Hidden Children in France During the Holocaust: A Disparate Encounter Between Judaism and Catholicism

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On June 22, 1940, after the Nazis invaded France, an armistice agreement was signed between Germany and France, dividing the country into two zones: an Occupied Zone and a Free Zone. The German invasion drastically changed the lives and safety of French Jews, and threatened their future.\(^1\) Anti-Semitic laws were increasingly enacted by the Vichy government operating in the Free Zone, like the “Statut des Juifs” of 1940 and 1941, which excluded Jews from public life, dismissed them from civil service and the military, and prevented them from working in industry, commerce, and other professions like medicine, law and teaching.\(^2\) French Jews, especially those in the Occupied Zone, were left in increasingly precarious positions.\(^3\) The response of Jewish families to this unjust persecution in France varied; with some opting to flee to the Free Zone and others seeking safe hiding places. Often, families decided to separate in order to maximize their protection.\(^4\) Jewish children in particular became extremely vulnerable, as they depended on their parents’ decisions and the generosity of others to survive. During the occupation in France, religious institutions, through relief organizations, and host families became the main avenues for protecting these children.\(^5\) In many ways, religion became both the cause of persecution and a means for protection during this period, as evidenced by the personal testimony of survivors, Michele Cohen-Rodriguez, Saul Friedlander, and Marguerite Elias

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1 Stephanie Corazza, “The Holocaust in Western Europe.” (Canada: University of Toronto, 2018).
3 Ibid.
Quddus. They encountered Catholicism, as both a lived ideology embodied by their hosts, as well as a practical tool for defining their new protected identity in France. The assistance of Catholic rescuers helped to save these Jewish children, whose lives changed drastically; however this safety came at great personal cost to the children. This paper will look at the personal testimonies of these survivors, accompanied by other historical research to evaluate these disparate encounters between Catholicism and Judaism in this extremely violent period of persecution.

In all of these testimonies, religion played a key role in the lives of the children in hiding. Not only were children persecuted for their Jewish culture and religion, many were also compelled to adopt a Catholic identity in order to maximize their protection while in hiding. In the testimonies, a recurring theme is that the young Jewish children fled Paris to seek shelter in Catholic institutions or pretended to be raised as Catholics in the French countryside. Michele Cohen-Rodriguez, Saul Friedlander and Marguerite Elias Quddus describe their experiences in hiding through an oral testimony and memoirs. The forced abandonment of cultural and religious identities for Jewish children in France during the Holocaust was traumatic and devastating for these children and yet equally necessary for their survival. The testimonies lead us to reflect on the ways that rituals, names, and family life were all disrupted by the forced adoption of a new faith and identity in this time of distress. While the motivations for protecting children differed, this analysis looks at the core religious motivation, and sense of duty to one’s fellow man, which continues to inspire many today. The Christian religion was a tool that inspired action in protecting persecuted Jews, exemplified by the guiding principles of compassion and charity. Despite this, the complicated relationship between the rescuers and Jewish children caused a
variety of responses, such as a disrupted conception of the child’s religious, personal and familial identity.

**Non-Jewish Rescuers**

In his article, “Righteous Gentiles and Courageous Jews,” Mordecai Paldiel acknowledges and analyses the role of rescuers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in the survival of Jews across Europe during the Holocaust. Assistance took many different shapes and forms, in helping Jews hide and providing food for them, assisting them in their escape to safer regions, or in the case of children, helping to arrange their adoption or care by others.⁶ For those Jews not confined to a ghetto or Jewish residential area, a concentration or labour camp, or were not part of an underground military organization, it was most likely that they survived because of help from both Jewish and non-Jewish rescuers.⁷ Samuel P. Oliner argues, “if the perpetrators and collaborators constitute the tragedy of this human experience, rescuers constitute its hope.”⁸ In the midst of the devastation and the horrors, the rescue and protection of Jews represented a beacon of humanity and goodness.

