

Historein

Vol 21, No 2 (2024)

Gendering the Mixed Economies of Welfare: Ruptures and Trajectories in Postwar Europe

Gendering the Mixed Economies of Welfare

Ruptures and Trajectories in Postwar Europe



historein
a review of the past and other things

21.2 2024

Review of Pothiti Hantzaroula, Child Survivors of the Holocaust in Greece: Memory, Testimony and Subjectivity

Dana Mihăilescu

doi: [10.12681/historein.30701](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.30701)

Copyright © 2024, Dana Mihăilescu



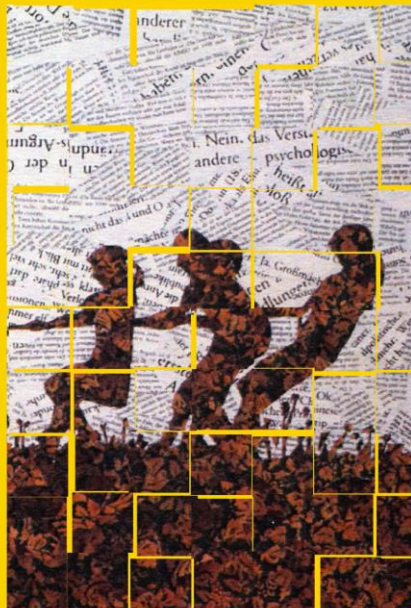
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Mihăilescu, D. (2024). Review of Pothiti Hantzaroula, Child Survivors of the Holocaust in Greece: Memory, Testimony and Subjectivity. *Historein*, 21(2). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.30701>

Gendering the Mixed Economies of Welfare

Ruptures and Trajectories in Postwar Europe



Pothiti Hantzaroula,
*Child Survivors of the
Holocaust in Greece: Memory,
Testimony and Subjectivity*

Dana Mihăilescu

doi: 10.12681/historein.30701

To cite this article:

Mihăilescu, Dana. 2024. "Pothiti Hantzaroula, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust in Greece: Memory, Testimony and Subjectivity*". *Historein* 21 (2).
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.30701>.

Pothiti Hantzaroula

Child Survivors of the Holocaust in Greece: Memory, Testimony and Subjectivity

London: Routledge, 2020. 278 pp.

Dana Mihăilescu

University of Bucharest

Scholarly studies on Holocaust child survivors have blossomed over the last decade, offering thorough, nuanced investigations of the many struggles specific to this generation. Most of these publications have followed two main paths of investigation. Some scholars have focused on the experiences of child survivors of the Holocaust from the time of the Second World War to the early postwar period and beyond, and examined everyday lifestyles, degrees of agency, traumatised and psychological challenges in various locations. Other scholars have primarily examined the successes, pitfalls and failures of rescue efforts, and Holocaust child survivors' afterlives in new places, either in displaced person (DP) camps or new host countries where children immigrated after the war, most often the case of Israel, Western Europe and North America.¹

A gap in this burgeoning field of inquiry is represented by the absence of country-specific case studies shedding light on the specificity of Holocaust child survivors from Eastern and especially Southeastern Europe, with the exception of Poland. Pothiti Hantzaroula's volume *Child Survivors of the Holocaust in Greece: Memory, Testimony and Subjectivity* represents one important step in filling this gap in scholarship, offering a microhistorical approach that provides precious detailed insight into the multiple challenges faced by child survivors from Greece through a comparative analysis of the specificities of the wartime experiences and afterlife of survivors in three Greek cities, Thessaloniki, Athens and Volos, corresponding to the three zones of occupation in which Greece was divided during the war, as excellently explained by the author in the introduction (13–14). These locations experienced different survival rates, ranging from the almost complete annihilation of the Jewish population of Thessaloniki after deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau (96 percent), to the disappearance of around half of the Jewish population of Athens under German administrative and military control, and to the exceptional high percentage of survival in Volos, where 74 percent of the Jewish population was alive at the war's end.

