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PARENTHOOD IN THE SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST

During World War II Jewish parents under Nazi occupation experienced unimaginable difficulties as they tried to function according to what they believed was their parental responsibility, which included first of all safe haven to the children, to supply enough food, to care for their health and education. The degree of each of the factors mentioned differed according to country and class. In the eastern European ghettos the situation was extremely complex: When hunger, forced labor, and death became the daily experience, living conditions were next to impossible and parents faced unbearable dilemmas in their efforts to maintain the family and their parental responsibility. Nevertheless, the family remained central to life in the ghetto, serving as both a support and a burden. Parents lived in constant tension trying to care for both their own lives and the lives of their children.

When we read the primary documents of the time – diaries, letters, memoirs, and other sources – as well as the oral testimonies that were recorded later, we confront a paradox. On the one hand, we see parents who are totally devoted to their children and ready to sacrifice their own lives to save a child. On the other hand, these same sources describe parents who neglect and desert their children. Because the contemporary documentation is fragmented, in both formal and personal sources, it is difficult if not completely impossible to follow individual families from the years that preceded the war through their entire ghetto experience. Therefore scholars should be careful and cautious with any generalizations.

My recent work has examined two dimensions of family experiences in the ghetto. In “Cohesion and Rupture: The Jewish Family in the East European Ghettos during the Holocaust,” I explored tensions within the family unit, and in “Motherhood under Siege,” I looked at the pressures on

mothers. In this paper I add a third dimension, the role of men as fathers and husbands. One should remember however, that the role of fathers is strongly connected with that of mothers and that the family should be discussed as a unit.¹

Parenthood has a life cycle that is related to the age of children and parents and to the size of the family. Understanding parenthood is dependent upon the relationship between couples and the structure of the family. Beyond the individual case of each couple and the particular relationships among family members, which will display a different reality in each case, parenthood is a cultural concept and contains a gendered code of conduct and responsibilities of both father and mother.² The definition of responsibilities and norms reflects both the partnership and the particularity of each of the partners in organizing the family and caring for its members, in the context of society's cultural conventions, class and gender relations.

I would like to explore how parents endeavored to maintain their basic obligations and responsibilities towards their children, and how this affected their identity as parents and their self image. What were the results of the traumatic events following the war and of confinement in the ghetto on their behavior as parents? Were parents aware of the ever-growing crisis in their ability to sustain and live according to norms and conventions that guided life prior to the ghetto enclosure, and how did they react?

One should bear in mind that many parents of the 1930s and 1940s experienced the hardships of the First World War and the economic and political crisis of its aftermath. The

¹ Dalia Ofer, *Cohesion and Rupture: The Jewish Family in East European Ghettos during the Holocaust*, in: *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 14 (1998), 143–165; “Motherhood under Siege, in: Esther Hertzog (Ed.), *Life, Death and Sacrifice: Women and Family in the Holocaust*, Jerusalem/New York 2008, 41–67.

² There is a vast literature on the topic, but I rely mainly on the classic work of William J. Goode, *The Family*, Engelwood Cliffs, NJ 1982, because of the strong connection he draws between culture and family structure.

1930s were difficult years for a majority of the Jewish population in eastern Europe because of the new economic crisis and the rise of antisemitism. It became more difficult to provide for the family and thus a growing number of eastern European Jewish women were compelled to work. Over 30 percent were employed in industry and commerce, but many more were working in small family businesses, and not included in that statistic.³

At the same time, parents were being educated differently. On one hand, many young Jews took advantage of public education, which became obligatory in the 1920s, and a considerable group participated in supplementary Jewish education of different forms. However, there were also many youngsters who continued to attend traditional religious institutions – the *heder* and the *yeshivah*. How different were the younger parents who were raised in a modern Polish-Jewish culture from their parents' and grandparents in their feelings and expression of love and affection between spouses and between parents and their children?

Shaul Stampfer's research on the interwar period showed the increased importance of a love, affection and a romantic relationship between Jewish young men and women entering marriage. This was more prevalent among the lower and lower middle classes, where economic considerations in marriage were less important than in the middle and upper middle class.⁴ Can we follow this growing centrality of love and affection into the ghetto and see how it is manifested in strong mutual bonds between spouses and between parents and children in both the nuclear and the extended family the parents of married couples?

³ Bina Garnazarska-Kadary, "Changes in the Material Situation of the Jewish Workers in Poland, 1930-1931" (Hebrew), in: *Gal'ed* 9 (1986), 169, table 8.

⁴ Shaul Stampfer, "How Jewish Society Adapted to Change in Male/Female Relationships in 19th/Early 20th-Century Eastern Europe," in: Rivkah Blau (Ed.), *Gender Relationships in Marriage and Out*, New York 2007, 65–83.

What were the major tasks of parents in prewar years and how did they change in the ghetto? Parents viewed their main responsibility in the family as an economic one – to care for the basic physical of both children and adults by providing food, clothing, and housing. The gendered roles of parents placed upon the husband the provision of the financial foundation while the wife managed the household, taking care of food preparation, clothing, and cleanliness. This gendered division of labor was normative even in middle and lower class families, where women worked.

In addition to its vital economic role, in all societies the family has also been responsible for transmitting culture and social placement to ensure that children would grow up to become productive members of society and conform to its values and conventions. Assumptions about gendered roles lead to a distinction between the upbringing of boys and girls, in particular in the sphere of education. In addition to the formal schooling that boys and girls received, fathers were responsible for the religious education of their boys and so enrolled them in a religious institution, while the mothers had to ensure that their daughters, through their home experience, would be able to manage a Jewish household. These functions were central to the achievement of the social goals of the family. In this respect the parents provided continuity and the transmission of tradition.

In this context one must consider the impact of emancipation and revolutionary movements such as Communism, Bundism, and Zionism on the ability of parents to be efficient agents of tradition. A growing number of Jewish youths experienced a growing mental and educational divide with their parents, which led to conflicts. (Calel Perechodnik, who will be discussed further, is one example of this phenomenon.) However, some researchers claim that these differences in perspective enabled Jewish adolescents and young adults to become independent and select their own way of realizing

their life vision.⁵ We want to explore what happened to this sense of independence and freedom when confined to the ghetto and whether it affected the solidarity between adolescent youths and their parents.

