

# Are The Trees in Bloom Over There?

## The Value of the Family and the Notion of Childhood

### **RATIONALE**

The following is a Teaching Unit that presents different perspectives on the Holocaust by combining the voices of two brothers who survived with the letters of their parents who were murdered. The letters, written during the Holocaust to their sons, together with the sons' afterthoughts on these letters afford us unique access to events of the Holocaust through the individual voices of one family unit.

### **AIMS OF THE UNIT**

1. To examine the story from various angles:
  - The historical narrative
  - Later testimony of survivors
  - Earlier testimony of victims
  - The presence of the murderers
2. To present the story of one German Jewish family before the Holocaust, during the Holocaust and after the Holocaust
3. To examine the complexity of dual loyalty and double identity of German Jewry.
4. To grasp the fortitude of parents forced to make critical decisions and the ability of children to function.
5. To appreciate the effect on family survivors resulting from the different paths chosen by them after the Holocaust.

### **OPENING**

- How can we define the notion of childhood?
- To what extent was your personal childhood affected by your life with your family?

The most fundamental and basic unit of association a man possesses is the family unit. From ancient times to the present, most human beings are born, raised, and educated in the surrounding of the family. In fact, despite the many differences between families, it is a known fact that the experiences a person has with his family are the most influential in shaping his individual identity. During the period of the Holocaust, the framework of the Jewish family in Nazi-occupied countries was totally shattered. Moreover, throughout the years preceding the outbreak of the Second World War, the disintegration process of the Jewish family became evident in various ways. One of the quintessential expressions of this disintegration process is expressed in the experiences of children at that difficult time of crisis.

During the Holocaust, Jewish children were deprived of their childhood as we perceive it: a time associated with innocence, love, joy, protection and learning. Instead, they endured experiences of family disintegration, abandonment and humiliation. They had to endure a horrendous reality of loneliness, starvation, diseases and death. Children had to deal with this new reality while being forced to face their fate and the fate of their families. At the time of the Holocaust there was a dramatic inversion of the roles within the family. When we speak about children during the Holocaust, in many cases it is impossible for us to speak about childhood as we know it.

### [The Story of Two Brothers from Hoffenheim](#)

The memoir, “Are the Trees in Bloom Over There?” depicts the personal story of two German-Jewish brothers: Manfred Mayer (1929) and Menachem Mayer (1932). The two brothers were deported with their parents and relatives from their home in Germany to a deportation camp in France. Later on, through the efforts of a Jewish assistance organization and of several Righteous among the Nations, the two brothers were hidden in various hiding places in France. After the war, the older brother, Fred, immigrated to the United States, where he became a space scientist. The younger brother, Menachem, immigrated to Israel, where he served as a soldier in the I.D.F., and later enrolled in educational work. Both of the brothers established large families in their countries. In contrast with the fate of the brothers, both parents

were taken to the Drancy deportation camp and then murdered in the Auschwitz extermination camp.

“Are the Trees in Bloom Over There?” is a dual autobiography written in two voices while the two brothers maintain a unique dialogue between them. It is important to note that the book was written after many years of minimal or no contact between the two. The title of the book is taken from the very heart of the brothers’ story: a moving exchange of letters, written during the war, between the brothers in hiding and their parents, who were kept in a deportation camp in France. Fred kept the letters for years without reading them. In 1959, just before burning the letters, Fred decided to send the letters to his brother Menachem who lived in Israel. Menachem locked them in a chest of drawers up until the mid 70’s and only then did he decide to read them. The writing of this book thus reveals two opposite aspects: the crumbling of their original family unit and the attempt to reconnect the now extended families.

In the following excerpts, one of the brothers explains his reasons for writing the book. The brother’s children, today parents themselves, also weigh in on this matter:

**Fred:** “Our readers are no doubt familiar with the subject of the Holocaust from school, from books and from the media. So why do we feel it necessary to expand on the topic beyond our personal memories? First, because these events and our response to them have shaped our lives and our worldview. Second, because antisemitism and intolerance of others are still prevalent. Innocent people are still being killed out of bigotry and hatred of what is foreign or different, or because of religious differences.”

**Children:** Today, as parents, it’s very difficult to describe the inner strength that a mother needs to write a final letter to her little children when she knows that she will probably never see them again.

Now we are adults. We have children of our own. When we re-read the letters your parents wrote in the concentration camps, we see a different picture – we see a family. They wrote of their memories, their everyday struggles in the camps.

### German – Jew

- How are the childhood memories of the brothers represented in reference to their families, their town and their identity?

“We were born in the small village of Hoffenheim in Baden, southwest Germany. Everything was leafy and green.

Mother’s name was Mathilde, but she was known as Hilde. Father’s name was Karl [...] As far as I know, Father’s schooling was limited to the elementary level.

I remember Mother had very long brown hair, which she gathered up in a bun.

