

# Bearing Witness

by Nava Gibori

In early May, some 50 Krakow Orphanage Children gathered in the Yad Vashem Auditorium. Though they have all now reached retirement age, this is exactly how they still define themselves—“the orphanage children.” With smiling faces, and accompanied by supportive family members, they traveled from across the globe to Jerusalem for a gala reunion, in order to bear witness to a story yet to be told.

The initiative for holding the event came from Malka Tor, head of Yad Vashem’s Oral History Section in the Archives Division, and Elisheva Pat, one of the Krakow “children.” In a previous conversation, it emerged that Elisheva belonged to a group of children that had immigrated to Israel from Poland in March 1957, all of them former residents of the Krakow Orphanage and all of them the bearers of personal testimonies that had yet to be documented. In the context of Yad Vashem’s special relationship with survivors and its efforts to collect testimonies, the idea emerged of inviting the “children” to an event marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their *aliya*, and of holding a group discussion about the past.

It became clear that the story of the Krakow Orphanage Children is a unique, dramatic and moving one: an experience that crystallized during the war and united them forever in a shared fate. They were all very young—the “oldest” among them only four or five at the outbreak of the war and the youngest born during the actual period of military activity, deportations and shattered families.

The main thread of the narrative begins with the children’s flight to the Soviet Union at the beginning of the occupation, the hungry war years and periods of residence in different orphanages. It continues through the Polish forests, a succession of hiding-places, survival amid a hostile rural population and hard agricultural labor. The more fortunate ones were placed with loving Christian families, which sheltered them at great personal danger. Most of the children never saw their parents again; they forgot about their past lives, their names and their families. Most were also unaware, until the war’s end, of their Jewish origins. For some, the past remains a mystery to this day. The passing years have done nothing to dissipate the mist of uncertainty regarding their identity, or to heal the wounds.

The purpose of the meeting at Yad Vashem was to try and revive the participants’



Krakow Orphanage “children” tour the Holocaust History Museum after giving a unique group testimony at Yad Vashem.

## “Who Am I Really?” Krakow Orphanage “Children” give testimony at Yad Vashem

memories—both general and personal—in order to build a story of the Holocaust childhood experience by means of a testimonial mosaic. The main topics discussed at the reunion were the strong sense of comradeship that still endures among the “children,” the sense of mutual responsibility and concern, and the way in which they function as “family” in times of joy and sorrow. The orphanage and the important role it played in shaping the children’s identity were additional focal points of the discussion. The caregivers and teaching staff—themselves Holocaust survivors—made it their mission to usher the children safely to adolescence and to undertake, with sensitivity to their orphan state and years of suffering, the long process of rehabilitating the children and restoring them to the Jewish world.

Listening from the audience were the participants’ spouses and children, who had come to share in the poignancy of the occasion. It emerged that it is still difficult for the survivors to communicate their past—to talk about the periodic upheavals, the separations, the changes

and the transitions they were compelled to undergo during the war. It is hard for them to talk about their fragmented identity, their life under assumed Christian identities and their subsequent return to the Jewish people. It is especially challenging for those for whom the circle has not yet closed; who still don’t know who they are.

Someone spoke of the “legacy” of the war, of multiple names—those they were born with, those given to conceal their origin, those they received after the war, and those they chose for themselves. “Who am I really? It’s not easy,” said Ella, who came from Toronto. “It will never be easy.”

After the meeting, the “children” departed for a guided tour of the Museum. I left the event with the voice of one of the participants still echoing in my head: “Despite our life story and the horrors of the war—despite being orphans—everyone grew up to be exemplary individuals. We’ve all raised families, we’ve all succeeded: we are all human beings.”

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