

Stopping the spread of moral savagery – child relief efforts in the Kraków ghetto

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Introduction

A memo prepared by the Jewish Social Self Help organization titled “Memo regarding the care of children in the Jewish Quarter in Kraków” dated 10 July 1942, called for solutions to the “moral devastation” of children and teenagers due to the lack of parental care throughout most of the day. The remedy, the memo argued, “will help allow stop the spread of moral savagery among children (...). This would be the first step towards putting a stop to the catastrophe that is threatening us, and which is rather dangerous in consequences in the long run.”² This short document reflects recognition of an existing problem, and the importance that Jewish organizations attached to child relief efforts as a way of morale-building among children

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² Jewish Social Self Help, “Memo regarding the care of children in the Jewish Quarter in Kraków,” 10 July 1942. USHMM 1997.A.0124 reel 31

and the rest of the ghetto inmates. Theirs was a difficult task, marked by sacrifice on part of the Jewish population, deceit of the German authorities, and financial, structural, and power limitations posed by life in ghetto. The authors of the document did not specify what kind of catastrophe awaited the Jewish population, nor did they provide examples of the children's "savage" behavior. What emerges from the text is their generous interest in the fate of children and an urgency to take action. Furthermore, the text transmits hope in the future of the Jewish people embodied in its youngest members.

Examining the life circumstances of Jewish children trapped in the Kraków ghetto from the moment of its inception until its final liquidation, I focus on Jewish communal responses to the plight of the youngest victims of Nazi persecution, and how such communal activities were framed by Nazi policies. This case study offers a lens on Jewish life under German occupation in Poland, particularly in Kraków, the (under-researched) capital of the General Government. It also provides a perspective on Jewish family life, Jewish responses to persecution, and the Nazi execution of genocide. For the purposes of my project, "Jewish children" are defined according to Nazi laws: individuals up to the age of fourteen racially defined as Jews. Jewish organizations, while continuously stressing the importance of child care as it concerned the entire ghetto population, applied the same age limit: "The initiative to help children deserves a special emphasis as a critically important social initiative. It includes children up to 14 years of age, so about 25 percent of the entire Jewish population."³

In this paper, I show that Jewish institutions undertook organized relief efforts against all odds in order to assist children as a way of ensuring their survival and the future of the Jewish

³ Jewish Community in Kraków, "Jewish social action on the territory of the General Government and its budgeting rules." An undated document. As it states that approximately 50,000 expelled Jews lived in the Kraków district, the document must have been written after the creation of the ghetto and before the forced confinement of all Jews from Kraków and the surrounding areas, meaning between March and October 1941. YIVO, 335.1, folder #91.

people. At the same time, these efforts were meant to improve the morale of the rest of the Jewish population by giving people hope, assistance in time of desperation, and creating a semblance of normal life. As Debórah Dwork has pointed out, “Child life is a subculture of the dominant society.”⁴ That subculture was threatened by Nazi racial policy and practice. Jewish organizations repeatedly argued that ghetto conditions contributed to the demoralization of youngsters. Those children old enough to be aware of the changes between their pre-war or pre-ghetto lives and existence in the ghetto, were confronted with new living conditions, a twisted set of life rules, and were forced to witness tragedy on a daily basis. Simultaneously, this same group were still children: their position in the social hierarchy demanded attending to their specific needs.

Various Jewish organizations in the Kraków ghetto, both those that existed before and were transferred to the ghetto, and those that were created in response to the fluctuating and deteriorating conditions, addressed the situation of the youngest members of the ghetto population. The ŻKO (Kraków Municipal Jewish Care Committee or Żydowski Komitet Opiekuńczy Miasta Krakowa), and later the JSS (Jewish Social Self Help / Jüdische Soziale Selbsthilfe / Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna), the Jewish Orphanage named after Róża Rockowa, the Vocational Hostel for Jewish Orphaned Boys, CENTOS (Centrala Opieki nad Dziećmi i Sierotami / the Association for the Care of Children and Orphans), hospitals, and later both the *Kinderheim* (children’s home in ghetto A) and *Tagesheim* (care center in ghetto B), all undertook endeavors to organize help for children. The institutions argued that when the central Jewish authority allocated funding it was vital to take into consideration the factors necessary to sustain child life. “The percentage share when dividing the sum should be higher than the

⁴ Debórah Dwork, *Children With A Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. xxxii.

number of minor charges due to the cost of feeding the children, the special costs connected to upkeep of the orphanages, and the costs related to care for the child/caretakers.”⁵ The document called for spending 55 percent of the budget on feeding, 35 percent on direct aid to children, and 15 percent on hygienic and medical help. This document elucidates the Jewish leaders’ preoccupation with child relief efforts and making sure that appropriate amounts were invested in children’s well-being.

Jewish institutions in the ghetto sought to shield children from the adversities of daily life, starvation, disease, and death. They tried to ensure the survival of the Jewish people by safeguarding the children against the brutality of the perpetrators and moral degradation caused by it. Unfortunately, the ultimate fate of the children rested with perpetrators and not with the Jews. In effect, as Nechama Tec observed, “Efforts to protect and help Jewish children were born out of the battle between those who wanted to kill and those who wanted to save. It was an uneven struggle, a war that left many child victims and only a few survivors.”⁶

The Ghetto

On 3 March 1941, the German authorities announced the establishment of the *Jüdischer Wohnbezirk* (the Jewish living quarter). Despite its official name, the Jewish district was nothing but a ghetto; in the case of Kraków, an enclosed and guarded area where the German authorities forcibly concentrated the Jews. Located in the Podgórze district of the city, it was surrounded by barbed wire and a wall with four entrances. Initially, only Jews in possession of work permits were allowed to move into the ghetto; all others had to leave the city. Beginning on 21 March

⁵ Jewish Social Self Help, “General balance of expenses for care in the first semester of 1942.” YIVO 335.1, folder 91.

⁶ Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 69.

1941, leaving the ghetto without a special permit became prohibited. Jews who attempted to do so faced the death penalty according to an order of 15 October 1941. This decree specified that the same penalty applied to gentiles helping Jews. Also, beginning that day, Jews were assigned responsibility for their own food supply. A few days later, another order forced all Jews from Kraków and vicinity, including those previously expelled, to report to the ghetto.