I think she was better educated than father. She played the zither [...]

Father was a soldier during World War I. I remember his stories about fighting in the war.

I remember sitting on Father’s lap on the Sabbath while he told me stories [...] the family cozily together, reminds me of Mother playing on the zither and singing the famous German song, *Lorelei*.

Mother gave me a very Germanic name – Manfred. When I asked why she chose that name, she replied that it was very popular. When she was young she heard a neighbor calling her son from the window, “Manfred”. She liked the sound.

Father was the part-time cantor to the shrinking community - there were only about 40 Jewish people in the community.

I remember Father leading the congregation in prayer during Friday evening and Sabbath day services. “

### Changing Times – Nazis Come to Power

- How did the brothers experience the betrayal by their German school friends?

- Fred claims that their behavior was the result of Nazi brainwashing. How do you relate to this?

“In the early years, we would visit with the neighbors before it became too risky for them to associate with us.

On hot days we kids paddled in the cool water, but when “our enemies” spotted us it was an open invitation, everyone yelling “drown the Jew boys”. They would jump on me and hold my head under water [..]

Walking to school was never pleasant. It was always a harrowing experience. German children were constantly indoctrinated and exposed to Nazi propaganda. They were brainwashed – their heads were filled with antisemitic ideas and racist attitudes. That’s how the Hitler Youth came into being [..] I do not recall a single incident where an adult, witnessing this daily bullying, tried to prevent the other kids from beating me up.

In May 1937, the Ministry of Education forbade Jewish children to attend public schools. This was one of the many restrictions imposed on the Jewish community [..] after spending one year, first grade, in the village elementary school, I then had to attend a Jewish school in Heidelberg, some 20 kilometers away. I had to cover the distance by train every day [..] Best of all, on the train I was anonymous – nobody knew who I was. From the time I got on nobody knew I was Jewish! Nobody beat me up, no one bothered me! In those days people didn’t greet one another by saying “Good Morning” but raised their right arm with the words “Heil Hitler”. I unhesitatingly did the same. For that moment I, too, belonged!”

### [Kristallnacht Pogrom](#)

Many historians claim that the events of this pogrom were a crucial turning point. State your opinion on this matter after reading the following passage:

“On the morning of November 9, 1938 [..] as I hurried home from the train station, I saw Mother pushing a cart piled high with clothes and bedding. In reply to my question she explained that they were destroying the synagogue and the adjacent

apartment. Furniture and household objects lay scattered in the street. Some local Nazis – including those who had been *in school with my father*, his comrades-in arms during the First World War – were standing up above, on the roof, which they were busy dismantling with great enthusiasm. The pleasure with which they applied themselves to their work was painful to see.

At the end of a full day of riots, Father was taken from us and imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp for a month. He was released earlier than others because of “concessions” made to German veterans of World War I! “

### Unknown Destination

The following passage touches on the problem of German-Jewish Identity. How do you understand this?

“The German army invaded France in May, 1940.

On October 22, 1940, a new and terrifying element entered our lives. At eight in the morning, two members of the Gestapo [...] instructed us to be prepared to leave within two hours. We were permitted to take up to fifty kilograms of personal effects per adult and thirty per child, and one hundred marks each. That’s all the information we received – they didn’t reveal our destination and they certainly didn’t explain why it had become necessary for us to leave our home

All the Jews of Hoffenheim were deported that same day. I remember Father shouting, “Is this why I fought in the war?” I distinctly remember him (father) taking out his distinguished service awards, including the Iron Cross, and angrily throwing them at the feet of the Gestapo. They were embarrassed and remained silent. “

### Gurs – Transit Camp

Describe the main factors that contributed to the brothers’ shock.

“We were in a place surrounded by barbed wire, with lots of wooden barracks. Upon arrival, men and women were separated. The younger children were permitted to remain with their mothers, so we stayed with Mother. Winter. Rain, wind, damp and cold [...] the barracks they put us in were completely bare. That first night we didn’t even have straw to sleep on. It was a far cry from home, from more or less normal lives, to this entirely new reality; the contrast was so stark that we were all in shock.

When the two of us [...] went outside in the morning, we immediately sank into the mud, because the entire swamp was built on swampland. There were no sidewalks, no pavement or vegetation – just a sea of squelching mud. I do not exaggerate when I say that it came up to my knees, and it was hard work dragging out anyone who had the misfortune to fall in. The mud was a severe hindrance, especially for the old people, who found it almost impossible to get to the toilet facilities. Everyone who survived clearly remembers the mud of Gurs.”

### The Separation

**Heroism is not only fighting with weapons. This passage provides another example. Explain.**

“We kids didn’t know that various people and organizations were trying to get children out of the camp.

One day, our parents told us they had given their permission for us to be taken from the camp – together with other children – to a children’s home somewhere in France. They explained that it would be better for us, because camp conditions were intolerable. We don’t remember how we felt or how we reacted to this news.

