

An Unbroken Chain: Postwar “Redemption” of Child Holocaust Survivors by the Orthodox Jewish Community

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Immediately after the Holocaust, Jewish organizations ranging from Zionist to ultra-orthodox sought to help the few children who had miraculously survived. Many were still alive because they had been hidden in Christian environments. Thus, children had to be located and retrieved, and in the words of one rabbi, “redeemed.”

While world Jewry was united in its goal of returning children to its community, there was much discord over where children belonged and how they would get there. Religious leaders, fearful that children would be lost to Judaism sprang into action. For example, Rabbi Herzog, chief rabbi of Palestine and Rabbi Oshry of the Kovno ghetto, set out to find Jewish orphans. These efforts were soon supported by Save-A-Child and the Rescue Children, two U.S. organizations that sent emissaries to Europe to retrieve Jewish children and place them in children’s homes until they were sent to their final destinations. Eventually, several thousand child survivors arrived in America. The work of Jewish agencies and individuals did not end there.

In this paper, I analyze U.S. efforts that underscore ultra-orthodox goals to rebuild the pre-Shoah religious world. One in particular, the Yeshiva Farm Settlement, was the brainchild of Slovakian Rabbi Weissmandl, head of the prewar Nitra yeshiva and member of the wartime Working Group. The rabbi envisioned a school where male refugees would combine Torah study and farming. How do survivors of the Yeshiva Farm Settlement recall their experiences in being restored to orthodoxy? Because of the scrupulous separation of boys and girls in traditional orthodox education, Rabbi Weissmandl’s novel yeshiva is also an opportunity to explore gender differences in the “rescue and rehabilitation” of child survivors.