In total, some 25,000 Jews lived in the Kraków ghetto throughout the two years of its existence.⁷ About 2,500 children lived in the ghetto at its peak in December 1941.⁸ This number increased or decreased depending on German orders related to control of the Jewish population in the General Government, and the *Aktionen* in the ghetto. Sources vary on the number of children in the ghetto. The census takers of Jewish organizations in the ghetto may not be accurate because they might not have included all children, being mindful of their future protection. Moreover, a number of children remained in the ghetto illegally by sneaking in and failing to register with the authorities. Then too, some children deceived the authorities about their age. Finally, the reports are only fragmentary, and were drafted by various organizations and their departments.

The Germans staged three major *Aktionen* in the ghetto. Between 28 May and 8 June 1942, about 7,000 Jews were deported to Bełżec. These dragnet operations were overseen by Wilhelm Kunde, and led by SS Obersturmführer Otto von Mallotke, and were meant to reduce the ghetto population. According to Heinrich Himmler's order of 19 July 1942, all ghettos in the

⁷ There are a few reasons for this undercount of Jews in the ghetto in comparison with the prewar size of Kraków's Jewish population (about 65,000). Many Jews fled Kraków following the German invasion. And the Germans expelled a number of Jews from the city in 1940. After the establishment of the ghetto in March 1941, official figures failed to register Jews who smuggled themselves there and thus lived in the ghetto "illegally."

⁸ Jewish Social Self Help, "Protocol of the meeting of the Jewish Municipal Care Committee held on December 17, 1941." USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31. This reported number, too, is a significant undercount, because children comprised 25 percent of the population in the Kraków ghetto ("Jewish social action on the territory of the General Government and its budgeting rules." Undated. Probably drafted between March and October 1941. YIVO, 335.1, folder #91). Mindful of the children's protection, parents and Jewish organizations failed to register all youngsters.

General Government had to be eliminated by 31 December 1942. Another *Aktion* was unleashed on 28 October 1942, under the direction of SS-Sturmbannführer Willi Haase. About 600 Jews were murdered on the spot and more than 4,500 were shipped to Bełżec. On 14 November 1942, Hans Frank declared the General Government *Judenrein* except for five closed ghettos in Kraków, Radom, Warsaw, Lwów, and Częstochowa. About 5,000 Jews remained in the Kraków ghetto. On 26 December 1942, the German authorities divided it into “Ghetto A” for Jews who were assigned work, and “Ghetto B” for those without work, and as a dumping ground for Jews from the Kraków area. Both were liquidated on 13-14 March 1943, with Amon Goeth, the commandant of the nearby Płaszów camp, in charge. The Jewish inmates of Ghetto A were marched to Płaszów, while those from Ghetto B were killed.

The main source of relief efforts – the Jewish Social Self Help

The outbreak of World War II prompted the JDC (Jewish Joint Distribution Committee / Joint), with regional headquarters in Warsaw to intensify its relief work. The organization allocated tasks to regional branches of other Jewish relief organizations. The German authorities allowed for the existence of only one general welfare organization in occupied Poland, the RGO (Rada Główna Opiekuńcza or Main Welfare Council), which served as an umbrella for Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish charitable and welfare institutions. The JDC chose Michał Weichert as the Jewish representative to the RGO. The JSS then became the official Jewish branch of the RGO, and the only Jewish association recognized by the Germans. When Kraków became the capital of the General Government, the headquarters of the JSS were established there.

Between 6 September and 26 October 1939 (?) the JSS answered directly to the Gestapo. When Hans Frank assumed the position of General Governor and established a civil

administration by January 1940, the JSS came under the control first of the Nazi welfare organization NSV (Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfart or National Socialist People's Welfare), and later under the welfare department of Frank's administration, the BuF (Bevölkerungswesen und Fürsorge). The activities of the JSS were thus from the very beginning dependent upon the approval of German authorities. With the U.S. entry into the war on 7 December 1941, the JDC was unable, as an American organization, to continue direct work in the Axis-occupied territories. It made arrangements, however, to assure the continuation of relief work under local auspices. In May 1942, Weichert changed the organization's name to JSH (Jüdische Soziale Hilfe / Jewish Social Help) in anticipation of appeasing the authorities. Weichert dropped the word "Self" probably to make it seem as if the organization acted solely on social basis, and did not include connotations with a world Jewish solidarity. On 3 June 1942, Governor Frank issued a decree stating that all Jewish matters would come under the control of the SS. This provision obviously included the activities of the Kraków-based JSH. With the deportations and murder of Polish Jews in full swing, the SS ordered a gradual dissolution of the Jewish welfare organization in July 1942.

The Jewish Social Self Help was dedicated to providing assistance to Jews throughout occupied Poland. Its Department of Care for Children and Teenagers (especially significant for this study) was further subdivided into four sections: closed care (orphanages), care for babies, open care (care centers and foster families), and care for children and teenagers. This Department together with the Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Care, took initiatives to monitor and provide care to youngsters, first in German-occupied Kraków, and then in the ghetto. The activities of the Section of Care for Children were delineated in a Plan of Work Program drafted by JDC members in Warsaw in January 1941. According to it, the Section was charged with

organizing help and examining the life situation of children; caring for orphans and abandoned children; feeding; and providing clothing and other basic needs.

The documents of the Kraków Municipal Jewish Care Committee, which was part of the Jewish Social Self Help, provide important data regarding the situation of children in the first months of the ghetto's existence. One of the urgent matters related to the situation of refugees. In its meeting protocol from 17 December 1941, the ŻKO was concerned with the sudden increase in the number of children in the ghetto due to the forced settlement of Jews from the vicinity of Kraków.⁹ The committee feared that the overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions and varying levels of hygiene among the newly arrived people were conducive to an epidemic outbreak. As a solution, the protocol called for an increase in sanitary workers from eleven to forty-five, and finally to fifty people. The ŻKO members argued that this would allow for greater effectiveness in monitoring the children's hygiene and their housing conditions. Eventually, the workers of the Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Care examined about 300 children that month.¹⁰ It appears that the Committee members and social workers wanted to reach as many children as possible in order to examine and document their and their families' living conditions, and possibly use their findings to establish a plan of action and list of needs.