Another important responsibility of parents was to provide their children with psychological support and give them a sense of self-assurance. We must remember, however, that the centrality of psychological self-confidence, as it is understood today by parents, was not shared by most parents during the years under consideration. However, from the YIVO collection of autobiographies of youth (based on essays written in Poland in 1930s), we learn that many young children were critical of their parents as their emotional supporters. They complained that parents did not understand their needs and ignored their emotional stress. Moreover, they often stressed that parents considered provision of the basic economic needs fulfillment of their obligations and were hoping that the children would soon grow up and participate in providing for the family's economic wellbeing. Authors of the autobiographies often criticized the relationship between their parents and testified to the lack of love and care. In lower classes, both mother and father were absent from home for long hours and often an older sister took care of the younger siblings. Boys spent long days in the *heder* which made up for the absence of a parent from home. However, descriptions of neglect are apparent in a number of the autobiographies and in other sources as well.⁶

⁵ Matat Adar-Bunis, "Childhood in Middle-Class Jewish Families in Poland-Lithuania in the 19th Century: The Rise of Youth Movements" (Hebrew), in: *Sociologia Yisraelit* 7, no.2 (2005), 351–80. The divide between parents and children are apparent in biographies and memoirs of Holocaust survivors, see, Avihu Ronen, *Condemned to Life: The Diaries and Life of Chajka Klinger* (Hebrew), Haifa 2011; Bella Guterman, *Zyvia the One* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv/Jerusalem 2011.

⁶ Jeffrey Shandler (Ed.), *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust*, New Haven 2002, especially the autobiographies of: Khane: 20–50; Esther: 321–43, and Yudl: 391–403; For an extensive description of the family and the internal relationship

In middle-class families the involvement of parents in their children's development was probably more evident. Calel Perechodnik, a young man from Otwock who left a diary in which he recorded his ghetto experience, provides us with a detailed portrait of growing up in Poland including a discussion of his home that stresses his relationship with his parents. As he introduces himself, we learn:

I was born in Warsaw, on September 9, 1916, into a family of average Jews, a relatively well-to-do, so-called middle-class family. They were honest people, with a strong family instinct, characterized on the part of the children by affection and attachment to their parents and on the part of the parents by a sacrificial devotion to the material well being of the children. I emphasize "material" because there were no spiritual bonds that tied me or my siblings to our parents. They did not try, or perhaps were not able, to understand us. To put it briefly, each of us was raised on his own; influenced by schooling, friends, books we read; conscious of our won material independence; and living in an atmosphere of free expression and thought in the years 1925-1935.⁷

This paragraph confirms the fundamental understanding of many Jewish parents towards their children, but also reveals the criticism of the younger generation, who were more educated and knowledgeable in psychology. Perechodnik wrote that his own marriage was a love marriage, and his strong emotional bonds to his wife and daughter are evident from his despair when they were deported from the ghetto to their death. I will later draw on Perechodnik's self-image as a husband and father and his attitude to his own father as examples of the complexity of parenthood.

Historical research on the family and parenthood during the Holocaust presents a number of major methodological

within the family based on the YIVO collection of autobiographies, see Ido Basok, *Aspects of Education of Jewish Youth in Poland between the World Wars in Light of Autobiographies by Jewish Youth from the YIVO Collection*, PhD dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009, (Hebrew) 56-118.

⁷ Calel Perechodnik, *Am I a Murderer: Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*, Boulder, CO 1996, xxii.

questions that emerge from the difficulty of finding the adequate documentation to enter into the life experience of specific families. The documentation on the family, as in many other topics of daily life during the Holocaust, is fragmented. Reflections on the situation of the family and parenthood are recorded in two types of documents. First, there are the formal documentations of the ghetto, such as Judenrat meetings, police reports, or the chronicles such as the one of the Lodz ghetto. Alongside of these sources are personal writings that typically discuss these issues in more detail, and more emotionally. The historical analysis endeavors to integrate all available sources and to contextualize them with the particular reality of each ghetto. In the following I will divide my discussion between non personal records found in ghetto archives, such as the chronicle, and contemporary private diaries, of which some were also found in ghetto archives. I will discuss each genre separately and integrate them in the final discussion.

Non Personal Ghetto Archives Documentation

The following entry is from *The Lodz Chronicle*, which was compiled under the auspices of the Judenrat. On January 12, 1941, the chronicle reports under the title “The Little Denouncer”: “An eight-year-old boy complained to the police that his parents had deprived him of his bread ration; he asked the police to punish them. Interpretations are redundant...”⁸

Needless to say, shortage of food and hunger were inherent in the daily life of the Lodz ghetto. However, the report of a child who was deprived of the little that was available, demonstrates, at first glance, a violation of the fundamental

⁸ *Chronikah shel geto Lodz*, trans. and annotated by Arie Ben-Menachem and Joseph Rab, 4 vols, Jerusalem 1986–89, 1:5. A selection from the Chronicle was translated into English as Lucjan Dobroszycki (Ed.), *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto 1941–1944*, New Haven/London 1984). Whenever a citation appears in the English version, I will cite it; in all other cases, the citation is my own translation from the Hebrew version.

responsibility of the parents towards their children. It shows us that the ghetto authorities could intervene in the private sphere, and that ghetto institutions enabled a child to complain about his parents. Does it hint at recurring violations of this kind? From the comment of the author of this item that “interpretations are redundant” can we conclude that it was a well-known phenomenon?

The interpretation of this episode remains open. What information is available to the reader about this particular family? We know only that the child dared complain. But we do not know why the parents deprived him of food? Were there other children in the family that, for some reason, the parents thought should get a larger portion of the bread? Or perhaps there was a sick child or a sick parent in the family and therefore the parents had to sell the bread ration to buy medicine? Or was this an act of parental punishment? Was it a regular behavior of negligence and inability to confront the hardship? The title that the writer of the chronicle gave this item is derogative; does it hint at anything? We are unable to answer any of the questions and are left perplexed.

