation, and disease.

I use the phrase "choice of survival strategy" cautiously, acknowledging that such choices were often constrained or made under extreme circumstances. A child's deeds under stressful circumstances were dictated only by accident, by an instinct, or by some particular abilities and skills formed in the related social contexts. The child fell into the ditch before the gunshot only because they had been watching the experience of other Jews who obediently accepted their fates in the form of a machine-gun salvo. Children called themselves Greeks or Ukrainians, concealing their Jewish origin, because adults had instructed them to do so. Therefore, those children were cleverer and more precautious and made those conclusions by themselves.

The lack of sources available to researchers studying Jewish childhood during the Holocaust is a universal problem and not unique to the case of Mariupol. I can affirm that the limited number of oral stories told by victims of and witnesses to the Holocaust remains the main one. Sometimes these scarce sources are the only

sources of information. Facing a lack of additional sources, such as ego-documents (diaries, letters or drawings), a researcher has to change their approach to the available evidence and to change the number of questions of an imaginary questionnaire with reference to particular assignments of the research.

In my opinion, studying problems connected with childhood on the frontline or in other traumatic situations is insufficient without two things: an interdisciplinary approach to the reconstruction of everyday practices and the placement of a particular problem within a wider special context. In the course of this research, I have tried to refer to research in the field of children's psychiatry on the one hand, and on the other to find analogues of various behavioral models typical of children who survived the Holocaust in other territories hand, in Poland first of all.

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