That same protocol also provides insight into the ŻKO financial situation. Until 15 December 1941, the Committee's monthly budget was only 1,300 złoty. Faced with inadequate funding, it nevertheless allocated 550 złoty for the care of the community's youngest members: 200 złoty to the orphanage, the same sum to day care, and 150 złoty to the hostel. The fact that the Committee allocated a relatively large sum towards child relief efforts signifies the

⁹ Jewish Social Self Help, "Protocol of the meeting of the Jewish Care Committee of the City of Kraków held on 17 December 1941." USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

¹⁰ Jewish Social Self Help, "Protocol of the meeting of the Jewish Care Committee of the City of Kraków held on 12 January 1942." USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

importance of sustaining child life in the ghetto. The equal distribution of money to the orphanage and the day care points to the recognition of dire life circumstances of children and their families, and the significance of both institutions to the Committee's mission. Faced with scarce financial resources, the Committee used creative ways to raise funds for the three institutions.

The JSS organized an entire social action around the "Month for the Child" appeal in November 1941.¹¹ The poster advertising the event encouraged Jews that "By Making a Pledge to the Jewish Self Help – You Help Hungry and Homeless Children!" The motto of the fundraiser referred to the conscience and emotions of the Jewish people, "The Jews have always cared deeply about orphans. Nowadays, the orphans are not only children without a mother or father, but all those cute creatures, whose mother or father, despite their efforts, cannot support them. Kraków Jews hold a centuries-old tradition, with a respectable history of service. The child has always found devoted caretakers, and its needs have always been properly understood." The proclamation called for assuring that no child was left hungry or without shelter. It drew attention to the reality that most, if not all, children, irrespective of having parents or caretakers or being orphaned, were in need of assistance. The advertisement for the fundraiser also called to established values of community and social responsibility. The Jewish community was urged to participate actively in building a network of assistance to youngsters.

The "Month for the Child" was an adult initiative, but the participation of children was crucial for moving adults to reach deep into their pockets despite their poverty and need to support their own families. The program included a performance entitled "Children for Children" by youngsters from the orphanage and the CENTOS day care. The entire performance was

¹¹ Jewish Social Self Help, "Poster and program advertising the Month of the Child," November 1941. USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

directed by Maria Billig-Kleinbergowa. Kids together with the artistic director prepared ten scenes. Children from the orphanage appeared in “Kittens” (rhythmic gymnastics), “Mushrooms” (performed by the youngest orphans), “Balloons,” singing Yiddish songs written by Mordechai Gebirtig, and a dance “Puppet with a Doll.” Children from the CENTOS day care performed “Dwarfs” (the youngest children), “Old Rynek” (a dancing pantomime to Mahler’s Symphony I), an orchestra performance, singing Yiddish songs written by Gebirtig, a Hawaiian dance, and a Waltz with orchestra.

If for adults the program was a fundraising event, for the children it seemed as an opportunity for self-expression. The entire enterprise shows the importance attached to the event, while the performances provided a way for children to feel important and for adults to engage them in creative activities, as well as to impart in them an appreciation for art, music, and dance. Simultaneously, the preparation for the event involved learning about Jewish heritage through Yiddish songs to gain a deeper appreciation for their identity as Jews. The performances allowed the children to take part in activities that were vital to their development. Unfortunately, while we see what went into the program (organizational effort, energy, commitment), we do not know what came out of it financially or in terms of its impact on the psychic well-being of children.

The need for providing relief efforts to children increased constantly, especially after German actions in the ghetto, and the resources necessary for such work were ever more difficult to obtain. Following the June 1942 *Aktion*, the Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Care conducted a census which revealed that at least 800 children required assistance¹². The Department of Care for Children and Teenagers was no longer effective at that time due to lack of facilities, insufficient number of qualified personnel, and lack of food. In order to alleviate the

¹² Jewish Social Self Help, “Memo regarding the care of children in the Jewish Quarter in Kraków,” 10 July 1942. USHMM 1997.A.0124 reel 31.

situation, the JSH proposed to create more “children’s corners,” led by educators. Such children’s corners were set up outdoors and allowed for care for children whose parents were at work, or for abandoned and orphaned children. This was meant to serve as a temporary solution until the JSH allocated proper space. An educator was responsible for her group of children. The group was further subdivided with each subgroup cared for by older children. Such method was designed as part of the scouting system of substituting adults with younger people and a program of self-education of youth. The issue of food was more problematic, and the policy adopted by the JSS specified that parents had to take care of providing food for their offspring.

The JSH documents present the deteriorating conditions among children in the ghetto, and testify to the organization’s desperate attempts to ameliorate them. In July 1942, the employees of the Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Care visited 95 percent of the children’s homes, making multiple visits to 32.3 percent (of the 95 percent).¹³ Also, 33 percent of children were examined for assessment of their health status (as compared to 29 percent of children examined in May 1942). The major hygienic issue was lice. The lack of basic sanitary conditions led to an increase in head lice from 24.3 percent in May to 33.5 percent. This problem was especially prevalent among girls. Social workers also attributed this situation to the absence of mothers in the daily lives of children. With adults working in the ghetto or drafted for forced labor, children remained without adult supervision for most of the day. Furthermore, with each *Aktion*, one or even two parents or the child’s caretakers were deported, sometimes leaving the child behind. The Department also reported that lice infestation of clothes among children decreased to 10.8 percent from 15.7 percent in May 1942. The examinations did not contribute to the decrease in lice, but frequent visits made hygienic action possible, which led to lower lice

¹³ Jewish Social Self Help “Comments to the report of the Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Care for the month of July 1942,” 3 August 1942. USHMM 1997.A.0124 reel 31.

infestation. The document emphasized that 84 children had been bathed (compared to none in May 1942); and 86 children had been deloused (compared to 90 children in May 1942). The Department took its work seriously and continued delousing and basic sanitary actions, such as washing children's heads, combing their hair, cutting hair, and instructing both children and their mothers about hygiene. Despite the unsanitary conditions in which Jews were forced to live, and the increasing persecutions combined with deportations, Jewish organizations in the ghetto continued to pay attention to the welfare of children. They found purpose in their activity as guardians of child's health and the well-being of the remnants of the community.