The volume's second relevant contribution consists in expanding a recent scholarly

path of investigation, that of considering the input of the age of child survivors on how they remember and construct Holocaust representation, discussed within an intersectional framework that also considers the role of geographical origin, gender, class, family dynamics and family history in shaping identity and understanding persecution and survival.² This is a complex and nuanced analytic structure that can open up further significant directions of research.

Thirdly, the volume tackles the important issue of the belated public remembrance of Holocaust experiences by those child survivors from Greece who had been sent to what was deemed the “privileged” camp of Bergen-Belsen because of the collaboration of some members of the Jewish Council with the Nazi German authorities therein. This led to postwar circulation of accusations of widespread collaboration in the Jewish collective imaginary, even if they were contradicted by the facts and resulted in a long period of child survivors’ internalised “stigma of privileged treatment” and silence about their traumatic sufferings in comparison to those deported to Auschwitz. This is a discomfort that has started to be overcome only in recent decades. This examination is particularly relevant when discussing the survival of children in the camps, as the author significantly indicates how in the case of Greece, “almost no other children than those in Bergen Belsen survived the camp system” and Greece had the lowest numbers of children surviving the war in terms of absolute numbers, with only 2,200 child survivors out of a total prewar population of 72,000 Jews in Greece and 11,000 Jewish war survivors (4).

At the same time, the age group represented by these child survivors in Greece made up the biggest percentage of survivors in Greece. Given this, Hantzaroula’s study is particularly relevant for assessing postwar Jewish identity and the afterlife of Jewish communities in Greece by employing a psychoanalytically-informed close reading of child survivors’ oral testimonies and generational memories. The author thoroughly investigates the specific features, in the war’s aftermath, of the memorialisation of war crimes that some child survivors had not directly witnessed by the transmission of their embodied traumatic knowledge as a “phantom”, secret, silent and unconscious intrafamilial trauma.

For her study, Hantzaroula has used 60 interviews with child survivors from Thessaloniki, Athens and Volos who survived in hiding or in concentration camps, 39 of which were derived from the most significant Holocaust-related testimony archives in the US, Israel, Germany and Greece, and 21 were conducted by the author herself between 2012 and 2017. By using archival and nonarchival oral and written testimonies of child survivors from Thessaloniki, Athens and Volos, the book manages to highlight the distinct trajectories of families who depended on interactions with the local population and the tried social and cultural life of the Jewish communities in Greece. Through an analysis of these interviews, Hantzaroula’s study points to a rupture in Jewish identity in postwar Greece vs. prewar Greece, highlighting how child survivors, by and large, undertook a sense of

disidentification with Jewishness and a long-term concealment of their Jewish identity that threatened the integrity of the self in the postwar years given the high level of antisemitism within the Greek society, just as it traces some recent networks of reclaiming a positive sense of their Jewish identity especially from the 1990s onwards.

To that end, the eight chapters of Hantzaroula's book map various age-, time- and geography-specific aspects making up the nuanced memories and identities of Jewish child survivors from Greece that together provide a highly comprehensive and enlightening account of their complex actions and fate, both during the Holocaust and in the various decades after the end of the Second World War. Chapter 1 starts with an analysis of various archives comprising Jewish child survivors' testimonies. It focuses on the impact of archival agendas and time-related dynamics in considering testimonies given over a long-time span, from the immediate postwar period to contemporary times, in order to show how the Greek case can shift assumptions about the development of Holocaust memory. Highly important in this respect is Hantzaroula's survey of the development of the Holocaust testimonial genre in Greece from 1945 onwards (31–50) which shows how the survivors' construction of a Holocaust memory was moulded by the political situation of Greece in those times. In particular, Hantzaroula highlights how there was little space for Holocaust memory in Greece until the 1980s despite the publication of some survivors' chronicles that combined the historiographical and autobiographical modes. She then emphasises the implementation in the 1980s of a shared narrative of wartime resistance that included all Greek people that did not leave space to acknowledge the persecution of Greek Jews incorporated in some of the survivors' testimonies. Finally she examines Erika Cugno Amarilio's 1989 project about Thessaloniki survivors which involved an open and supportive interviewee that made it possible for child survivors to transmit the Holocaust as public memory in Greece.