The issue becomes more complex when we read in the *Chronicle*, under the title “A Story That Repeats Itself,” of a family in the ghetto which tried to save one of the children who contracted tuberculosis. The doctor recommended sending the boy to the hospital and then keeping him at home with good nutrition. The parents gave up part of their food allotment and the mother became so weak that she could not go to work. The older sister, too, contributed some of her food for her brother and also asked to work night shifts, so that she could get a larger food allotment and give it to her brother. However, the condition of the boy did not improve. The family began selling the last household items, their shoes, and their clothing to buy better food. After some time the older sister also fell ill, her condition quickly deteriorated, and the doctor said that she would no longer be admitted to the hospital. Oskar Rosenfeld, who wrote this section in the *Chronicle*, concluded: “They tried the impossible to save the one that was

going to die, and by doing this the other members of the family were joining the last road. [...] These reoccur every day, one family after the other is destroyed, the son, father, mother, sister – it is always the same story, but in a different order.”⁹

This report and commentary in the *Chronicle*, which were written in the last year of the ghetto’s existence, reveal the “high high price” of love and devotion. The mutual responsibility of the parents, brothers, and sisters created a chain of death, which was typical of the unmanageable situation. Was the value of family cohesion stronger than the will to live? Was the life of one member of the family more important than the life of another? We are again left with unsolved questions.

The *Lodz Chronicle* also records one “typical document of life” – the request by a wife to divorce her husband:

I ask to divorce my husband, because he is not ready to support his family. We are a family of five. A short time ago we were six – my thirteen-year-old daughter died of starvation. I beg for mercy for my other three children, since we are unable to live like this. My husband is working in the carpenters’ *restore* [the term used in Lodz for the small ghetto workshops] and we get no allowances. For the last two years there is no peace at home – fights and battering occur every day. I cannot bear it any longer. I plead for help; I have no other way to save my life.¹⁰

One should ask: What was the meaning of divorce in the ghetto? Was the husband forced to leave the apartment or the one room that the family shared? With poor housing conditions, this could present a difficult problem for the man. Documents testify that men who filled higher positions in the ghetto often had a lover or left their wives and took a younger woman as a wife or partner.¹¹

Returning to the case recorded in the *Chronicle*, here we may gain some information about relationships within the

⁹ *Chronikah shel geto Lodz*, 4:389, May 29, 1944.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:307, Dec. 21, 1941.

¹¹ Leib Garfunkel, *The Destruction of Jewish Kovno*, Jerusalem 1959, 255; Rachel Auerbach, *Warsaw’s Testaments* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1985, 109–112.

family in the years that preceded the ghetto period. The complaints about two years of bad relationships go back to the beginning of the war and the confinement to the ghetto. However, the date may assist in understanding the period that the complaints were lodged. From December 1941, when the deportations from the ghetto to Chelemno began, the tension among ghetto inmates mounted.¹²

During the fall of 1941, Jews from the Reich were deported to the Lodz ghetto and the prices of food skyrocketed. Hunger and starvation increased and working conditions in the ghetto deteriorated. The husband in this case, who was employed in the carpenters' *restore*, undoubtedly experienced this. Carpentry was an important industry in the ghetto, one which in the course of two years the number of workers doubled. In 1943, 450 such workshops were in operation.

The carpenters' *restore*, however, went through a traumatic period in early 1941. Its 700 workers felt exploited and in order to improve their working conditions initiated a strike. They demanded a raise of 10–20 Pfenning per hour for the four categories of workers; that half the salary be paid in food products; an additional soup, not charged against the ration card; and reinstatement of the supplement of 500 grams of bread (Rumkowski had just set a bread ration of 400 grams both for those working and for non-workers). The strike lasted some ten days (Jan. 23 to Feb. 2, 1941), and provoked a few other *restores* to join in, but in the end it failed. The workers went back to work after a number of them were arrested, food rations and payments were taken away from them and their families, and a few were injured by the Jewish police who used violence. Following these events the workers' spirits

¹² During this period 70,672 people were deported from the ghetto and the 92,054 who remained lived through lesser crises until the final liquidation of the ghetto during July–August 1944. Michal Unger, *Lodz: The Last Ghetto in Poland* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2005, 311.

were very low and their sense of camaraderie was strongly undermined.¹³

What can we conclude from these events – and our general knowledge about the work conditions in the carpenters' *restore* – about the sore behavior of the husband towards his wife and children? Can we reach any tentative conclusion about the couple's parenting?

Could this assist in understanding the timing of the divorce request? In just a few weeks massive deportations started and single mothers were more vulnerable to be deported; thus, many single women tried to join with a man in the hope that it would prevent their deportation.¹⁴ In some ghettos, such as Vilna and Kovno, it was the policy of the Jewish Council to register single women and orphaned children with a man as a family to avoid their selection or to get them a safer work permit. Under these conditions, a request for divorce by a woman with three children seems very unusual. Could she count on the divorce and the allowance to improve her economic situation, and that she would be able to care for her three children?

We are unable to push the sources that far and apply our historical imagination to create such a particular narrative with the information at hand. However, when we add the information that 102 divorce requests were filed in the ghetto between September 1942 – when a Divorce Board was established in the ghetto (abolishing the religious divorce ceremony) – and November 1943, we may question whether in ghetto conditions divorce was more common than we had imagined. However, from the general number one is unable to learn about motivations and the condition of those who filed for divorce.

The story of Bajli a fifteen-year-old girl from Warsaw, as found in the Ringelblum archives, described a different

¹³ Joseph Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days: Notes from the Lodz Ghetto* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1994, 201–28; Isaiah Trunk, *Lodz Ghetto: A History*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 2006, 324–28, 372–78; the latter pages are a translation from the Yiddish of Zelkowicz's notes. The paragraph describing the workers' demands uses the translation of Trunk, p. 372.