CENTOS

An organization devoted solely to helping Jewish children in the ghetto, CENTOS, located on 5 Węgierska Street, cared for about 300 children placed in foster families, and provided assistance to both the orphanage and the hostel. The importance of CENTOS lay in the fact that it created institutions whose goal was to save youngsters from the detrimental physical, educational, and moral effects of the ghetto. The sheer recognition of the problem and the need to address it that led to the reactivation of the organization under the auspices of the JSS show that the fate of its youngest members was a priority for the Jewish community. At the same time, implementing familiar solutions and patterns that had worked in peace time was a way of responding to Nazi anti-Jewish persecution. Caring for children was a form of response to oppression and also a necessary precondition for safeguarding the future of the Jewish people. Children were the most vulnerable group, and assistance in the form of care provided to them was crucial in assuring their well-being.

In Kraków, CENTOS was reactivated on 25 May 1940 in response to the deteriorating situation of Jewish children. First created in 1924 to continue the work of the dissolved Child-Care Department of the JDC, the aim of CENTOS was to serve as an umbrella organization for all child care institutions, and to coordinate common efforts. In Kraków, it was part of the JSS, and existed as the Jewish Care Committee Department of Care for Children and Orphans “CENTOS.” Dr. Józef Steinberg, Rachela Mahler, and Dr. Gizela Thon managed the organization, while Maria Bilizanka (Billig-Kleinberg) directed various events for children.

CENTOS handled various issues related to child’s life. Halina Nelken, a seventeen-year-old girl, joined the organization as a hygienist volunteer in May 1941. “The work consists of checking the housing and health of children (...),” she wrote in her diary.¹⁴ She found it painful to witness the tragedy of Jewish families “It is heartbreaking to see small anemic children with hollow cheeks huddling around their sick mothers.” Apart from inspecting the living conditions of children and their health, CENTOS also provided entertainment to children. The orphanage and hostel cooperated and organized a lottery, combined with a party and artistic program. There were also weekly charity concerts at the orphanage; children sang songs to music, recited poetry, staged performances, or were the audience for entertainment provided to them by adults. All these endeavors helped children by easing the pain of their daily struggles. They diverted children’s thoughts, at least temporarily, from the misery of daily life.

The Patronat Opieki nad Dziećmi byłego Centosu (the Patronage of Care for Children under the auspices of the former CENTOS) located on 37 Józefińska Street¹⁵ issued an appeal to

¹⁴ Halina Nelken, *And yet, I am here!* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. 80.

¹⁵ It is unclear and remains to be determined whether the first location was 37 Józefińska Street, and later 5 Węgierska Street. The name of the institution referred to in the document as “The Patronate of Care for Children under the auspices of the former CENTOS” might be misleading and unclear why the term “of the former CENTOS” is used here. One of several establishments of CENTOS included “patronates,” which were committees in charge of children who were learning a trade, and also supervising boarders in private families and occasionally distributing food and clothing. AJDC, AR 1933/44, Poland reel , folders 821-826.

parents in July 1941. It urged both mothers and fathers of children remaining under the care of the Department to seek advice in all matters related to the children's health and their upbringing. The institution catered to two separate age groups, 3-7 year-olds and 7-12 year-olds, and offered parents separate days to come for advice. This division signifies a recognition of problems appropriate to children in those two separate age groups. Perhaps these were identified by social workers (or psychologists) as they observed children's behavior and scrutinized their living conditions. Possibly the advice hours started in response to popular demand. Adults faced a new set of life conditions, and they had simultaneously to raise and care for children in extreme circumstances. The institution explained the goal of its program as working for the benefit of the children. "We believe it is an important opportunity for the good of their children. We want to find out about the conditions in which the child lives and is being raised at home, and we will try to give advice and help the parents to meet their children's needs."¹⁶ This call to parents reflects the organization's preoccupation with sustaining a cohesive family unit and suggests concern for family life in general.

On a daily basis, the institution of two day care centers served as an important part of organized help to children in the ghetto, and offered places where children could participate in developmentally appropriate activities. The fate of youngsters in the ghetto of course depended upon German policies that were executed through the Judenrat. Thus, in May 1942, the Judenrat ordered a building at 22 Rękawka Street to be vacated for about nine toddlers, who had previously been in Catholic orphanages, and were now to be placed in that location.¹⁷ The Jewish identity of these children could not be established in all instances, but the Judenrat had to comply

¹⁶ "Appeal of the Department of Care for Children under the auspices of former CENTOS on 37 Józefińska Street, 15 July 1941." YIVO 335.1, folder 91.

¹⁷ Jewish Social Self Help, "Protocol of the meeting of the Jewish Care Committee of the City of Kraków held on 12 May 1942." USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

with the German order. The displaced children, who had previously attended the day care at that location, were transferred to the second day care center on 5 Węgierska Street, which was overcrowded by that time.

Despite the difficulties posed by vacating one day care site, the JSS tried to accommodate the children in its other location. It was open between 2:00 PM and 4:00 PM, and catered to children whose parents worked during the day. Children, therefore, had a place to stay indoors for at least two hours and not wander the streets. They participated in activities under the care of educators; while parents were assured that their offspring remained in a relatively safe place. Also, homeless children were encouraged to come to the day care center between 9:00 AM and 5:30 PM.¹⁸ This way children would not be exposed to the dangers that awaited them in the streets of the ghetto. And they could socialize among their peers. It allowed the educators to offer shelter for these children, as well as an opportunity to involve them in activities that fostered a sense of community and appreciation for common heritage. In effect, the day care center, by offering a relatively peaceful place, care, and constructive methods of engaging young minds, extended its role to mediating the debilitating influence of life in ghetto and improving the morale of its charges.

