
Josef ITAI-INDIG

THE FLIGHT OF THE CHILDREN*

*From the history of Jewish refugee children
during World War II*

Josef Indig lived in Zagreb until 1941. He was an active member of the left wing youth Zionist organisation Hashomer Hatzair. The transfer of orphaned children from occupied Europe through Yugoslavia to Palestine is an accomplishment that should never be forgotten. Josef changed his surname to Itai after emigrating to Israel. There he joined the Gat Kibbutz where he lived until the end of his life.

More than twenty years have passed since then. Dozens of Jewish children would come to us because we offered peace and tranquillity. They sought salvation and freedom with us, little knowing that our peace and tranquillity heaved with unrest and anxiety. So much time has passed since that autumn of 1940 when Recha Freier, the founder of the Youth Aliya and the force behind the rescue of Jewish children from Germany, entrusted me with caring for these children until they managed to set off for Palestine. I spent time with the children for almost five years, taking them across three borders, taking as much care as was possible in the years between 1941 and 1945. All the terrible scenes which could have happened and which did happen around us still live within us.

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I waited in a Zagreb suburb for the first group of children, having been informed of their arrival. The police were not supposed to notice them, because they were without papers. They crossed the Yugoslav border illegally, they were going to live in Zagreb illegally and our Jewish people were waiting with all the warmth of solidarity to accommodate them. I peered into the darkness, seeing nothing, only a vague mass drawn in strange colours, neither man nor tree. Could this perhaps be the beloved children, the rescued Jewish children we were waiting for?

I had an idea. "Shalom!" I said. Immediately the mass broke apart, flying in various directions as though struck by the spark of life: younger and older children gathered around me with great confidence, firing questions at us. Two of them remain in my memory:

"Haver, is there a Minyan in Zagreb, so that I can say Kaddish for my father?"

"Haver, is it true that they play football in Zagreb? Are we allowed to play too?"

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And so they began arriving.

They came both in organised groups and individually, as the fate of the Jews brought them to us under the boots of Fascist Europe.

One day we had been told to expect the arrival of a group of sixteen girls from Berlin. These were the daughters of Polish Jews and there was no one to take care of them, so Recha Freier took them under her wing. We'd not been given any information by telephone and Rosa Hacker's office was heavy with concern. After we had waited the whole day an ominous message arrived: the Yugoslav police had caught the children as they trudged through the snow across the border north of Maribor. Our prisoners were sitting in Maribor and the authorities were planning to return them to Hitler's Austria.

In Maribor an odd situation awaited me. Everyone in the town knew about these strange small prisoners who were cooped up in a little Maribor hotel, drying out their clothes and awaiting their fate. The Ban headquarters gave orders for them to be returned, but Maribor wouldn't allow it. The people of Maribor gave their oath that these children would be saved and the newspapers in Ljubljana did their part.

They were accepted by a camp in Krško.

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March 27, 1941, arrived. After difficult negotiations and pleading, this final group received permits from the British government to enter Palestine. I escorted them from Zagreb, uncertain whether I would be able to get them to Belgrade, because the authorities in Zagreb were silent that day.

Several dozen Jewish children got off the train in Belgrade. Nobody was waiting for us. I set off with my little mob through the night of March 27, through Belgrade, the calm after the storm. After we had been walking through the streets for several minutes, we came across a tank with an officer standing in front of it.

“What’s this?” he asked in astonishment.

“They’re Jewish orphans from Germany. I’m taking them to the Association of Jewish Communities.”

The young officer was outraged. He began to spit out disconnected questions:

“Well, what can I do... They’re really from Germany... Damn Hitler... Shall I escort you... You want a tank... Cannons?”

We found peace again in front of the Association’s office. There was no one to open the door for us. The caretaker didn’t dare. And then a general came along and banged on the door with his sword, cursing all the saints in heaven. “Open the door or I’ll...”

The next day the children set off from the crowded Belgrade railway station accompanied by Šime Špicer, a good and devoted man who happily watched as they finally managed to scramble into the wagon.

