Fifty Years After, Hidden Children Speak

Léa Marcou
FIFTY YEARS AFTER, 
HIDDEN CHILDREN SPEAK

“For fifty years, I have not spoken of my childhood years in France during the second world war. A hidden child, I lived under a false name amongst unknown people, being careful – as I had been taught – not to reveal, by a gesture or by a word, that I was Jewish. I knew I was in danger, still not understanding why and I was constantly afraid. I didn't know whether I would see again one day my parents from whom I had been suddenly taken away. Nonetheless what were my pains compared to those of the deportees, compared to the fate of eleven thousands Jews children deported from France? I would have been ashamed to call myself a survivor of the Shoah. But now the time has come to break the silence, because there is a need for keeping the memory alive, and we are the last survivors.”

It is in more or less this way that all of the members of “Aloumim” (the Israeli Association of the children hidden in France during the Shoah) express themselves. Established in the summer of 1993, this association has approximately 500 members, spread throughout sections of Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv and Haifa. It has several goals:
- to allow men and women to get together and evoke this hidden past in informal or thematic meetings (for instance “the life in the convent”, “the passage to Switzerland” or “the demarcation line”).
- to obtain “Just of the Nations” medals from the Yad Vashem Institute for these brave French people to whom they owe their life – farmers, religious people or also one of the “escorters” who, braving the danger, guided scared children to a “hideout”, a shelter.
- to transmit the history in order to fight negationism and forgetting. By what means? This is done on the one hand by collecting testimonies from the members of the association who wish to relate their story. Moreover this is done in order to inform the young Israeli who often don't know what

happened in France during the second world war. Every year members of “Aloumim” go to schools and “recount”.

The association publishes Mémoire vive, a bilingual French-Hebrew bulletin. The content of this bulletin includes among other things, memories of hidden children, and descriptions of “those who have acted”, Jews and non-Jews who have played a role in saving children. The column “Avis de recherche” has allowed more than one sexagenarians, too young at that time to have clear memories, to find people who knew him/her and to reconstruct the torn-down framework of his/her past.

Collecting the testimonies occupies an important place in the activities of the association. It is done generally in French, the mother tongue or at least in the childhood language of these authors. More than 160 stories have been already recorded and, for most of them, written down. They will be stored (the process is in progress) at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and in Paris at the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation.

Like the memories which come up during the meetings, these testimonies yield a striking picture of what children of 6-7 to 15-16 years old (if they were younger their memories are too vague to be related) have been through, with all the psychological aspects involved.

Who are they, these young clandestines? Many of them were born in France from French parents or immigrants going several generations back. Sometimes they have been “placed out” by their parents concerned about protecting them; sometimes they avoided a raid – randomly for some of them, like this 6 and-a-half-year-old boy who was at the hospital when his family was arrested. Some of them were already refugees, for instance coming from Nazi Germany in 1937 or 1938. Sometimes, as early as the Winter of 1940-41, they were held with their parents in one of the camps of Vichy, Gurs or Rivesaltes for example. And the parents had to accept being apart from them, entrusting them to someone sent by a Jewish or non-Jewish organization who obtained their freedom or helped them to escape.

Through the individual stories, always illustrated by anecdotes, through the shocking pictures that the childhood memory has retained, main themes appear. The “before”, the period of clandestine identity, the everyday life, mainly in Paris, when anti-Jewish acts follow each other. A key-memory: going to school with the yellow star, confronting the stare of others. Moreover, it is important not to forget the curfew: because she was found in the street one evening in the spring of 1942, Reine, 9 years old, spent the night at the police station. The bans which increase, like the one
prohibiting entrance into a public garden or a movie theater, isolate the little Jewish Parisian and deprive him/her of the games and distractions of his/her age. He/she can not even comfort him/herself by listening to songs on the radio, because the radios have been confiscated.