The Jewish Orphanage

Another institution devoted to providing organized help to children in the ghetto was the Jewish Orphanage named after Róża Rockowa. Established in 1847 by the Society of Jewish Women, it was initially located on 64 Dietla Street. At the beginning of the war, the orphanage was directed by Anna Feuerstein; Dawid Kurzman served as the educational director and

¹⁸ Jewish Social Self Help, "Document regarding the soup kitchen for children on Węgierska Street," 25 May 1942. USHMM 1997.A.0124 reel 31.

handled religious matters. Aleksander Biberstein acted as the board director, he represented the orphanage in front of other Jewish institutions and handled the supplies. Engineer Morgenbesser was responsible for renovations and moving, and Dawid Schmelkes and Leib Salpeter handled financial matters. At the end of May 1941, the orphanage was moved into the ghetto on 8 Krakusa Street, where it remained until June 1942. Throughout the existence of the orphanage, members of the Jewish community joined forces to organize and administer the meager resources that they managed to obtain legally and illegally. The orphanage limped along thanks to the donations of ghetto inhabitants, as well as the JSS. The latter supplied the orphanage with food, including flour, cocoa, nutrients, and medicine. Nachum Monderer from Wieliczka supplied the orphanage with meat; and one Mr. Weiss delivered food and coal.

The German authorities interfered in the operation of that institution as they had in the child care centers. By order of the Stadthauptmann, SS-Obersturmbannführer Rudolf Pavlu, at the end of 1941 or the beginning of 1942, the orphanage was forced to accept a group of ten children who were regarded as being of Jewish origin. They had formerly lived in the Catholic day care and nursery at Koletek Street. These were abandoned children of unknown origin raised according to the tenets of the Catholic religion. They had a hard time adapting to life among Jews in the ghetto. How these children were discovered is not clear, but the fact that they were indeed found, selected, and sent to the ghetto sheds light on the perpetrators' attitudes toward children of unconfirmed background, and how important it was for them to remove all Jews or alleged Jews from Aryan life. It also draws attention to the way that the perpetrators viewed Catholic orders, and the degree to which they suspected, were informed of, and knew about the activities of nuns in rescuing Jewish children. The German authorities also ordered the return of Jewish children who were placed in other institutions outside Kraków to be brought to the ghetto.

For example, a mentally disabled boy named Juliusz Propst, transferred from the orphanage to a mental institution in Iwonicz in 1940, had to return to the orphanage in the ghetto.¹⁹

Following the June 1942 *Aktion*, the orphanage was moved to 31 Józefińska Street. About 150 children and 25 staff members had to be accommodated in 220 square meters.²⁰ Sabina Mirowska, a secretary at the institution, testified in the early postwar years that, “It was here that the true Gehenna of Jewish children began.” In September 1942, the head of the Jewish police, Symche Spira, decided to commandeer the building for Jewish policemen and their families. The orphanage was moved again to 41 Józefińska Street. There about 230 children including boys from the Vocational Hostel for Jewish Orphaned Boys were housed. They lived in an area that comprised of one larger room adapted for a sleeping room, and five smaller rooms. At a meeting held between Jewish representatives of ghetto authorities Spira and Michał Pacanower with Kurzmann, Feuerstein, Birnfeld, and Biberstein, several days before the move, the first two promised to help the orphanage. On 28 October 1942, however, the orphanage was surrounded and the children and staff were led to the assembly place at Plac Zgody. A number of boys from the Hostel saved themselves by leaving the building through the roof earlier that morning.²¹

The management of the orphanage responded to the children’s needs and to the functional requirements of the institution. Prompted by the dire financial situation, the orphanage created a broom workshop. Children assembled brooms and the orphanage collected money from sales, which it then spent to support the children.²² The entertainment events held in the

¹⁹ Aleksander Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie* (Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1986), p. 242; testimony of Sabina Mirowska AŻIH 301/1079; Miriam Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse* (Portland, OR: Valentine Mitchell, 1996), pp 240-246.

²⁰ Testimony of Sabina Mirowska AŻIH 301/1079; Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, pp 240-246.

²¹ Testimony of Sabina Mirowska AŻIH 301/1079; Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, pp 240-246.

²² Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, p. 240, 242.

orphanage, such as theatrical performances, concerts, and plays, also served to raise money for the orphanage.²³ When the safety of the children was concerned, the orphanage personnel took rumors seriously and responded accordingly. At some point, there was a rumor in the ghetto that children who had jobs would be treated as adults and would be spared deportation. In light of the news, the orphanage set up a stationary workshop that specialized in making envelopes. Regina Nelken, an orphanage employee and mother of the volunteer CENTOS hygienist Halina, testified about the situation of the little ones. “And the children worked till they dropped. They would return home with their heads aching, sad, exhausted, and resigned.” Due to age “There were some children whom it was impossible to persuade to work; at any opportunity they would run out into the yard, so as to be able for a moment to play at being children: playing tag, swinging on boards, and so on. Others ran away back home and declared categorically that they would not go to work.”²⁴ Roman Polański remembers that in the final weeks of the ghetto’s existence children, including himself and his friend Stefan, were put to work in the orphanage. They received one meal a day and an hour of tutoring. Their work consisted of making paper bags – folding and gumming sheets of brown paper. Roman recalled that Stefan, “Being so little, he found the hours long and demanding. His bags were a gooey mess, but he never cried.”²⁵ It appears as if some work was done in the orphanage by the charges, and at times children were sent there from their own homes to work. Eventually, the workshop served a purpose for the Germans – it was a method of registering the number of children left in the ghetto.

The Vocational Hostel

²³ Testimony of Regina Nelken, AŻIH 301/1078, Nelken, *And yet, I am here!* p. 83.

²⁴ Regina Nelken AŻIH 301/1078; Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, p. 250.

²⁵ Roman Polański (born in 1933), *Roman* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1984), p. 34.