In the case of France, 75 percent of about 320,000 Jews survived the Holocaust.⁹ The consequences for helping Jews in occupied Europe were severe, especially in France, as rescuers put their own safety at risk, fearing both Germans and their collaborators.¹⁰ Yet, there are numerous stories of Frenchmen playing active roles in thwarting the Germans’ plans to implement the Final Solution, as demonstrated by one of the largest rescue operations undertaken

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⁷ Ibid.
in France and in Europe during the war.\textsuperscript{11} This was the smuggling of 10,000 Jewish children from the Occupied Zone to the southern Free Zone, successful due to the organization by French Jews, aid from French resistance movements and the willingness of French families to provide refuge for these children.\textsuperscript{12} Although there were a number of collaborationist movements in France, including the Vichy government, many Frenchmen continued to serve and rescue the persecuted Jews. A number of people were involved in the rescue of Jewish children, including those who escorted the children to their new homes and those who made “routine inspection visits to make sure the children were well cared for.”\textsuperscript{13} Host families also “took the frightened children into their homes and showered them with affection, love and patience.”\textsuperscript{14} Paldiel’s description of these rescuers does not go into great detail, and does not speak directly to each individual experience, as will become evident through the personal testimonies evaluated later. Regardless of this, Paldiel communicates the fact that thousands of Jewish children in France survived the Holocaust by staying with host families or in religious institutions.\textsuperscript{15}

What motivated rescuers to assist Jews, especially when their personal safety was at risk? While selfishness or financial gains are certainly contenders, Eva Fogelman argues that “the act of rescue was an expression of the values and beliefs of the innermost core of a person.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus, rescuers who went out of their way to assist Jews often did so out of a sense of duty to their fellow man. For religious rescuers, many believed that it was their moral obligation to live “according to the Christian principles of compassion and charity,” and to “love thy neighbor.”

\textsuperscript{11} Yehoshua Porath, “The Forgotten Rescue of French Jewry,” review of To be a Jew in France During the Second World War, by Renee Poznanski. Azure 11 (Summer 2001).
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\textsuperscript{13} Paldiel, “Righteous Gentiles,” 139.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
that inspired their response. Many religious rescuers were guided by the conviction that they were accountable to a higher power, God, and thus provided aid to Jews fleeing to safer regions or shelter. In Oliner’s *Altruistic Personality: Rescuers Of Jews In Nazi Europe*, a study of people who saved Jews from the Holocaust which is based on over 600 interviews, God and Christianity were two of the stated reasons that rescuers helped Jews. Representative comments include: “‘I did it out of Christian duty,’ ‘I know God would have wanted me to,’ ‘I am an obedient Christian; the Lord wanted us to rescue these people and we did.’”

In France, religious rescuers included both French Catholic families and members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. For example, the support of Archbishop Saliege of Toulouse for the rescue efforts of Jewish children led by the French Jewish agency *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE), helped to open the door to Catholic institutions which would safely place over 300 Jewish children in the Toulouse region. Thus the goodness and courage of both Jewish and non-Jewish rescuers helped to protect and save thousands of French Jewish children. While these children were able to escape the cruelty and horrors of the Final Solution, their lives in hiding were anything but uncomplicated. Whilst hiding in Catholic institutions or with Catholic families, the children were put in a completely new environment, expected to act as Christians, and adopt completely new identities. They were separated from their families, many for years, without an idea of what happened to them, or how to get in contact with them. These children were “uprooted from their homes [and] torn away from their families”: they could no longer attend their schools, or go to

17 Ibid, 176.
19 Oliner, *Altruistic Personality*.
20 Ibid.
their local parks, and in this sense, “they did not belong anywhere.” Children did not feel firmly rooted, and the complicated relationship between rescuer and each Jewish child caused a variety of responses. In the personal accounts of survivors Michele Cohen-Rodriguez and Marguerite Elias Quddus, as well as Saul Friedlander, it is evident that each child’s religious, personal, and familial identity was disrupted, often leaving traumatic emotional scars.

**Disrupted Ritual**

Both Michele Cohen-Rodriguez’s oral testimony and Marguerite Elias Quddus’ memoir are testimonies given decades after the traumatic experience of hiding during the Holocaust. The lives of these two young Parisian Jewish girls, like other French Jewish children, changed dramatically after the Nazi takeover and the increased persecution. The parents of both Cohen-Rodriguez and Elias Quddus took action to hide their daughters in the French countryside to protect them from the Nazis and French collaborators. Both Cohen-Rodriguez and Elias Quddus were rescued by Catholics and placed in convents, and later Catholic homes for protection. While these Catholic rescuers were able to protect the girls from the ultimate horrors of the Holocaust, they were not able to protect their religious identities. In Cohen-Rodriguez’s testimony, she had difficulty recalling her time spent at a convent in Savigny, even struggling to remember its name. However, her most vivid memories were of singing in the church choir, and being “hit everyday” by the nuns because she refused to kneel and do the sign of the cross when entering the church. Upon reflection, she realized that this was due to the memory she had of her father who had once said that “a Jew doesn’t kneel” during Passover, though in a

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25 Ibid, 18 – 19.
completely different context. Thus, she understood that if she knelt and did the sign of the cross, “the wrath of God” would come down and strike her.26 Though “safe” in this convent, fear, frustration, and loneliness characterized the experiences of many children like Cohen-Rodriguez.

