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Children of the Holocaust

When Hitler and the Nazi party came into power in 1933, no one saw what was coming, the Nazi plan to ultimately annihilate the Jewish community, the “Final Solution”. During this time full of hate, discrimination and anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish legislation took place, and boycotting of Jewish owned businesses, and eventually confinement camps. Nazi laws were aimed at eradicating the civil and economic rights of Jews and other groups, Jewish children were no exception. These laws had a severe effect and significantly impacted the lives of those children. Childhood is the crucial period in life where the young mind learns and is influenced most by their surroundings. During this time, personalities and habits are formed. How they were raised, experiences and their environment determine their psychological state during adolescence and adulthood. Childhood is the most important learning experience of a human’s life. It’s no surprise then that the children of the Holocaust were severely affected by the atrocious acts they witnessed and the oppression they experienced. During this horrific time in human history they were constantly surrounded by death. The children were forced to labor and follow unfair laws and the living conditions in the ghettos and confinement camps were inhumane. As a result, the children’s physical, emotional and psychological health was severely impacted, that is if they survived.

When World War I came to an end in 1918, Germany along with its allies had been defeated. Having been blamed for the war, Germany had to carry the burden and take on economic responsibility. Fifteen years passed and Germany struggled to recover with economic hardships and many people unemployed. The Germans felt that their government, the Weimar Republic, was weak. This allowed Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party the opportunity to step up and take control. Promising a better life and future for Germany during times of despair, Hitler was welcomed with open arms. Hitler was appointed the head of the German government in January of 1933. With a new chancellor in power, the Germans finally had hope; hope that they did not know existed for a long time. However, the moment the Nazis came to power Jews, other groups and their children became targets of anti-Semitism and eventually the holocaust.

Jewish ghettos were formed to concentrate and keep track of the Jews. Jewish children were often under fed in the ghettos died from starvation, malnutrition. Scarcity of sufficient shelter and clothing also exposed them to illnesses and diseases. Some of the children were too young to be forced into labor and therefore viewed as “useless eaters”. Children along with the disabled, the ill, the homosexuals and the elderly, would be selected to the first to deportations where they will meet death. Charlene Schiff 12 years of age at the time, describes smuggling food into the Horochow ghetto [Interview: 1993] “Ingeniously, we dug out two holes in the fences, below the fences, so that a child could sneak out to the other side and, you know, take off the Star of David and try to act like a normal human being and see if we could obtain food. And now and then, children brought home some food back to the ghetto. I did it many times. It was very dangerous, because if one was caught one would pay with life. I mean, this was the order, to shoot, to kill the person, the perpetrator. I was very lucky, and now and then I would bring a slice of bread, I would bring a carrot, or a potato, or an egg, and these were very, very great achievements. My mother made me promise that I wouldn't do it anymore, but I disobeyed.” Life was so hard and food was so scarce that the children would risk their life to get food for themselves and their family.

When the time to deport the Jewish people to the death camps came, children tried to hid or flee many times getting separated from their families. Many non-Jews families opened up their homes for these children and sometimes also their whole family, in her diary Anne frank writes, "The war goes on just the same, whether or not we choose to quarrel, or long for freedom and fresh air, and so we should try to make the best of our stay here. Now I'm preaching, but I also believe that if I stay here for very long I shall grow into a dried-up old beanstalk. And I did so want to grow into a real young woman!" Saturday, 15 January 1944(pg. 125). Anne tries to be positive as she’s hiding but begins to realize that she’s mentally weathering away and might not even get the chance to grow to be a young woman. “Among the most painful memories for hidden children was their separation from parents, grandparents, and siblings. For a variety of reasons—the lack of space, the inability or unwillingness of a rescuer to take in an entire family, or the decision of the parents not to abandon other family members in the ghetto—many Jewish children went into hiding alone”(Hidden children). The anxiety and fear the children experienced from being separated from their parents was of course one of the hardest thing a child could go through. Other children had to change their identity and live under a false identity. Often time children would forget there real identity if separated from their parents at a young age.  Unfortunately not all children could find refuge and those who couldn’t were sent to the camps. The young were often the first to go. If the child made it to the concentration camp they were put to work. First tripped of their clothes, their hair and their identity and given numbers. Elie Wiesel a child survivor and author of Night writes, “One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me. This was Elies final passage after the Holocaust has ended. The affect the Holocaust and living in concentration camps stripped him of his life physically and mentally

Works Cited

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