The pre-war Vocational Hostel for Jewish Orphaned Boys (Stowarzyszenie i Bursa Żydowskich Sierot Rękodzielników) housed and cared for about fifty boys between the ages of fourteen and eighteen in the ghetto. Before moving to the Jewish quarter, there were two separate hostels located on 53 Krakowska Street and 6 Podbrzezie Street. In the ghetto, they merged into one institution located on 35 Józefińska Street, and directed by Matylda Schenkerowa. The boys paid a certain amount from their salaries to a common account, and those who worked outside the ghetto brought in food for everyone to share.²⁶ JSS representatives visiting the hostel in April 1942, reported it as located in an appropriate building with a yard and a garden that were adequate for the boys to play. On that date, the hostel was inhabited by 42 boys between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. All boys were employed and they were also assigned chores in the hostel.²⁷ Regina Nelken recounted her perception of the institution: “The hostel was run in exemplary fashion, the children were found apprenticeships in various trades, anything to prove to the authorities that things were working. In the evening, classes were organized.”²⁸ The boys secured food for themselves and proved their usefulness to the authorities. At the same time, the hostel’s management made sure that their charges received some education. Due to the age of its charges, the hostel is an exception in this study. Its existence, however, sheds light on the normalizing effect that institutional care had on youths.

Food and poverty

Child relief efforts in the ghetto, while dedicated to raising the morale of children and the inhabitants generally, also focused on supplying food and addressing the problem of poverty.

²⁶ Biberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, pp 248-250.

²⁷ Jewish Social Self Help, “Report from the visitation of the Vocational Hostel for Jewish Orphaned Boys at 39 Józefińska street in Kraków on 19 April 1942.” USHMM 1997.A.0124 reel 31.

²⁸ Testimony of Regina Nelken, AŻIH 301/1078; Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, p. 247.

Food and hunger were intertwined dimensions of life in ghetto. Based on survivor testimonies, starvation was not prevalent. Still, it was difficult to obtain food and the nutrients necessary for the proper development of children. Because people had little or no income, and not enough goods to barter, hunger was a constant in children's lives.

In the first months of the ghetto existence, Jewish organizations received supplies from abroad. A letter from the JSS in Kraków to a Mrs. Irena Rosenblatt (?) in Warsaw reveals that these supplies probably arrived first in Kraków and were then distributed to other cities throughout the General Government. Mrs. Rosenblatt had received twelve cans of condensed milk thanks to the intervention of the JDC with the German Red Cross.²⁹ It is unclear, however, whether the JSS letter had been sent before the shipment of the condensed milk. The JSS appealed to her to give away some of the milk to sick and malnourished children, preferably through an orphanage or children's feeding center. This short note shows the concern that the Jewish organization had for the health of children. Supplies did not last long, however. By December 1941, the JSS was concerned that the imported reserves of cod liver oil and condensed milk had run out, and a request from the JSS to appropriate more food for children had been denied by Stadhauptmann Pavlu.³⁰ It is clear that the German authorities controlled food supply to the ghetto (even when food products arrived from the Red Cross), and their decisions had a direct impact on who the receiving group was.

The December 1941 ŻKO meeting protocol includes a report by a Department of Care for Children and Teenagers inspector about feeding the poorest children who could not come to the day care because they lacked proper clothing and shoes. The Committee recommended investigating the family situation of such children in order to establish the feasibility of

²⁹ Letter to Irena Rosenblatt from the Jewish Care Committee in Kraków, 29 July 1941. YIVO 335.1, folder 87.

³⁰ Jewish Social Self Help, "Protocol of the meeting of the Kraków Municipal Jewish Care Committee held on 17 December 1941." USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

delivering at least one warm meal daily to those in need. This document testifies to the abject poverty that some families faced, as exemplified by the youngest members of the families. The children were singularly affected by destitution, and their dire situation required them to spend their days at home, not able even to go outside. Because adults had to work and had their own needs, including clothes, children's needs slipped to the margins. Such a situation undermined family morale, both for those who experienced it and for those who witnessed it. The ŻKO recognized the existence of such destitute people and malnourished children, and made efforts to address their conditions.

A month later, in January 1942, a Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Care inspector reported on the destitution of children who could not attend day care because they had no clothes or shoes to wear.³¹ The children from the Józefińska Street asylum must have been in the same dire straits. They were forbidden to leave the building, and thus could not have received warm meals at the day care center. The hygiene officer reported horrible conditions of children who, without clothes and shoes, lay in straw. Housing conditions were equally miserable: many apartments had no stoves. Inhabitants lived in the cold and could not cook a warm meal. The only food that many of the children in this situation received was rutabagas. The hygiene officers tried to provide basic underwear and one warm meal daily to these children.

Dr. Tisch, the director of the Department of Care for Children and Teenagers reported in March 1942 on the situation of the soup kitchens on 5 Węgierska Street and 22 Rękawka Street, where approximately 230 children were registered to receive meals. About 200 children were fed potato soup with grain at 5 Węgierska Street.³² All children admitted to being hungry after

³¹ Jewish Social Self Help, "Protocol of the meeting of the Jewish Care Committee of the City of Kraków held on 12 January 1942." USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

³² Jewish Social Self Help, "Memo regarding the visitation of soup kitchen for children" 30 March 1942. USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

having eaten this dinner. The children's main meal consisted of one warm dish; supper consisted of bread with marmalade. The soup kitchen's staff received more nutritious meals than the children. While they ate their meals, their charges were required to leave the premises. Perhaps this practice was instituted to avoid adverse reactions by the children and suppress guilt on the part of staff for eating, while many children were still hungry after they had left the table. A visit to the hostel in April 1942 revealed, by contrast, that the forty-two boys received large nutritious dinners that consisted of three dishes: thick soup with beans, potatoes with gravy, and carrots. Their situation was slightly different, however.³³ As we have seen, these were older boys who either trained for jobs or worked, and their earnings contributed to the overall better situation of the hostel residents.

The ŻKO reported on 12 May 1942 that between 200 and 230 children received dinner at the day care center; between 90 and 100 children received breakfast; and about 130 children received supper. Meals were no longer delivered to children at their homes, unless a child's medical condition required it.³⁴ The fact that many children received warm meals at the center was a relief to working mothers. Unfortunately, on 15 July 1942, the German authorities prohibited providing extra meals to children.³⁵ The order meant that if children received meals at home or in a day care facility, they were not allowed to receive extra meals in soup kitchens or other facilities.