Elias Quddus’ memoir is unique in that she first illustrated her most vivid memories and then proceeded to write the memoir from the perspective of her young self at the time of the Second World War.27 Throughout the text, she frequently portrayed the convents negatively, and blamed them for her fears and aches, writing: “Catholics give me diarrhea,” and “I get diarrhea every time I put my fingers in holy water and make the sign of the cross.”28 This particular description is paired with a drawing of a nun with a cross around her neck and holding a Bible in the shadows of dim lighting.29 The illustration represented her view of the convent and the Catholic Church in general as dark, cold, and alien. Though these girls were offered protection in these Catholic institutions, ultimately saving their lives, their childhoods were disrupted greatly, and were left with profound confusion. For both women, isolation from Jewish practices, and the forced adoption of Catholic ones played a large role in shaping their identities later in life.

Though adopting new religious practices and beliefs was traumatic for many, this was not the only experience. Zoe Waxman, a feminist historian cites scholar Saul Friedlander’s personal experiences hiding in a Catholic seminary in France during the Holocaust. Waxman explains, “the rituals of Christianity and the experience of going to church itself provided him with a further sense of security,” as “God the Father, Mary, and Jesus” provided the protection and security his family could no longer give.30 For Friedlander, the seminary provided him with a

28 Marguerite Elias Quddus, In Hiding. (Canada: The Azrieli Foundation, 2013), 82.
29 Ibid, 82.
home, both literally and emotionally, as he was separated from his family and his Jewish heritage. Thus, while the women reflect on their new religious identities as sources of severe trauma, Friedlander provides another image of religious identity as potentially a saving grace. What is most important from each of these three accounts, however, is that all Jewish children hiding in Catholic institutions experienced some level of religious re-identification that was imperative for remaining alive, but may have also left serious and irreversible scars on those who survived.

**False Names and Identification**

Beyond adopting new religious rituals, many of the children in hiding were compelled to adopt new names that sounded less Jewish and more French in order to protect their identity. To this end, children had falsified documents and had to pretend their parents did not exist, or that they were ethnically French. Though the act of changing one’s name might seem trivial in comparison to the other necessary actions of survival taken by persecuted Jews during the Holocaust, names are, nevertheless, at the core of a person’s identity in society. They connect you to those who are important to you and indicate who you are in the world. Adopting new names and identities while in hiding impacted the children’s connections to their Jewish heritage and their family. For example, Friedlander’s name was changed to Paul-Henri Ferland, “‘an unequivocally Catholic name,’” which led to a profound crisis of identity for him.\(^{31}\) The confusion resulting from these new names was likely traumatic for each child. Since names have power beyond social interactions, they are something precious, intimate, and irreplaceable.

Identity concealment was a crucial part of hiding for both Cohen-Rodriguez and Elias Quddus. When Cohen-Rodriguez stayed with the Godignon family, she took on a new identity,

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 73.
pretending to be a gentile whose father was a POW, as did the two other Jewish girls sheltered at
the Godignon’s household.\textsuperscript{32} In comparison, Elias Quddus describes in detail the moments she
was told by her mother that she and her sister must pretend to be Catholic girls, when they learnt
the story of the Virgin Mary, and when the yellow stars were removed from their coats.\textsuperscript{33} The
new names were closely linked to the new religious identity, and therefore were a great source of
pain for Quddus. She illustrates this suffering vividly in one sketch where her mother received
the baptismal certificates from a client, and the certificates being passed over to the Mother
Superior at the convent.\textsuperscript{34} The writings paired with the depictions enhance our understanding of
the events endured, allowing readers to visualize what transpired, as understood by Elias
Quddus. The illustration of Elias Quddus’ mother, Rachel, cutting off the yellow stars is
especially important, as it symbolizes the removal of the girls’ public Jewish identity as they take
on a Catholic one.