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When I returned to Zagreb a day or two later, I found the remaining sixty children staring blankly at me.

“Why didn’t you go with them?” they asked in surprise: “We’re used to being left behind.”

I was to hear the same question again and again. These dear, tormented faces, used to not trusting people because so many of them were beasts, because they had taken away their fathers and mothers. Their view of the world was wearied by their ongoing struggle for mere survival. It would be a long time before they would be able to trust anyone, to believe in hope and confidence and people helping one another.

There were sixty children without papers in Zagreb when the Nazi army overran the city. The streets were full of Ustasha scum. Berta was already screaming:

“We’ll never escape from them!”

After a few days we managed to put them up in the homes of two scientists, houses which were owned by the Jewish Community. And so we began to search for an escape route.

“Don’t give us the yellow arm band,” said Arje, “You know that I’m proud to be Jewish, but we’ve already had some nasty experiences with these Nazi scum. The point of all that is to make an accurate list then, when everything is properly organised, they’ll grab you. Don’t give us the yellow band.” We took his advice, it was the right thing to do. It allowed us to save them more quickly and easily than would otherwise have been possible.

I was soon on my way to Ljubljana to look for a solution. A month later I returned with a photograph of the old Habsburg castle of Lesno Brdo, above the Horjul valley.

Again the children looked at me in wonder.

“You’ve come back? We were sure that you must have saved yourself and forgotten about us.”

A few days later we crossed the Italian border.

I was sure the children would feel relieved. We were saved now, a new chapter was beginning and our hope was growing. We could build our own strange and random community, a community of Jewish children who have fled one country after another, never knowing when they will ever return to their own.

I was happy that these tormented children would now see the beauty of Slovenia. We climbed towards Lesno Brdo, up the winding mountain paths surrounded by beautiful pine forests. On one side was the lovely Horjul valley, framed by the magnificent black hills, while beside us, below Lesno Brdo, lay a small, blue lake. I felt sure the children would recover in the beauty of this region.

“What’s beautiful about this!”

“So what if it’s beautiful!”

“Hitler will come and find us here, as well!”

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After several months, when we had our lives well organised, when Boris, a professor at the Berlin Music Academy who had been a student

of Glazunov, played to the children in the gloomy evenings of the mountain twilight, the first news about the Partisans from the Vrhnika area reached us. We had a great celebration when they finally came to us to rest and dress their wounds. Someone from the Palestine Syndicate would send us huge quantities of medicines from Switzerland, which would usually be marked for "Our Partisans". It was enough for me to send him a postcard:

"You should send me a large amount of medicine because my child (the red-headed one) is sick".

He would understand that the Partisans needed medicines.

It was at about this time that our beloved Dr Licht came to us. We received information that Licht would be released from Graz and would come to Ljubljana. We were excited, of course, because we wanted Dr Licht to rest with us, among the beauties of nature. I collected him when he arrived and was shocked to see the state of our Dr Licht who had taught several generations of Jewish workers in Yugoslavia. We thought that he would soon go somewhere inland, where he could wait in peace for the end, the inevitable victory. But Dr Licht preferred to stay with the children and he gave them many lectures, filling their souls with the spiritual treasure of the civilised belief in humanism and heroic progress, the values we so much treasured in him. At that time his progressive spirit was drawing closer and closer to the most progressive forces, so our meetings with him by our little lake were very moving.

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We moved freely along the hills of the Vrhnika area. The rural folk would help us find food for the children because they were starving. There were times when we would cook stinging nettles, raspberries, anything we could find in the forest. It was hard listening to the sighs of the sixteen-year-olds in the evening.

"If only I could have something tasty to chew on, a nice piece of meat, or..."

"Stop it, or I'll..."

When the great offensive began in July, 1942, the Italians became extremely nervous and suddenly ordered us to evacuate immediately. We were hesitant that night about where to go. All the forest roads were barricaded by the Partisans, with great tree trunks blocking the way for all vehicles. The Partisan commander, Josip Černi, ordered the locals to

drive the children and their belongings at midnight to Drenova Griča, our railway station. I don't know how we could have got all our things to the station had it not been for him.

