Lloyd on Meyer, 'Never Forget Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz'

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Located in Poland, Auschwitz-Birkenau bears the silent screams of the brutality directed at, and murders afforded to, Jewish people during the Second World War. Historical accounts of Nazi barbarities are well documented in cultural discourse but little is known about the children interned in the three camps at Auschwitz. Alwin Meyer seeks to address this gap in knowledge, stating that while 232,000 children and juveniles were deported to Auschwitz, only 750 were liberated in the death camp at the end of January 1945. Meyer interviewed and subsequently documented the stories of thirty-one adult child survivors in her book, Never Forget Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz.

With seventeen chapters, this book is an extensive historical chronicle, presenting first-person testimony interwoven with considerable historical facts. As a historian, Meyer sets the tone for the book in the first chapter by detailing the Czech ancestry of one of the child survivors, a Greek Jewish boy named Heinz. The author chronicles the turbulent history of the Jewish inhabitants of Karlsbad from the mid-sixteenth century, noting that Jewish life was pervasive across all of Europe. Further evidence of widespread historical discrimination, expulsion, and persecution of Jews within, and across, countries is presented from additional adult survivors within this chapter.

The second chapter, “That’s When My Childhood Ended,” details the marginalization of Jewish people by the Nazis, who segregated them from society across Europe during the 1930s, branding them “asocials.” Meyer states that 160,000 Jews were living in Berlin in 1933, with only 75,000 left in 1939 due to a multitude of factors, including forced emigration and murder. Several child survivors detail the impact these events had on their childhoods, such as tales of fleeing their countries without their parents.

The following chapter introduces narratives of the establishment of camps during the early 1940s. It also acquaints the reader with Nazi brutality. One child survivor, Herbert Adler, recalls how the children were moved from one camp in Dieselstrasse, where they were not allowed out, to another camp in Kruppstrasse, where they were forced to undertake manual labor. While out working, Herbert witnessed the death of his little brother, Rolf, who had just turned nine years old. Rolf fell out of a moving truck that they had been loading with cobblestones, and despite Herbert shouting to the truck driver, his brother was dragged along and died.

As the chapters progress, so do the horrors. The next chapter chronicles the rise of the deportation
trains in the early 1940s that took Jewish children, women, and men to concentration camps. The adult survivors tell tales of illegal school lessons within the camps, without the aid of pens or paper, transfers between camps, and pervasive hunger. They also recount witnessing children arriving at camps. Lydia Holznerova, for example, states that in 1943 she witnessed Polish children arriving at her camp in Theresienstadt: “We weren’t allowed to talk to them…. It was said that the children were meant to have a bath, but no one wanted to. They screamed ‘gas’ but no one knew why” (p. 91). The next three chapters detail further individual stories of childhood experiences in the Nazi-led concentration camps. One criticism I have of this book is that with so many survivor stories provided in snippets in each chapter, you have to weave back and forth between chapters to remember the ancestry and previous historical details of each child.

Chapter 8, “Small Children, Mothers and Grandmothers,” shows that as the bearers of the next generation of Jews, hundreds of thousands of women and their children, whether unborn or alive, were consigned to death. The subsequent chapter plunges the reader into further despair as it chronicles how inmates, particularly children, were forced into complicity with these heinous crimes. As slave laborers in Birkenau, the adult survivors refer to their childhood roles in the crematoria as “corpse pushers” and “corpse draggers,” forced to witness the deaths of babies, children, mothers, and grandmothers (p. 192).

Interspersed within the chapters are tales of acts of humanity, particularly following the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1945. These tales provide momentary relief from the relentless barbarities. The story of a Polish couple who sought to adopt an orphaned child from Auschwitz is one example of such momentary relief. The couple entered the camp through a hole in the fence, hiding from the SS patrols, and eventually finding a child who “ran to me, held out his little hands and said in Polish: ‘I want my mother.’” Emilia, the woman, “wrapped the child, who was perhaps 2 years old, in a cloth and took him from the camp with her husband” (p. 296). Thus ensues a series of stories of child adoptions of Jewish orphans from Auschwitz.

The traumas of camp experiences were evident in physical ailments that required long-term medical treatment (pneumonia, meningitis, ulcers, lice, frostbite, wounds, malnourishment, stomach cramps, etc.) and mental health problems, which endured following release from the camp. Children develop both physically and neurologically in response to their environmental conditions; therefore, it is unsurprising that the children of Auschwitz acquired perceptions that were atypical. For example, Meyer relays that one child survivor, Kola, held the belief that people do not die, that they are killed. Upon presenting a relative’s body to Kola for inspection following a natural death, his adoptive parents were met with his response: “Who beat him to death?” Further, when there was no meat in shops, Kola suggested to his adoptive mother that he should be killed so that the family would have meat. As killings, beatings, and barbarities had been common occurrences during Kola’s early years, he believed that adults who had not experienced camp life were lacking in experience; they “had no idea what life was really about” (p. 305).

The penultimate chapter explores identity creation and renegotiation across the life course: “Everybody wants to know who they are and where they come from” (p. 385). Everyone interned at Auschwitz had a number permanently tattooed on their arms, a lasting legacy for the survivors of their identity as Jewish children at Auschwitz. Meyer details that during the tattooing process one survivor, Hanka, stated that she “had attempted to pull away and had been held down. ‘It hurt a lot’”
The author also relays how Kola often returned to the former camp, exploring every inch of the premises, in an attempt to answer the unanswered questions about his family that perished at the hands of the Nazis. This chapter also tells stories of how the adult survivors have reached out to other survivors, endeavoring to establish familial ties or procure historical details of their deceased families.

The last chapter provides detailed stories of the long-term mental health impacts of living with the memories of the horrors endured at Auschwitz. Readers educated in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex PTSD (CPTSD) will be familiar with the symptomology evident within the narratives and will be unsurprised to read that many surviving children suicided following their release from the camp. Meyer states that the majority of child survivors struggled with why they survived when their families perished. This positionality included projection onto their children. Yaakov Gilad, for example, said, “If I got bad grades or broke something, she [my mother] would say: ‘Did I survive Auschwitz for that?’ Even as a small child I heard this. Through my actions I had to provide the justification for her being alive” (p. 428).

I pondered long and hard on how to structure and compose this book review and how much detail to include. I concluded that clarity in language, supplemented with selected adult survivor voices, would illuminate the content appropriately. It is an incredibly difficult book to read due to the relentless detailing of the most unimaginable horrific treatment of human beings. Further, that newborn babies should be killed and that children should be beaten, tortured, and/or killed defy belief. Despite a history in death studies scholarship, I had to take breaks from reading this book, something I have never had to do before. And yet its importance as a historical testament to the surviving adult children, and those brutally murdered, should not be understated.

Moreover, reading the earlier chapters of this book detailing the marginalization and othering of Jews, along with forced emigration and devaluing of Jewish lives during the early 1930s across Europe, I could not help but draw parallels with contemporary narratives pertaining to refugees within neo-Nazi discourse. Correspondingly, the last chapter also echoes adult survivor narratives of these contemporary views. Thus, despite the unimaginable content, the educational value of this book cannot be overstated.

I commend Meyer for witnessing and disseminating the narratives of the children of Auschwitz; these stories should never be forgotten. The adult voices reflected within this book speak clearly to the fact that child survival within the Nazi death camp was an anomaly. The brutal murders of babies and children are documented in graphic detail (not for the fainthearted) throughout this text, but Meyer has painstakingly detailed these stories as a labor of love so that every Jewish child born in, or survivor of, Auschwitz has a voice. This is their legacy.