\textbf{Fractured Family Life}

Jewish children during the Holocaust, vulnerable and dependent on their families’
decisions for protection, were often separated from their families when they went into hiding.
Thus, the hidden children’s sense of family was greatly impacted, as were the families that
hosted them. One can grasp the trauma and distress both the children and their parents must have
gone through to be separated. Waxman argues, “The ability to be a parent to one’s child had
become impossible under Nazi rule. Children were not allowed to live, and parents were unable
to protect them.”\textsuperscript{35} To illustrate this, she uses the personal stories of survivors including
Friedlander’s story of hiding in France. She explicitly describes the emotional difficulties

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Cohen Rodriguez, Segments 20-21.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Quddus, \textit{In Hiding}, 69 – 71.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 69 – 71.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Waxman, \textit{Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History}, 56.
\end{itemize}
experienced by both Friedlander and his mother as the need to go into hiding became ever clearer. An excerpt of a letter written by Friedlander’s mother to a gentile friend shows her desperation as she begs her to care for her son.\textsuperscript{36} Waxman also describes the emotional trauma for the young Friedlander: “the loss of maternal love and protection was appalling,” and he was left to turn to teachers for this comfort.\textsuperscript{37} Cohen-Rodriguez also explains the emotional gap living in hiding with a host family in her oral testimony. Upon reflection, she remembers being “deprived…of love that we needed as children,” stuttering when explaining.\textsuperscript{38} The only affection she ever received was from Monsieur Godignon, while Madame Godignon was very nasty.\textsuperscript{39} Despite the nice house in the countryside, there was “emptiness,” as she lacked the maternal love.\textsuperscript{40}

As outlined above, Elias Quddus’ memoir is from the perspective of herself at a young age. The host family, the Chatenay’s, though sometimes strict, provided affection for Elias Quddus and her sister Henriette, kissing them and calling them “sweethearts.”\textsuperscript{41} Frequently throughout the memoir Elias Quddus describes her emotional longing for her own parents, recalling memories of her family eating around the dinner table and her Papa’s glasses.\textsuperscript{42} However, Elias Quddus explains the devastation of having to call the Chatenay’s ‘Mama’ and ‘Papa’ after her sister suggested the idea. When the girls’ mother returns and is able to take Elias Quddus and her sister home, she described ‘Mama’ Chatenay’s sadness of seeing the girls go after years of caring for the sisters and wanting to adopt them.\textsuperscript{43} Saying goodbye to the girls, the

\textsuperscript{36} Waxman, \textit{Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History}, 73.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 73.
\textsuperscript{38} Cohen Rodriguez, Segments 20-21.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, Segments 20-21.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, Segments 20-21.
\textsuperscript{41} Quddus, \textit{In Hiding}, 102.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 97-101.
\textsuperscript{43} Quddus, \textit{In Hiding}, 132.
Chatenay’s called them “family,” while Elias Quddus felt extremely uncomfortable. In a childlike description, Elias Quddus explains, “I had no mother and now I have two. It’s very unpleasant.” Whether the hidden children lacked maternal love or had families that did provide affection, the confusion resulting from these fractured families left marks on each child.

**Conclusion**

The perilous situation of Jews in France made it increasingly difficult for families to remain together. Families often made the devastating decision to send their children into hiding, sending them to live with non-Jewish families or to stay in religious children’s institutions. Non-Jews, free from the condemnation of death by the Nazis due to their religious and cultural backgrounds, played instrumental roles in helping Jews to survive during the Holocaust. In the midst of the great tragedy of the Holocaust, there were those who exhibited humanity, including the non-Jews who committed themselves to helping Jews. In the rescue of Jewish children in France in particular, the combination of efforts of Jewish relief organizations and Catholic institutions helped to save thousands of French Jewish children. The act of rescue illustrates the goodness and compassion of the host families in providing a home for these lonely, frightened children, and of the institutions that opened their doors. Despite this, the personal accounts of Jewish children in hiding in France reveal how being uprooted impacted their lives, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The memoir of Elias Quddus is especially unique in that she wrote it from the perspective of her young self and paired it with illustrations of her most vivid memories. Each source enhances the understanding of the phenomenon and allows readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of children’s own experiences, and how they were impacted by the tragedy of the Holocaust. The different sources reveal how, while in hiding, the children

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44Ibid, 133.
45 Oliner, Altruistic Personality.
were compelled to conceal their Jewish heritage and religion and adopt a new cultural and religious identity. Although this was out of necessity for the children to maximize their protection, their past and future lives were greatly disrupted. These testimonies serve to remind each reader that the experience of being saved is complicated, and can be traumatic, and the lingering, resulting emotions can impact generations to come.
Bibliography