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We arrived in Modena. The Jews there knew nothing about us and were not prepared. We waited in the old Modena church, where the celebrated Leon de Modena used to study and work. Friedmann, the kind and elderly president of the Modena municipality, did all he could to accommodate us. After a long wait the children, numb to their fate, went to the village of Nonantola.

There was an empty summer villa waiting for us. Its festive renaissance style was obviously at odds with the gloomy days of Fascist rule we were living through, but the cordial welcome from the local people immediately heartened us. Dr Moreali, the village physician, immediately came to see us. He was an old fighter against the Fascists and had for years rejected all their attempts to break him, to force him to join Mussolini's party of disintegration. Throughout our entire stay, Moreali was our comfort, he was our moral support as were huge numbers of the workers and peasants of Nonantola who showed us solidarity at every step.

It was with great difficulty that Dr Licht parted from the children. He stayed to rest in this ancient village which dated from the time of the Roman legions, which took care of the bones of the first popes, relics from the Frankish epoch. Its Roman church and city walls made the village a museum of history. The people of Nonantola even claim that Dante once lived there.

Our Nonantola people! The first day they heard we were cooking rice in milk and adding sugar, the townspeople gathered, making the sign of the cross, watching us in wonder and pity before, slowly, beginning to produce bottles of oil from their aprons.

They thought this was the least they could do, given their deep conviction that life was miserable indeed when there was nothing left to cook but rice. "That's no life at all," they would say.

Nonantola was largely anti-Fascist, a position it demonstrated a thousand times.

Life began to be organised once more. One kind young Italian Jew came to help us with our daily work. Soon our older youngsters began to dream about doing productive work. They began helping the peasants.

Siegfried worked constantly with one of the farmers and there became fond of agriculture. Our life was somewhat restricted by various government limitations, such as a ban on travelling without permission. The local Jews were very rigorous about these, fearing the consequences if they were breached. During the first days our Italian “boss” even asked us to get his permission each time we left the house. This obviously didn’t do anything for the already problematic psychological state of the children, which was further exacerbated by the curious request that they offer prayers to God. Whatever small streak of religious devotion some of them had rapidly evaporated after these demands.

Our group of children, fleeing from their fate, were struggling for life itself. They dreamed of one day arriving in Eretz. The group was a symbol of Italian Jews. Because of this a wonderful, idyllic link was forged with the Jewish youth of Florence who would come to visit us, cementing personal friendships and, through us, nourishing themselves with the solidarity of the Jewish destiny.

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There was a sudden increase in the size of our group with an influx of Yugoslav Jewish children from Split. About thirty children from Sarajevo and Osijek who found themselves in Split in 1942 joined the group. Our Villa Ema now housed about a hundred children and adults. A special office of Delasem, the Italian group which assisted immigrants, was organised in the house to provide material assistance to Jewish refugees. There the older boys did productive and useful work for the Jewish community. Through Delasem I would find the addresses of our people, our comrades from the movement and older public workers to whom I could send the assistance from Palestine which was arriving through Istanbul and Geneva.

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Mussolini fell! The people of Nonantola poured into the streets in celebration, finally venting their many years of pent-up rage at the local Fascists. Dr Moreali rushed to us with the good news he had been awaiting eagerly for many years. This opened new horizons for us, making our plans for Aliya suddenly realistic. Our dreams were about to come true; my vow to Recha Freier to deliver the children to Palestine became achievable; even the sky was more beautiful.

And then, on September 8, 1943, the Nazis invaded Italy. A unit of SS troops set themselves up in the school across from the villa.

