

Claiming 'Unaccompanied' Children: Uncovering Children as Agents of Postwar Reconstruction

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In the early months and years after the war's end, Jewish child survivors separated from their families found themselves occupying an anxious place in adult attentions. Wartime host families, surviving relatives, local Jewish groups, humanitarian aid organizations such as UNRRA, overseas agencies and potential adoptive families abroad might all stake a claim to an "unaccompanied" Jewish child. The angst over who could and should claim these children reveals a great deal about adult visions of child survivors in symbolic, political and ideological terms.

Caught between competing families, religions and even nations, "unaccompanied" child survivors could find themselves pushed and pulled, in the postwar moment, by a baffling array of conflicting demands for their bodies, minds and souls. At the center of this process, of course, were the children themselves, who are often treated more as objects than as subjects in historical work on the period. This paper explores children's roles as actors in the "claiming" process—for children had far more agency here than we often assume and were capable of navigating these competing claims to their own ends.

The paper draws on the case files of the Canadian Jewish Congress's "War Orphans Program." This rich collection of documents illustrates how far "unaccompanied" children—even very young ones—were adept at playing adult concerns and demands off against each other to cut pathways out of their countries of origin, into select care homes and reception centres, and finally away from continental Europe altogether. It argues that we would do well to consider just how far children themselves, with agendas of their own, fundamentally shaped the outcomes of aid schemes meant to relieve their plight.