But this is only the first part of the drama. Many stories retell of the time when the police knocked at the door, came to arrest one or both of the parents, who generally question (at least before this summer of 1942 when the large raids end the illusions): “But why? We have not done anything and we are in order”. The children who stay alone are most often taken care of by a Jewish organization, which sometimes guides them directly to a “hideout” with the help of a rescue network, or sometimes shelters them in a center or a home for children. The sejour in these institutions leave contrasted memories. In Paris, the boarders of the Center at Lamarck Street, which is part of the UGIF (Union générale des israélites de France/General Union of the Israelites of France) were, like all of the population, badly fed and from 1943 were terrorized by the aerial alerts, which added to their distress of being apart from their parents and to the fear of being arrested (in July 1944, the Gestapo took away more than 300 children from the institutions of the UGIF, among them the 72 living in the center at Lamarck street. Destination: Auschwitz, from where almost none of them came back). Conversely, the children’s homes established in the free zone, mainly by the OSE (Œuvre de secours aux enfants/Center of Help for Children) and the EIF (Eclaireurs israélites de France/Israelite Scouts of France), seem like a haven in the turmoil. With a “Jewish ambiance” where the Shabbat and the holidays are celebrated, and thanks to many activities, these children find a warm and reassuring atmosphere and they forget a bit their fate. Often they go to the school of the village and the local population provides a valuable support to the institution and to their people. The links of friendship created during this collective life are such that still today the “elders” try to find each other or to meet back up with an instructor again, by publishing a “searching for lost persons” advertisement in Mémoire vivante.

With the intensification of the raids and the deportations beginning in the summer of 1942, the children’s homes risk being transformed into traps, so while awaiting closure they began to disperse the boarders elsewhere. In their turn these boarders have to learn a false name and a false autobiography and are about to start their existence as “hidden children” in the strict sense of the term, either with farmers, or in a convent or a Christian institution (these are the two main forms of reception). Some children find themselves moving from one place to another. Life on the farm
is a novelty for most of them. Naturally, there are harsh welcoming families, who seem mostly interested in the pension paid monthly by the parents or, if they have disappeared, by the institutions. Other families, numerous, are sympathizing and affectionate, and sometimes the relations created with them still last to this day. Some of the “hiders” are also members of the Resistance. Many of the children who were quite old enough to be aware of the danger relate their their constant anguish: the fear of hearing the dog bark, indicating that it is necessary to run to the “hiding-place of the hiding-place” that their protectors have set up for them. To be hidden in a convent means to plunge into an unknown universe, to risk being exposed by ignorance of the Christian prayers and practice. The members of “Aloumim”, now Israeli, emphasize also sometimes their problems of identity: some of them were feeling attracted by this world where we speak of love, where there are pretty pictures and music in the chapel, and which seems to them so peaceful after the events from where they are coming. Others, mainly those who received a religious education, fought to preserve internally their jewish identity, without exposing themselves.

Among the other main themes of these stories, the “passages” are especially poignant. Passage across the line of demarcation with sometimes extraordinary conditions: a little boy and his mother have travelled in a small space set up by an ingenious truck driver at the bottom of a coal container. Again, a 7 year-old little girl has crossed the line in a coal container on a barge, another one in the tender of a locomotive. Another example is the risky, illegal crossing into Switzerland, attempted with or without success by some groups of children under the guidance of Jews or Christians who, for some of them, have paid this attempt with their life. Occurring more rarely is the crossing to Spain.

When the Liberation finally came, many of these “hidden children” learned that from now on they would orphans. They grew up in new orphanages, or took the boat to Israel, under the aegis of the Aliya of the young people. Among those who found one or both of their parents again, some of them, still babies or toddlers at the time of the separation, don’t recognize them, and don’t speak their language anymore.

Fifty years after, the story of the hidden children comes little by little out from behind the shadow and takes its place in the works of historians. More and more often, French or Israeli students writing a thesis, researchers affiliated with a for instance the Institut du temps présent go to the “Aloumim” Association or publish a search for lost persons in the
columns of Mémoire vive. These burning memories, with their drama and their events, are not only the expression of a “stolen childhood”, of which they carry an indelible witness; they also reveal a rich documentation of the events as much as of the acts of the rescuers, Jews and non-Jews, of the history of a region or a village where the children have found refuge – and where some of them go back today for a remembrance ceremony or for the awarding of a Medal of the Just. They give a living picture of many acts of anonymous French people, the lack of humanity of some of them, the discrete heroism of those to whom they owe their life. And not to forget, as it concerns an Israeli association, their contribution to a better understanding in Israel of French history during the dark years.

Léa Marcou
(Translation: C. and K. Delage)