¹⁴ Unger, *Lodz*, 331–34.

story of a family that was on the brink of starvation.¹⁵ The father was a furrier who had lost his business. The mother, the daughters, and the extended family, which consisted of an aunt and children are the protagonists of the narrative. The father decided to produce coats from old pieces of fur and sell them illegally on the Aryan side. This was definitely illegal, as all furs were confiscated, and selling anything outside the ghetto confines was a crime under Nazi regulations. Fifteen-year-old Bajli was to smuggle the coats out of the ghetto, contact merchants, (whom the father probably knew from his previous business), carry out the transaction, and receive the money. The mother was extremely worried about the safety of her child and she used to watch from a certain corner in the ghetto to see that Bajli crossed the walls safely. For almost one year the “business” ran smoothly. One day Bajli was caught and put in jail to await sentencing. The parents were extremely anxious because in November 1941, the Germans announced a death penalty for Jews found on the Aryan side. Her parents tried to get her released from jail, but they failed. During the months in jail they tried to help her withstand the hardships she endured.

When a typhus epidemic broke out in the prison, Bajli pretended to be ill. She was moved to the hospital where her parents were able to visit her. They brought her food and her father tried to smuggle her out of the hospital and free her. He failed and Bajli was sent back to prison. She was released after long months in a kind of amnesty for Jewish prisoners. At that point she was severely ill with tuberculosis. We do not know the final fate of Bajli and her family.

This narrative attested to the great pain of Bajli’s parents who struggled to sustain the family while being aware of the danger their daughter was facing. It seemed that they were unable to find an alternative to Bajli’s contribution to the income of the family, when smuggling was the only way to sell the coats and the danger of starvation was imminent. Bajli

¹⁵ YVA, ARI 470, “The story of Bajli” (Polish)

herself felt satisfaction at being able to assist her family and her aunt's family. We learn that in this case it was the extended family that had to function as an economic unit. The story of this family displayed cooperation and a sense of solidarity and dependability between its members with both parents acting together. The official ghetto documentation reported diverse examples of constructive and depressing cases of parents who worked out their responsibilities in extreme situations.

Diaries

In the discussion of this genre of documentation I will use the diaries of one man and a few women from different ghettos and of different social classes. Parenthood will be examined from the perspective of fresh parents, and the approach of young adults to their parents.

Unlike the previous sources, a diary provides a fuller narrative of different stages in life and represents a continuous story. Calel Perechodnik's diary may serve well in this research. It was written from May 7 to October 19, 1943 while Perechodnik was in hiding. A large part of the narrative told the story of what had happened before he moved to his hiding place. The months in hiding are also a mixture of details and his recollections and insights about the past that does not leave him, in particular strong feelings of guilt concerning his conduct as a husband and father throughout the deportation of his beloved wife and the two-year-old daughter he loved dearly. The diary allows the reader to follow the Perechodnik family from the time that Calel and his wife Anna Nusfeld were lovers, before they were married, and then as a couple before they became parents. We learn how they perceived parenthood, and the impact of the war and occupation on their lives. The diary also guides the reader into the relationship between Calel and his own parents, the older Perechodniks, with his father as a focal point, and the attitude of the elder Perechodnik towards his son Calel and his family, and vice versa.

Calel Perechodnik belonged to an educated, secular Jewish elite. Because of the *numerus clausus* he was not admitted to the university in Warsaw and went to study engineering and agronomy at the University of Toulouse. He returned to Poland in 1938 to marry his beloved girlfriend, Anna Nusfeld. The couple worked hard in their own businesses and established a fine household with a desire to raise children.

The outbreak of war in 1939 confronted them with hardships and losses: Anna's two brothers were killed. Both their businesses, the movie house Anna shared with her brothers and Calel's storehouse, were closed down and taken over by the authorities. However, they did not lose their optimism: the war, they believed, would end soon and they would be able to return to a normal routine and recover their lives. Moreover, Calel mentioned in his diary that despite the sadness over the death of his brother-in-law, he envied him for having left a living child, so his memory would not fade away. Calel and Anna decided to have their first child. In August 1940, almost one year after the Nazi occupation, Athalie (Annuska) was born. They were happy as could be and planned carefully how to raise their daughter so as to guarantee her a great future.

Calel and Anna were happy parents and were not counted among the poor. Calel Perechodnik was a good planner as head of the family. Prior to the move to the ghetto he stocked his room with food and wood for the winter. He gave his original apartment, which he had to leave, with all its furnishings to a Polish acquaintance whom he trusted. Therefore, he was able to sell household items that were kept with his friend and exchange them for food. Though Calel was aware of the hardship and suffering around them, and the disparity in the ghetto, for him and Anna everything centered around their own shelter; they were cautious and enjoyed their parenthood.

Thus I passed summer and winter 1941 in comparative peace, taking care of and raising my little Alinka. Although my wife and I denied ourselves many things, there was nothing too dear for my daughter's diet. She was treated royally, we never left her

alone in the house and she therefore blossomed for us, developed and augured for us the best hope for the future.¹⁶

The next year, 1942 was a year with no peace and quiet. News of the deportations from Lublin followed other fateful tidings. Otwock was relatively calm until August 1942. When in 1943 Perechodnik was describing these calm months, he had already gained knowledge and insights that he lacked during the first eight months of 1942. He thought he was safe since he served on the police force. He and his family were not hungry, nor were they candidates for forced labor. His thoughts centered on his work and the family, though it is clear from his writing that he was apprehensive about what would happen in the future, particularly to his daughter. While uncertainty caused alarm, his defense mechanism and the options, even if limited, of his family to leave the ghetto helped discount the urgency despite knowledge of the deportations from Warsaw. Wealthy Otwock Jews, Perechodnik wrote in his diary, who earlier had fled to Warsaw, believing that the big city was safer, returned to Otwock. Others left the ghetto, secretly crossing over to the Aryan side.