Medical help – the Infectious Disease Hospital

³³ Jewish Social Self Help, "Report from the visitation of the Vocational Hostel for Jewish Orphaned Boys at 39 Józefińska street in Kraków on 19 April 1942." USHMM 1997.A.0124 reel 31.

³⁴ Jewish Social Self Help, "Protocol of the meeting of the Jewish Care Committee of the City of Kraków held on 12 May 1942." USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

³⁵ Jewish Social Self Help, "Circular Nr 64," 15 July 1942. USHMM 1997 A.0124, reel 31.

Apart from the organizations created to provide relief for children in the ghetto, there was another institution that cared for the youngest members of the community – the Infectious Disease Hospital, located on 30 Rękawka Street. There were many child patients in the hospital, who suffered from a number of diseases including typhoid fever, hepatitis, scarlet fever, measles, and inflammatory diseases. The hospital workers and volunteers showed sensitivity to the children, extended kindness to them, and offered them humane treatment. Halina Nelken wrote about the one child whom she cared for and remembered best: “Among the many children, there is one severely retarded five-year-old boy who is like a small, helpless animal, unable to speak, sit up, use his hands to eat. He just lies there without making a sound, even when he has wet himself.” She recalled what perhaps other staff members had to face, “I fed him, with aversion at first, but when he politely swallowed the food and looked at me with such trust in his big eyes, I felt tenderness for this beautiful, unfortunate child and caressed his smooth cheek.”³⁶ Children such as that boy required a special kind of attention and dedication. Witnessing human tragedy on a daily basis could have desensitized the staff. The example of Nelken shows, however, that there were individuals who maybe have had contradictory feelings, but in the end maintained respect for the youngest and the most defenseless.

Towards the final liquidation – the *Kinderheim* and *Tagesheim*

After the October 1942 *Aktion*, the Kraków ghetto was divided into “Ghetto A” for working people; and “Ghetto B” for those without work and for children. By order of the German authorities, the head of the Jewish police, Symcha Spira and the head of the Judenrat, Dawid Gutter, created two institutions: a *Tagesheim* (day care) in Ghetto A and a *Kinderheim* (children’s home) in Ghetto B. Henryk Zvi Zimmerman, a member of the ghetto underground,

³⁶ Nelken, *And yet, I am here!* p. 84.

remembered the tragic situation of children half a century later. “One had to have a lot of love and emotional strength in order to help these kids.” He went on to explain the underground members’ worries about the children’s safety. “We were afraid to assemble them in one place, because we knew what the risk was.” The underground was skeptical about the idea of a group home, “but soon we received information that Gutter, Streimer, and Spira were working zealously to create a *Kinderheim*. They wanted to persuade the Jewish community through this zeal that they are caring activists. Children up to the age of fourteen were supposed to be housed in this place.” The undertaking was seen as assisting the Germans, enabling them to destroy the lives of children under the veil of relief efforts. “From trusted people we knew that this was being done by order of the German superiors. Gutter and his aides wanted to incorporate the activity of this facility into the activity of our social welfare organization. We wanted to avoid participation, not wishing to contribute to an enterprise which aimed to deceive children who trusted us.”³⁷ The creation of the *Kinderheim* elucidates the tensions surrounding what was considered the appropriate course of action toward the children’s fate in the ghetto.

The *Tagesheim* was initially located on Limanowskiego Street, but due to the increasing number of children, it was moved to a building on the corner of Józefińska and Krakusa streets. The *Tagesheim* included bedrooms, a play room, a dining room, and a section for babies. Despite the best intentions of the teachers and nurses who cared for the children, the youngsters’ condition deteriorated. Although they received food, their psychological condition needed specialized attention – they were nervous, sleepless, and often cried. These children were of different ages, some were homeless, some orphaned, and some had been previously hidden by Poles, and brought back into the ghetto. There were also children of unknown origin. A girl

³⁷ Henryk Zvi Zimmerman, *Przeżyłem, pamiętam, świadczę*, (Kraków: Wydawn. Baran i Suszczyński, 1997) pp 139-140.

named Janina Tarlińska (or Tarłowska) was one such child. She claimed her parents lived on Dietla Street and she asked her caretaker, Regina Nelken to contact a Protestant pastor outside the ghetto to take her out. The girl tried to leave the ghetto and Regina had to calm her down. Just before the liquidation of the ghetto, Janina fell ill with measles and Regina was unable to save her. Giving her testimony in the immediate postwar years to the Central Commission of Jews in Poland, Regina was still uncertain whether the child indeed was gentile, and placed in the ghetto by mistake.³⁸

The *Kinderheim* served as a day care facility and an orphanage. Tadeusz Pankiewicz, one of the few gentiles allowed to do business in the ghetto (he owned the Pharmacy Under the Eagle on Plac Zgody), recorded in his diary: “The *Kinderheim* was filled every day with scores of children who entered willingly and with joy, without even the slightest hint in their innocence of the immense danger and tragedy that was imminent.” Reflecting on this initiative he wrote, “Just imagine that all this was done just for the few weeks before the pre-set date for the murder of all the children who attended the *Kinderheim*. But the children worked happily and the parents were pleased with their elation and with their progress.”³⁹ The educators, by contrast, were impressed by the children’s unnaturally peaceful behavior. They worried that it might have more to do with trauma than to normal child behavior. Pearl Benisch recalled a conversation she had with an educator: “‘I often work with these kids at night,’ Ruchka [Reinhold] once told me. ‘They baffle me. They’re four or five years old. They rarely wake up at night like normal children, and when they do, they don’t cry. They don’t ask for anything. They just lie still or talk to themselves quietly. There’s no one to cuddle them. No matter how [hard] Dr. Bieberstein tries to make them

³⁸ Testimony of Regina Nelken, AŻIH 301/1078; Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, p. 249.