Poor Berta! She could not endure all of this. In Lesno Brdo the ancient walls had echoed with the sobbing of the children when mail was returned from Poland with address unknown written on it. The children knew these returned letters were death notices and their cries rang from the peak of Lesno Brdo along the beautiful Horjul valley. Even back then Berta had watched the valley with excitement: she would spend hours there and nobody could rouse her. They were black days when the post office, that punctual German post office, would day after day bring the news of their parents' death to our tormented children. Berta fell into a state of distress, her mind no longer able to comprehend the reality of this diseased world.

Now I became frightened. Would Berta and the other children give up? Many of these dear little ones would come to me in the morning, grimly boasting: "You see, we were right, they're chasing us wherever we go, they're at our heels!"

That night we told the older children to stay with our good farm folk. I went to see my friends from the ancient and peaceful monastery of Nonantola to ask them to take our children in so that they could be saved. Old Monsignor Pelati stood on the doorstep solemnly making the sign of the cross: "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit".

We would get ammunition shells from the Italian police, who were opposed to the Fascists, and carry them to the monastery. Don Beccari would take them, put them in a basket and carry them on his bicycle to the Italian Partisans in the mountains.

Within the monastery walls, during the gloomy nights, Don Beccari, Don Rossi and I would discuss Marxism, Zionism, Hitler's imminent defeat and our hopes and perils. In the meantime, together with Dr Moreali and our friends from Modena, Don Beccari made a plan to save us. A tradesman made a new seal for the town of Larina in southern Italy and Moreali was appointed mayor of the town. In this way we all acquired genuine Italian identity cards.

We had heard that the annihilation of the Jewish population was to begin in Italy as well in a day or two. Don Beccari's plan was for me to take the children, dressed in priest's robes, to the south and past the allied front line with the assistance of his friends. This plan did not succeed so I went to the Swiss border in an attempt to get 120,000 lire from

our friends in Switzerland, the amount we needed to get into Swiss territory. Salvation had a cash price: they wanted a thousand lire for the life of each child.

It was the hardest day of my life. I waited for a day in Como. I had turned to a stranger for help and now I was waiting for him to return from Switzerland with a message for me. What if he was a German? And what if he doesn't come back?

The next day he returned with the money, excitedly trying to convince me that everything would be all right. He also gave me a few small pieces of Swiss cheese for the children.

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Back in Nonantola the children again asked me "You've really come back? We thought you'd run away by yourself." Children, children why can't you believe that there are still some people in this world, even in this cursed year of 1943, who love you and care about you!

We set off on our trip. Somewhere before Milan there was an SS checkpoint. This was terrible because we were also hiding an Italian Partisan under the seat, but we got through! We slept in the public toilet in front of the Milan railway station. We walked for hours heading towards the border and the children were already exhausted. By the time we reached the fast-flowing Trezina, even the older ones had begun to tire. Berta wanted to let the water take her away and our cook was begging for death to come.

It was the tragic night of Yom Hakippurim, 1943. The Swiss acted as if they knew nothing. They asked why we had escaped, had we killed someone or stolen something? They wanted to send us back to live nice and peacefully, because the Germans certainly wouldn't do us any harm. After three days of torment as we waited for a decision, the camp captain gave us a long speech about the difficult position Switzerland was in. By now our strength was exhausted. When he finally told us that the federal government had decided to let us stay, my strength failed altogether and I fell into Laci's arms.

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Switzerland, 1943-45. The Aliya youth hostel Beaux les Bains near Montreux. A normal life with clear objectives. We were waiting for the end of the war to finally achieve our goals. New children arrived and

we prepared for the next step towards our goal. And finally it came, that day at the end of June, 1945, when we set off through France and Spain, to board a boat for Palestine, where we arrived as the first group of new immigrants after the war.

Recha Freier was waiting for us. And Shalom Finci, a Palestinian and British Army paratrooper, was waiting for me.

Our relatives and friends were waiting for us, a new life was waiting for us.

Berta's brother was waiting for her, but there was no longer any joy for her, only a slight and distant smile, one which held the pain of lost parents, lost years, wounds that can not be healed.

We made our farewells to one another, each going his own way.

In 1955 we met again in Gat, as close to one another as we had always been, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of our arrival in Israel.