All would have been interpreted as alarming and warnings, but Perechodnik, who did consider a number of alternatives to ensure his family's safety, was unable to come to a decision. He heard two conflicting voices that were upsetting him: one that urged: "there is a danger in delay" (23) and the other voice that reassured: "regardless of what was going on in the world, every individual ought to and needs to live normally, work, and earn a livelihood." (22)

Nevertheless, tension mounted between Calel and Anna. For Anna Perechodnik, news of the killings revived the memory of the murder of her brothers during the first months of the war. She wanted to get a false identity card that would allow her to pass as a Pole, and she planned to escape to the Aryan side to pass or to hide. Her non-Jewish appearance would

¹⁶ Perechodnik, *Am I a Murderer*, 9. Henceforth, page references to the diary will be noted in the text.

have enabled her to pass as an Aryan, so she begged Calel to get the papers for her and for the baby. Calel knew that he himself had no chance of passing as a Pole, since he looked like a typical Jewish intellectual. (23) One might think that this asymmetry suddenly emerged between the couple was affecting Perechodnik's decision-making. He wrote with great bitterness and sincerity:

I silently shrugged off her words, didn't even want to hear them, because they irritated me. It is possible that if I had had some ready hard currency, I could have arranged it – just to be left in peace. But first of all it was necessary to sell a suit, my English coat – that upset me. Besides, believing in all “assurances” I did not have a foreboding of danger. (24)

Calel did, however, inquire about a hiding place for his daughter, assuming that the child had a good chance to survive with a Polish family. He thought that if only she would survive she would be the legitimate and sole heir to the family's considerable real estate. He initiated a deal with a decent Polish friend by which, for a large sum of money paid in advance for one full year, the child would be sheltered by a Polish family in Lublin. Alas, the deal did not materialize, and Perechodnik made no other efforts. The spring and summer of 1942 were marked by unbelievable information of massive deportations to unknown destinations from large Jewish communities in the General Government.

On August 17, 1942, just two days before the deportations began, the atmosphere in the city took a turn for the worse. Perechodnik shared with the reader a painful memory of a bitter quarrel with his wife. He came home very upset, and so was his wife. A small incident with the baby developed into a big argument, and Anna charged him with being indifferent to her plight and anxiety and preferring to save their fortune instead of saving her life: “She knows that when she is deported, she will leave it [her property—D.O.] all behind, finally, that I did not procure for her *Kennkarte* (identity card) and that I generally did not protect her.”(26) Her words pained him and Calel left the house in a fury.

This incident stands out in the diary's narrative since the presentation of their personal relationship usually displayed love, solidarity, and great respect for each other. Reading the description of their personal behavior through the two previous days, August 15 and 16, in which tension was already great, adds to the surprise of the reader at the angry outburst described above. On Saturday, August 15, Perechodnik met Mr. Wladyslave Blazewski, a lawyer (Magister) whom he had befriended since 1940. He trusted him as an honest man and thought offhand to give him a suitcase with belongings to keep for them. He consulted with Anna, who approved of the idea, and they planned to have Blazewski come to their home two days later. Sunday, August 16 was a quiet laundry day at home, and Calel took care of the baby.

Thus it would seem that the row of Monday, August 17, was a result of tension that had accumulated for long months and was kept undercurrent by both Anna and Calel. However, one sad result of this fight was the one-day delay in the visit of Mr. Wladyslave Blazewski, the Magister.

During the next day Perechodnik was already certain that the deportation was around the corner. Following information obtained from the police, he and his wife acted rationally and phoned the Magister who came to their home. They shared the information with him and begged him to find a home for the baby. He took the suitcase and promised to return the next day with a plan for the little girl. (29)

Calel and Anna continued to act coolly and continued with their calculated steps; they prepared their bags for hiding, went to the baker and baked bread with the flour they had, and Anna went secretly to a photographer to take a photo for a Polish *kennkarte* that would be ready the next day. However, the next day was too late. Calel was left without his family. On August 19, 1942, Anna and little Athalie were deported to Treblinka.

This next section is also an excellent analysis and is very well written.

Let us now analyze the roles of Calel and Anna as parents. They were a loving couple. Ten years before they married they became lovers and their relationship endured the long separation when Calel was studying in Toulouse. Anna was not as educated as Calel. She was orphaned at an early age and her two older brothers took care of her, but her economic condition was sound. When she lost both brothers in the first months of the war, Calel felt that he was for her a father, brother, and husband. They were true partners; he consulted Anna about his business and work, respected her partnership with her brothers, and later took care of her inheritance. Parenthood seemed to reinforce their sense of partnership and cooperation. After the birth of Athalie, Anna, like many middle-class women, devoted her time to the home and the child. Calel, too, spent time with his little daughter and took care of her when Anna was too busy with household chores.

As mentioned above, though Athalie was born during the first year of occupation, it was a planned pregnancy. They wanted to have a child and they thought that the war would not last more than one year. Having a child was a promise, Calel wrote, that "I shall not wholly die" ("Non omnis moriar"). (7) This may hint that they were not blind to the dangers threatening them, but like many other Jews and non-Jews, they were optimistic about their own destiny and the duration of the war. They sounded like a reasonable couple, calculating opportunities and risks.

Perechodnik continued to act rationally. As mentioned above, when in December 1940 Jews had to move to the ghetto he gave his apartment with all that it contained to a Polish friend whom he authorized to sell items from his household, enabling Perechodnik to acquire food and other items despite the shortage in the ghetto. In February 1941, one month after the ghetto was sealed off with a fence, Perechodnik realized that there was increased danger of being conscripted for forced labor, so he joined the Jewish police. This promised some stability. His task was to supervise the bakers and make sure that they made proper use of the supply of flour. Thus, he

wrote in his diary, he did not clash with people nor had to use force, and in the ghetto situation his specific responsibility as a policeman also promised some benefits.

Perechodnik was aware of the social gaps in the ghetto, the difficult situation of the poor, and he noticed how people's conduct changed. He followed political and military developments and conversed with the Magister and other Polish friends on the political future, sharing with them the information about the fate of Jews. He did not hesitate to ask their advice and assistance in his efforts to shelter his daughter, but, as noted earlier, only to a limited extent.