³⁹ Tadeusz Pankiewicz, *The Cracow Ghetto Pharmacy* (Washington, DC: USHMM, 2000), p. 97.

feel like children, they're just haunted little Jews, scared, frightened, always on the watch. Knowing little Jews.”⁴⁰

The number of children in the ghetto doubled after the October 1942 *Aktion* in the Jewish quarter and other *Aktionen* in the vicinity of Kraków. Sabina Mirowska testified: “Outside the gates of the ghetto stood Jewish children who had either run away themselves from the *Aktionen* or who had been brought in by Poles. These children were taken to the Orphans’ Home at the order and on the recommendation of the head of the Jewish police, Symche Spira.”⁴¹ The overcrowding led to terrible living conditions in the orphanage. Two to three children slept in one bed. The newly arrived charges were unwashed; they suffered from scabies and lice which threatened to infect other children. Mirowska admitted: “It became clear later that the Germans had so graciously agreed that we should take the children in as a trap that had been planned from the beginning.”⁴²

Survivors who were children at the time recalled the steady deterioration of life in the ghetto, and in the children’s home in particular. Blanche Fixler was taken to the ghetto and placed in the *Kinderheim* once her aunt, who lived on false papers on the Aryan side, could not take care of her anymore. Blanche recalled that the sanitary conditions in the *Kinderheim* were horrendous – it was dirty and filthy. She was full of lice and her braids had to be cut off. She regarded the *Kinderheim* as an enclave where children could stay together and off the streets. She remembered that there was no one to take care of the children in the final days of the home. The adults had been taken away in other actions, and there was just not enough educators. She also recalled the scarcity of food. Children had no activities, but they still had to keep themselves occupied somehow. Blanche’s testimony illuminates the feeling of an impending end, even when

⁴⁰ Pearl Benisch, *To Vanquish the Dragon* (Jerusalem; New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1991), p. 177.

⁴¹ Testimony of Sabina Mirowska, AŻIH 301/1079; Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, p. 242.

⁴² Testimony of Sabina Mirowska, AŻIH 301/1079, Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, p. 243.

she was still housed in the children's home. Blanche's aunt visited her sometimes. Hearing rumors about an *Aktion*, her aunt decided to smuggle Blanche out of the ghetto.⁴³

Despite the destitution, misery, disease, dirt, and lack of food, Jewish organizations in the ghetto continued their relief efforts, at least by providing shelter. Mala Sendyk and her sister were put in the *Kinderheim* while their mother was at work. Mala recalled that she was starving while there. She vividly remembered that when the caretakers did not want to comb her hair anymore, the prevalence of lice meant that she had to have her hair cut off. Faced with insufficient number of educators, children had to take care of themselves and of other young people in the home. Eventually, she claimed, children were put to work cleaning the home, scrubbing floors and washing overflowing toilets.⁴⁴ For the lucky few, who had a parent, sibling, or relative in the ghetto who could take them out, there was some hope for change, or just the hope of being taken care of by a member of the family. Then there were those few children who either had a relative passing on the Aryan side, or an opportunity to be smuggled out of the ghetto. Mala's mother decided to take her out. Mala remained in the *Kinderheim* for three to four months, and then sneaked out of the ghetto.

There were children in the *Kinderheim* as in other institutions who were of uncertain origin, as well as those regarded as Jews by the Nazis. Lili, a child of a German soldier and a Jewish woman, was one such example. She was placed in a boarding school in Zakopane, Poland, but since her father died in the war, the money for tuition stopped. Upon discovery of the girl's origins, Lili was placed in the Kraków ghetto. Witnesses recorded that Lili missed her father so much that, with a NSDAP label pinned to her sweater, she called out to the German soldiers to take her with them. Sabina Mirowska recalled the girl's predicament. "It was difficult

⁴³ Testimony of Blanche Fixler (born on 15 May 1936), VHASH 33934.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Mala Sendyk (born on 13 September 1936), VHASH 42440.

for her to get on with the other children because they could not understand each other.” Lili’s upbringing influenced her attitude towards other children. “She kept her distance, she felt herself to be a German and, subconsciously, she thought she was superior.” In the end, however, “she met the same fate as the other children.”⁴⁵ During the liquidation of the ghetto, the children in the *Kinderheim* were brutally murdered by the Germans.

Conclusion

The examination of child relief efforts in the Kraków ghetto illuminates the life circumstances of children and adds to our understanding of the range of Jewish responses to oppression. It shows that despite the adversities of ghetto life and the conditions imposed by the Germans, Jewish organizations strived to provide assistance to the youngest members of the community. In them they saw the future of the Jewish people. Addressing the situation of children was meant to improve the morale of the ghetto inhabitants. Knowing that their children were fed, clothed, and taken care of, parents were to some extent relieved of additional worries. The work of Jewish organizations also contributed to creating some sort of semblance of normal life by providing assistance to the most needy and giving people hope. Ghetto inmates were for the most part and up to a certain time spared the public view of children’s misery. Relief workers and Jewish institutions managed to organize help for children as their life conditions deteriorated. The persistent emphasis of Jewish organizations on the importance of providing assistance to children for the sake of their physical and emotional well-being looms large.

Since the activities of Jewish organizations and the lives of ghetto inhabitants, including children, were framed by Nazi policies, the exploration of relief efforts elucidates the extent to

⁴⁵ Testimony of Sabina Mirowska, AŻIH 301/1079; Hochberg-Mariańska, *Children Accuse*, p. 243; Testimony of Regina Nelken AŻIH 301/1078; Nelken, *And yet, I am here!* p. 174; Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, p. 246.

which the perpetrators interfered in Jewish life. The Jewish authorities in the ghetto fulfilled German orders, and members of Jewish organizations tried to appease German authorities in order to continue their work. Their “cooperation” with the occupying forces may have been in good faith. Perhaps it was for personal benefit. But their struggles to sustain child life are clear. In the end, the perpetrators’ policies regarding food and other goods distribution, assignment of children to specific institutions, deciding who was considered a Jew, conducting actions in the ghetto, and deceiving the Jews throughout, were well beyond the Jewish organizations’ and authorities’ realm of influence. This is not to say that Kraków ghetto, or the activities of Jewish relief agencies in Kraków ghetto, for that matter, were unique, but it is crucial to acknowledge the variations of Jewish life under Nazi occupation and how these shaped the range and extent of responses of Jewish institutions to the plight of the youngest victims of the community.