I remember Father lifting me into the truck and gazing into my eyes. We didn’t have a chance to say goodbye to Mother because the truck didn’t wait, but I can still see her standing on the wooden bridge and waving as the truck passed.

We keep asking ourselves how they found the inner strength to send their sons, twelve and not yet nine, into the unknown. Their bravery seems all the greater when

we consider that they were in the minority – most of the parents, unable to foresee what lay ahead, refused to part with their children. All of them perished in Auschwitz.”

### ADDITIONAL QUESTION:

You have just read three passages dealing with:

- Leaving home
- Arrival in the transit camp
- The later separation from the parents

Which stage strikes you as the hardest? Explain your choice.

### Life in Hiding as Reflected in the Letters

- In the following excerpts from the parents' letters, can you find any reference to the issue of sending the boys away?
- Do these letters portray the conventional roles of parent and child? How do the inverted roles reveal themselves?
- What elements of tradition are the parents eager to leave the children?

1.

*Rivesaltes, August 1941*

*Dearest Children,*

*We were very happy to receive your letter. I was especially happy to read that you are well, because that's really the most important thing. Did you get the letter where I wrote that Father was taken from here with more than 100 other men? Three weeks have passed and I still haven't heard from him. They say they were taken to work. What do I say to this? If only we knew where they were [...] What do you get to eat? Do you get cooked meals like you had at home? We get watery vegetable soup, sometimes with potatoes.*

*Lately I have been suffering quite badly from diarrhea. In the photograph you sent your face looks thin, Manfred, and is Heinz's neck swollen? Regards and kisses from your Mother, who loves you with all her heart. They just brought your passport photos, you look well. Why do you need them? Are you going away?*

2.

*We received your letters together with the Hanukkah gifts [...] My diarrhea is getting better [...] Best wishes for your birthday and bar mitzvah. Today your letter arrived (of January 26<sup>th</sup>) and we were happy to read that you are healthy and to learn about your school reports. I see, Heinz, that you enjoy school. Can you send us anything? I must take care of myself because I get diarrhea very easily [the next few words were erased by the censor]. What do you get to eat? What has Heinz done with all the shoes I gave him? If the shoes are small on him, send them here and I'll sell them. How can it be that you don't have boots? What is your shoe size? How are your socks, I'm sure they're torn by now?!*

*Now, about your Jewish names: Manfred is Maier bar Kalonymous, and Heinz is Menachem bar Kalonymous. Write them down.*

3.

*My dear children,*

*Just a few lines before we leave – I don't know where we're going. We don't in the least regret leaving you behind, you are safer where you are. Perhaps you'll hear everything. Be well. All the best and kisses from your Mother. Dear Manfred and Heinz, be good to one another – that's my greatest concern.*

### [The Brothers Separate Again](#)

The two brothers have been through so much, and yet we now read that they separate for a second time by their own choices. What thoughts trouble you at this point in the unfolding family saga? What forces are at play in their separate decisions?

**Menachem/Heinz:** [After the war was over, and following several years of being separated] “..Manfred tried to persuade me to join him [in the United States], but I refused, insisting that I wanted to go to Palestine. I was fourteen at the time, and very much influenced by my teachers and counselors, so I don't think this was an independent decision on my part.

Sometimes I ask myself what right they had to separate two brothers, the only survivors of a whole family? [...] that's how my fate was decided [...] Sometimes we

control events and make choices, but most of the time it only seems that way, because our actions are dictated by circumstances over which we have no control. “

**Fred [16 years old]:** “On the way to [the United States] I wondered why I had not chosen to go to Palestine? After all, I had been exposed [..] to my Jewish cultural heritage and many people had chosen to make their lives there.

Frankly, I am not sure exactly how my thinking evolved. I was multifaceted. Foremost was a feeling that had grown in me over the years that being Jewish was not healthy.”

### The Destination

Despite ending up on separate continents, the last passage reveals a deep-seated need in both brothers to study. How do you connect this to their parents’ wishes?

**Menachem:** “In my opinion, Manfred’s flight did not end when he crossed the ocean. I think his choice of career, as a space engineer, also represents a kind of flight, as far as possible, to outer space [..]

For several years, in addition to my daily routine, I studied toward a teaching diploma in natural sciences. I attended classes two evenings a week at the School of Biology in Haifa. Twice each week I walked five kilometers down the hill to the old Haifa road where I caught a bus to the school.

**Fred:** Within days Mr. Heumann asked me what I wanted to become. I said I didn’t know yet, but that I was hoping to go to high school. He said, “Nonsense, you are going to be a butcher.” I said I certainly did not want to be a butcher [..] I worked at the machine shop from eight to five, then traveled to school by subway and bus to study from six to ten [..] I graduated on August 1, 1952, fourth in a class of twenty-five.”