All these demonstrated the thoughtfulness of Perechodnik and his ability to think clearly and make decisions. As noted above, initially the tension increased when Germany turned against the Soviet Union in June 1941 and news began to be received about the mass killings. At first this seemed far away, but as reports and rumors about massive killing in the General Government reached Otwock, rational thinking was shattered and replaced by deep fear. Perplexity reigned over reason, and sound rules of action did not promise the expected results.

These circumstances destroyed the "safe nest," and the total trust between Anna and Calel. Though not at all confident, Calel pretended that he knew how to handle the situation. Anna was under more stress and may have had a better intuition—she realized what she and the child should do, but was unable to convince Calel and could not proceed on her own. In this respect, she followed the traditional gender roles, in which activities and responsibilities in the public sphere belonged to the man in the family. Just one day before the deportation she went secretly, without informing Calel, to have her photo taken for a forged Polish identity card. The tension that transpired in the couple's relationship did not dissipate and developed into a real conflict, as Calel painfully recorded.

In view of the ensuing deportation, Calel, who failed to act in time to create conditions that would protect his daughter and wife, was crushed. The Nazi tactics of deceit led him to

maintain that “I have brought my wife and daughter to their deaths.” (36)

Perechodnik’s diary is an honest testimony of a husband and father plagued with unbearable guilt and a deep sense of betrayal. Calel did not write until he reached a hiding place. In the last weeks of the ghetto and during his long months in a forced labor camp he was unable to record such a painful account. He had to protect himself from the memory of both his action and inaction.

Writing and reflecting left him exposed, almost unguarded and completely helpless. He was quite sure that he would not survive. The diary, he wrote, became his and Anna’s second child—a child of love and revenge, a child from which he had to part so it would survive, and a child that testified to the great love of a husband and a father. (191–92)

The Elder Perechodniks: Calel’s Parents

Perechodnik writes extensively about his own parents and describes how they acted during the war years. We should bear in mind that we do not hear the parents’ voices but rather Calel’s interpretation of their personalities, behavior, and parenthood. What stands out when reading Calel’s descriptions of both his mother and father is a complex relationship between parents and son. In the first pages of his diary Perechodnik provided some background information about his youth, his family, and his parents. As noted above, Calel discussed the lack of warmth and love in the relationship between parents and children. He did stress, however, that his parents were devoted and dedicated to the provision of the material needs of their children, and one may assume that they supported his education in Poland and in France. We may also assume that they favored his marriage to Anna because he mentions in the diary that his parents loved Anna more than they loved him and that she returned their love.

Calel stressed his respect for his parents, and he appreciated their hard work and honesty. He resented what he understood

to be the materialistic approach of his father who gained his sound economic status on his own, through hard work, and he also appreciated his practicality. He was critical, however, of what he understood to be his father's lack of spirituality.

The elder Perechodnik emerges from his son's diary as one who acts as a head of a family, a sort of patriarch. During the night before the deportation, however, he and Calel's mother secretly escaped from the ghetto without informing the children. The next morning however, he came back to learn what had happened to his son-in-law and daughter and their families. Both Calel and his brother-in-law were serving with the Jewish police, and the father assumed that they were relatively secure. Indeed, his daughter hid in the cellar and, unlike Anna, did not report for deportation.

When Calel told his father what had transpired with Anna and little Athalie, his father was furious; he could not understand how foolish Calel was to believe the Germans that his wife in the assembly place would be safe. "How could you have brought your wife to the square?" he yelled. "You know from the past that the Germans cannot be trusted." (85) This conversation rubbed salt into Calel's wounds.

Yet the elder Perechodnik did not let sorrow detract his attention from the steps he had to take to save his life and that of his wife. He conferred with Calel and called for concentration and alertness to carefully calculate their steps in order to save their lives. He was sure that his and his son's material situation was a crucial factor, so that they would be able to pay well for every service obtained from Poles. He requested Calel to take care of the remainder of the families' belongings that had not yet been pillaged by the Poles. These, he thought should be safeguarded to meet the needs of the family.

In Calel's state of mind when this conversation took place, the message was unbearable, and he confided the following to his diary:

I opened my eyes wide: He had just learned of the death of his daughter, sister-in-law, grandchildren, and he talks to me about pillows. Is this an animal or a human being? I am supposed to

watch his bedding, as if the entire ghetto isn't piled high with pillows. What's the point? Who thinks of life in the future? I didn't say anything to him, gave him a few shirts, and led him to the boundary of the ghetto. This first visit did not leave me with feelings of happiness. It's true my parents were safe, but a distaste stifled a son's feelings. There remains only a sense of obligation towards them. (85)

Despite these emotions, Calel cooperated fully with his father. He organized the suitcase, filling it with items to sell, and gave his money. In many respects he admired his father's energy and determination to live. After one of their meetings, when Calel was in the forced labor camp to which the remnant of the Otwock ghetto were deported, he met his father to give him money to get his mother out of a forced labor camp. He described in the diary how he perceived his father during this meeting:

There I see an older man with big gray whiskers, dressed in a black jacket. I open my eyes wide Yes it is my father. He has changed unrecognizably during this time, is considerably thinner, but thanks to that has a first-rate Aryan appearance. [...] my father had changed so much that he moves about fearlessly on the streets of Otwock. (118)

Calel understood from their conversation that his father was passing as an Aryan because he claimed that if he would remain among Jews only the bullet awaited him; but Calel was not ready to admit that his father was right. Was the alternative any better, Calel wondered, not sure that he himself desired to live with the fear and challenge of living under disguise; however, the father was ready to take up the challenge.

I will not go into the detailed story of the elder Perechodnick and how the relationship between father and son evolved. What stands out from the diary is that ambivalent feelings on the part of Calel were dominant, from which a love-hate relationship with his parents ensued. Calel suffered from what he interpreted as distrust of his father. Nevertheless the father, who passed as an Aryan, was Calel's and his mother's contact with the outside world during the long months in which they

were in hiding. For a long time the father refused to let Calel know where he resided or his whereabouts. Was it distrust or an additional precaution hoping to save Calel from pressure if he should fall prey to denunciation and be interrogated by the Germans about other Jews in hiding? Calel was sure that his father did not trust him and was offended. He was always faithful to his parents (though admitting that he did not love them) and spared nothing of the capital he entrusted to his Polish friends to support them. But it was the father who took all the meaningful steps for their survival. He displayed not only resourcefulness, but utmost devotion.