Chapter 2 is centred on the structure of child survivors' testimonies to assess to what extent they show a different mode of experiencing the Holocaust in comparison to adult survivors' accounts. Here, Hantzaroula wonderfully builds on existent studies about child survivors' testimonies to underscore the high relevance of entangled somatic and psychic, conscious and unconscious processing of traumatic events, as represented by child survivors' photographic memories of events as well as by their development of a chronology of war through key events disrupting their lives. Most significantly, war became real for them via their acquired fear of death on realising what being Jewish meant for outsiders, or via their emotional rupture and sense of insecurity caused by their separation from their parents. By comparison, in the case of very young children raised by gentile families, the traumatising came after the end of the war upon reconnecting with their biological families, while being suddenly separated from the families that they had thought were their real ones.

Chapter 3 investigates the trajectories of escape of Jewish families from Athens and Thessaloniki, through which we learn of the little opportunities of survival they had and the

high role of luck, alongside financial means or connections to a resistance organisation, in staying alive. In this sense, Hantzaroula provides an excellent survey of the confiscation of Jewish property in Thessaloniki and the deportation itineraries that became deeply imprinted on children's memory, demonstrating how illegitimate the Christian Greeks' claims for Jewish possessions were and how dangerous and violent the deployment of deportation was (especially 75–81).

Chapter 4 considers the memory of child survivors of Volos, who remained alive by hiding on Mount Pelion and, to a lesser extent, Athens, but still confronted high levels of antisemitism in postwar Greek society. Meanwhile, their participation in the resistance was decisive for changing their own status as citizens and the meaning of their Jewish identity after the war's end. Hantzaroula explains how, in this area, the high percentage of survival of the Jewish population is closely tied to the low levels of separation from family members and "the vigilance and prompt mobilisation of leftist organisations" (114) that formed the resistance, to which especially working-class Jewish youths adhered and constructed their identity, in synch with the gentile population, through cultural and educational activities. Moreover, after the war, their belonging to the resistance allowed them to connect their fate to that of the Greek non-Jewish population and to emphasise a continuity between their prewar and postwar lives that was not possible for the Jews of Thessaloniki, who suffered much more devastating losses. Nevertheless, the Jewish survivors of Volos only gave their testimonies after the 1990s establishment of the VHA archive and the production of *Schindler's List*, which offered them the incentive to make their memories public. Meanwhile, the child survivors of Volos who went into hiding continued to conceal their Jewish identity for a long time and have aligned their identity to that of concentration camp survivors in their testimonies. As a continuation of this latter direction of research, Chapter 5 closely examines the experiences of Greek Jewish children in the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, highlighting the physical and psychological burdens they carried in their adult years, especially the fragmented nature of their camp experience and a reversal of values that prevented the formation of a story via which to narrate what was happening to them. After liberation, Hantzaroula relevantly shows how child survivors' sense of insecurity and concealment of their Jewish identity continued after their return to a high level of antisemitism in Greece given the large number of wartime beneficiaries and patrons primarily concerned with "safeguarding the interests of those who had gained from Jewish property" (171).

Chapter 6 further explores the specifics of the antisemitic discourse in postwar Greece under the doctrine of Helleno-Christianity, a project of ethnic homogenisation which was constructed as anti-Jewish and anticommunist during the interwar years and continued to function as a state policy after the end of the war. This doctrine worked in conjunction with the widespread wartime looting and Greek appropriation of Jewish properties and

belongings, making the mainstream population continue to construct Jews as foreigners. Jewish child survivors in particular experienced this hostile attitude in school, where they faced antisemitic slurs from both peers and teachers. Hantzaroula convincingly shows how the Helleno-Christianity doctrine had a key role in the construction of Jewish identity in Greece as a stigmatised identity related to shame which Jewish child survivors gradually remodelled as a positive sense of difference by connecting it with their academic skills and achievements, reconfiguring Jewishness away from a religious core to a sense of self-assumed defence against those trying to annihilate it. Chapter 7 explains one of the fundamental factors that permitted Jewish child survivors' passage from a sense of Jewishness as stigmatisation brought about by antisemitism in the Greek public sphere to a sense of positive reworking of Jewishness. This change happened thanks to the promotion of Jewish sociality in schools and summer camps organised by local and international Jewish agencies after the end of the war. To prove this, Hantzaroula expands the study of child survivors' postwar reconstruction of Jewish identity in Greece in relation to the implication of international and local Jewish community organisations that worked together to strengthen the bonds among child survivors in relation to their Jewish identity. This involved the creation of public and private schools for Jewish child survivors in Greece with the primary material support of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, involving many voluntary local committees whose activities at schools, summer camps and children's centres targeted "a sense of continuity of Jewish life", "the wellbeing and recreation of children as well as the moral formation of Jewish youth" (195). In these educational institutions, child survivors also developed their collective identity based on mourning as well as resistance to antisemitic attacks and discriminations. A positive sense of child survivors' shared identities was thus developed not in connection with fear and shame but with friendship, love, protection and joy, one which child survivors have carried forward by joining social media networks. Finally, chapter 8 looks at indirect forms of traumatic memory transmission represented by "postmemory" and "generational haunting" that extends the examination from child survivors to the subsequent generations and challenges the trauma "unrepresentability" thesis. Most significantly, Hantzaroula here uncovers many child survivors' lingering distrust of official archives for their political agendas and lack of understanding of the context of their wartime actions and experiences. As a result, many child survivors decided to tape their experiences and entrust them to their family members only and thus to break the silence during their lifetime by releasing their phantom recollections into a social realm in which they had more trust.

Thoroughly researched, Hantzaroula's book represents a needed and much welcome addition to the study of child survivors of the Second World War by offering students and scholars of the Holocaust a comprehensive insight into the specifics of Greece, which can serve as a basis for subsequent comparative or kindred assessments in the case of other southeastern European countries. Combining a detailed historical analysis with a fine-tuned psychoanalytic approach, the book is also of high relevance across

disciplines, for historians, psychologists and psychoanalysts researching the Holocaust and other genocides, as well as for memory studies and migration studies researchers.

¹ The most significant studies in this respect are Patricia Heberer, *Children During the Holocaust* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2011); Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Sharon Kangisser Cohen, Eva Fogelman and Dalia Ofer, eds., *Children in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath: Historical and Psychological Studies of the Kestenberg Archive* (New York: Berghahn, 2017); Beth B. Cohen, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust: The Youngest Remnant and the American Experience* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Sharon Kangisser Cohen and Dalia Ofer, eds., *Starting Anew: The Rehabilitation of Child Survivors of the Holocaust in the Early Postwar Years* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2019); and Rebecca Clifford, *Survivors: Children's Lives after the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

² In this sense, the author expands the findings of recent studies emphasising these entanglements in the case of child survivors from other countries, such as Nathan Durst, "Child-Survivors of the Holocaust: Age-Specific Traumatization and the Consequences for Therapy," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 57, no. 4 (2003): 499–518, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2003.57.4.499>; Dana Mihăilescu, "Being Without Pleasurable Memories: On the Predicament of Jewish Child Survivors in Norman Manea's 'Proust's Tea' and Kindred Narratives," *American Imago* 70:1 (2013): 107–9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26305043>; Cohen, Fogelman and Ofer, *Children in the Holocaust*.