Reading Diaries, Reading Parenthood

I elaborated on Calel Perechodnik's diary because his narrative centers around the crisis of his personal life and that of a spouse and a father. Nevertheless, similar issues are mentioned in many other diaries. In what follows I will discuss a number of the issues as they appear in other diaries.

The care of parents for children and the care of parents by their children is a theme that also appears in the diary of Fela Szepe, a young woman from a well-to-do family. She was a student at the University of Warsaw when the war broke out and ruined her future.¹⁷ The Szepe family of five lived in Dombrova Gorliza in Zaglembe. The diary was written in the Greenberg forced labor camp (Zielona Gura in present-day Poland), and in it were recorded reminiscences about the family and its cohesiveness, as well as the great partnership among the parents and between them and the children. Memory of the family and the hope of a reunion provided the motivation and energy to endure the cruelty of the camp. Fela recalled how her mother begged them not to obey the registration call. She did not trust the innocent-looking announcement of the Germans for the young people to register.

¹⁷ Fela Szepe, *A Blaze from Within: The Diary of Fela Szepe the Greenberg Forced-Labor Camp* (Hebrew), ed. Bella Guterman, Jerusalem 2002, 7–19.

Following this call and the willingness of Fela and her sister, Bath Sheva, to register, an argument arose with the parents. The sisters thought that since they were employed in an established workshop they were safe from forced labor. The father, anxious for his daughters, went with them to register, but waited in vain for their return. Fela and Bath Sheva were seized and sent to the forced labor camp.¹⁸ In the first months in the camp the caring parents sent them parcels of food and clothing. These were extremely helpful for both their physical and emotional endurance. As letters and parcels arrived more and more seldom until they stopped altogether, the urge to know what happened to the parents and the hope to meet them became an important source of energy to endure and survive.

Another diary, from the area of Zaglembie, refers to the relationship between young adults and their parents. Hajka Klinger, a zealous leader of Hashomer Hatzair, described a rift between her and her Orthodox parents. In the years preceding the war she was critical of the Orthodox life style of her parents and their inability to understand the reality around them.

During the years of occupation, despite different approaches to the necessary responses to the Nazis in daily life, the devotion and assistance of both parents and daughter to each other was unquestionable. The parents were prepared to endanger themselves to protect their daughter, who was active in the underground and hiding from the police, while the daughter was ready to do the utmost to assist her ill father and support her mother and her sister, who was married and had a small child.¹⁹

An additional testimony of trust between parents and a grown-up married daughter, transpires in the diary of Noemi Szac Wajnkrance.²⁰ In contrast to both Klinger and Perechodnik, for Noemi her professional, assimilated parents served as a model. She had wonderful childhood memories and of

¹⁸ Ibid., 35, 43–45.

¹⁹ Avihu Ronene, Hajka Klinger, note 5.

²⁰ Noemi Szac Wajnkrance, *Gone with the Fire: Notes on the Warsaw Ghetto written in Hiding* (Hebrew), ed. Bella Guterman, Jerusalem 2003.

traveling abroad with her parents, and she admired the optimism and creativity of her father. She identified strongly with the difficulties they experienced when they had to move into the Warsaw ghetto, leaving behind their belongings and social environment, but appreciated her father's positive approach. Noemi referred in her diaries to the extended family, an uncle and aunt and also her parents-in-law. She shared her income with her parents and her other relatives in need, and got extra food coupons for them. She visited her parents regularly and missed them when walking in the streets became dangerous.²¹

Her parents were anxious about her safety and did not want to burden her. The father demonstrated great ingenuity in devising a hiding shelter. Thus they managed to escape the large deportations of the summer 1942.

Noemi married her husband Jurek shortly before the outbreak of the war. They loved each other dearly and promised to be always completely honest and candid to each other and share their troubles and doubts as well as their joy and happiness. The tension of ghetto life however, created some rifts between them. Issues that may seem banal were in conflict with their promise to discuss all that troubled them and never keep secrets from each other.

Caring for the parents resulted with an unexpected conflict. Jurek suspected that Noemi was ready to give everything they had to her parents, while she considered his parents as being over-demanding. She did not inform Jurek of the extra food coupons she brought to her parents and her brother, who were extremely poor. She expressed sadness about the first secret that stood between them.²² Still Naomi expressed great love and devotion to Jurek and trusted their relationship as a couple.

Unlike the diaries mentioned above, Irena Hauser, a forty-year-old Viennese woman deported to Lodz with her husband and six-year-old child, focuses on the lack of partnership with

²¹ Ibid., 21, 41.

²² Ibid., 46–47.

her husband and the absence of his sense of parental responsibility towards their child. She wrote with great anger and bitterness. Only fragments of her diary were found and they testify to the horrible situation of a poor refugee family in the Lodz ghetto. The diaries referred to earlier were written by middle-class people who were confined to the ghetto in their own town. In contrast, Irena Hauser was part of the most destitute segment of ghetto population: the poor refugees.

Irena Hauser's writings confront the reader with the bare facts of a cruel situation of despair and pain. It also shows her endless efforts to endure in the swamp of poverty and want of the Lodz ghetto. It is among the most difficult texts to study, and the reader senses that he or she is touching the utterly naked essence of pain and suffering.

Irena described her husband as a selfish, unreliable man who was unable to manage in the difficult situation of the ghetto. From the early days of their arrival in Lodz, he lost any sense of direction and was preoccupied with immediate anxieties and personal necessities such as cigarettes. Thus he foolishly sold most of their belongings and in a very short time they were left with next to nothing to sell for food or medicine. He was working in a *restore* but did not share the food he got with his family. He held on to the food coupons, his only concern being for his food and cigarettes. Irena's description presents a dysfunctional family in which the father and husband lost all sense of partnership and responsibility. At a certain point she filed for a divorce, as he often became violent towards her and their child. His very presence became unbearable to her.

Though I cannot fully elaborate here on the difficult account of Irena Hauser, it is important to stress that she also wrote that her husband was hungry and very weak, that he too was hardly able to climb the stairs to their apartment. She was not blind to his suffering, but was filled with anger at his desertion of his responsibilities as a father and a spouse.

She often wrote that she would have rather died than endured the hunger, pain, helplessness, and loneliness, yet her

responsibility to her child prevented her from committing suicide. In September 1942, when the deportation of the children and the elderly took place, she played with the idea of joining the carloads of deported children and getting the loaf of bread that was distributed to the deportees, but her son Erich Bobi refused. The following sentence from her diary can summarize her despair: “[...] the child cries hunger, the father [smokes] cigarettes, the mother wants to die, family life in the ghetto.”²³

Discussion

The examples above and other sources, allow a modest discussion of the modes of parenthood and of the questions posed at the beginning of the article.

It is clear that the methodological difficulties are not easy to overcome. The fragmented sources provided by the *Chronicle of the Lodz ghetto*, and the scattered letters from the Ringelblum archive and other sources, challenge the scholar to weave an integrated fabric of family life and parenthood. The sources demonstrate the impossibility of carrying out basic parental responsibilities – providing food for the children and protecting them physically, even before the deportations. We also learn that the norms and expectations of parents were deeply implanted in the minds of the ghetto inmates, who were tormented by the collapse of what they believed were their unquestionable responsibilities. From the chronicle of the Lodz ghetto we learn that couples who lived separately hurried to the rabbi for a divorce when one spouse was deported. This suggests that couples were still thinking in terms of conventional behavior even though they were already living outside of marriage with another spouse²⁴. We may also learn from these fragments that the family was a source of strength that often preserved the wish and perhaps the ability to survive. The despair of parents who lost their children in deportations

²³ Quoted from Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust*, New Haven 2006, 123; Unger, *Lodz*, 279–80, 276–77

²⁴ *Chronikah shel geto Lodz*, 1:352.

resulted in an inability to endure, and often the parents died soon after.²⁵ Despite their fragmentary nature, the sources are powerful and evoke an empathy for and even affinity with the tragic protagonists and their efforts to establish a semblance of normality in the chaotic and unprecedented reality.

One might assume that diaries or a more extensive body of correspondence would enable us to observe a continuous relationship between couples and their performance as parents and provide a fuller description of the reality that confronted parents trying to carry out their responsibilities. Resources are, however, very limited, despite the relatively large body of diaries that were published and those that remain unpublished in the various archives. The diaries capture the tragic events and often become a lamentation, or a text of memorialization and testimony. The window that the diaries open for scholars may be misleading and give an illusion of full realization and understanding of the multifaceted, complex, and painful reality.

The narrative of diaries is also a selection of details and events that may have been selected to respond to the writer's needs and goals at the time that it was written, as in the case of Perechodnik, discussed above. While the strength of the narrative lies in its authenticity and directness, it may lead the reader to come to general conclusions and grant it more authority than it deserves. The sources do not allow for a meaningful quantitative analysis; only a qualitative methodology is available. But even the qualitative methodology should be approached with caution.

In addition, because we often read diaries today that were written in another language than the one we are reading, the style of the description may be understood to be colored by circumstances.

Nevertheless, some generalizations are in order. Parents lived in a state of continuous tension that served as a seismograph reflecting the events around them and the information

²⁵ Ibid, 1:531

they received from other ghettos. It is clear from all the diaries that people did not expect the war to last so long or that the fate of the Jews would develop so brutally. Therefore, as Calel Perechodnik wrote, they decided to have a child despite the shadows of war. Arie Klonicki-Klonymus from Pinsk called his son, born in 1942, Adam in the hope that the universal vision of mankind would destroy the bestiality of Nazism.²⁶

Some middle class Jews and professionals were able to contact the Aryan side and send their children to pass as Aryans or go into hiding. Miscalculations ended in tragedies, such as in the case of Perechodnik, or betrayal by gentile friends or acquaintances. A parent who survived carried this tragedy with him/her for long years and many were reflected in post-war writings.²⁷

A description that narrates the events in some continuity, beginning with the outbreak of the war, becomes more meaningful for understanding the protagonists and their environment. This is apparent in fathoming the relationship between Calel Perechodnik and Anna, and between Calel and his parents. The same holds true for the diaries of Fela Szeps and Noemi Szac Wajnkrac. Hajka Klinger, in her ghetto diary that related to her life before the war, was able to demonstrate how a relationship evolved under the duress experienced during the occupation and in what respects her perspective towards her parents changed. Nevertheless, the relationships between children and parents or between couples were crucial to face the crisis of ghetto life and the threat of death.

The shock of deportation was an experience that the protagonists were unable to work through, and many lost their partner, child, or parents in this crisis. However, circumstances were extremely different in the various ghettos. The isolation of Lodz, and the relatively easy movement in and out of Otwock were crucial to the ability to plan hiding strategies

²⁶ Arie Klonicki-Klonymus, *The Diary of Adam's Father* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1969, 17.

²⁷ For examples, see Baruch Milch, *Can the Heavens Be Void?* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2003; Klonicki,-Klonymus, *Diary*.

and contact Poles. In places where pressure was somewhat less extreme, or among social groups that had connections or means, Jews were able to sustain a semblance of normalcy that could continue almost until the last moments before deportation. This was the case with the Perechodniks and the Szeps.

I would like to end with a quotation that demonstrates the quest for preserving the family in the situations that did not allow it. I will quote from a letter that Malvina, the wife of Arie Klonicki-Klonymus, wrote about their son Adam, to her relatives in the USA (the letter was never sent but was attached to the diary). Adam was in hiding with a Christian family, while the parents, Arie and Malvina were in great danger escaping from one village to another. "I want so much to bring up my adored son, to get pleasure from him, is it possible? It is even difficult to dream about it."²⁸

²⁸ Arie Klonicki-Klonymus, *The Diary of Adam's Father* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1969, 46