

# Wolf discusses myths and facts of 'hidden children'

Alexander Traum  
THE JEWISH STATE  
October 9, 2009

For many people, the story of "hidden children" during the Holocaust is analogous to the story of Anne Frank, whose posthumously published diary details her years spent secretly hiding in an Amsterdam apartment complex.

Diane Wolf, a professor of sociology and director of the Jewish Studies Program at University of California, Davis, set out to dispel the "myths" perpetuated by Frank's anomalous situation in the Annual Raoul Wallenberg Program on Sept. 30 at Douglas Campus Center of Rutgers University. The lecture was based upon her recently released book "Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden Children and Jewish Families in Postwar Holland" (UC Press, 2007).

In her research, Wolf interviewed almost 70 individuals who were hidden children in Holland during the Holocaust. Though she stressed that one cannot make extrapolations about hidden children in general from such a relatively small sample size in which participants were self-selected, the findings do shed light on the difficult situation that many of these survivors faced, especially after the war.

"The important thing is that for camp survivors, May 1945 meant liberation, meant liberation from oppression," she said. "For hidden children, what I found in my study was that May 1945, the liberation, which was a very happy event in the lives of the Dutch people was, and marked the beginning of, trauma for the lives of these hidden children."

The definition of a hidden child is rather specific, Wolf explained, with their experiences differing from those usually associated with survivors. She emphasized, however, that these hidden children are no less victims of the Holocaust than those who survived the camps.

"Although they definitely were in danger, they were not in danger on an hourly, daily basis in the same way that a camp survivor was," she said.

There are generally two main categories of hidden children, according to Wolf. One of those categories included those children who were clandestine, as Frank was, remaining in a secret room with her family intact. The other, much more common group of hidden children, was those who were "integrated" into non-Jewish families. Wolf said that while the majority of families who took in Jewish children did so for altruistic reasons, others, such as Orthodox Calvinists, believed that saving the lives of children of the "chosen people" would redeem them in the afterlife, and a small number did so for money.

Wolf's research focused on the experiences of Dutch-Jewish hidden children after the War.

"My goal was to find out how families reconstructed themselves after the war and I was interested in how that operated and how that felt from the perspective of the child," she said.

In her sample group, the median age for the children when they were taken in by the non-Jewish families was 4. This fact is significant, Wolf suggested, because children generally do not begin to develop strong memories until they are 5. These children were given new names; fictitious stories of where they came from were fabricated; and they otherwise became part of their new families -- going to school, playing outside, and attending church. Yet because of their undeveloped memories, many of these children "began to believe that this was their family, these were their friends, this was their church."

Wolf said that after the war ended, the fate of these children depended primarily on how many of their parents survived, if any, and if only one parent survived, whether it was the father or mother.

For those whose parents both survived, reuniting was often a negative experience, as many of the children, especially those who were younger, lacked strong memories -- if any memory at all -- of their parents and felt distant from them upon their return.

"What happened was generally those families really did not reconnect after the war -- that the bonds had been broken by the war and they never really cemented again," she said.

If only one of the child's parents survived, it was only the mother who was allowed to regain custody rights, since society did not accept single fathers as adequate caregivers, Wolf explained. If only the father survived, the child would become classified as an orphan.

"There were these very gendered assumptions, which were extremely unfortunate in cases when those fathers survived, because some of these kids wanted to go back to their fathers," she said.

If neither parent survived, the children would stay with their hiding families, go to other family members, or be placed in orphanages. Wolf explained that in those individuals she interviewed, all of these scenarios provided their own potential hardships.

"I have to say in this situation after the war, and the trauma of loss and abandonment and all of that, that it does seem to be true that there isn't really a right choice, because these are all difficult situations and its very difficult to figure what the best interests are in that case," she said.

Wolf said that in the course of her research she became aware that Holland was not the land of resistance fighters who tirelessly sought to save Jews from the Nazis -- as portrayed in Frank's diary. Approximately 70 percent of Dutch Jews were killed in the Holocaust, the second-highest percentage in Western Europe after Germany. In comparison, 24 percent of the Jewish population in France was killed.

"In the Netherlands, the rate of deportation and death of Jewish population really resembled the statistics of an Eastern European country than a Western European country," Wolf said.

Among those in attendance was Maud Dahme, of Flemington, who herself was a hidden child in Holland and whose story is recounted in the documentary "The Hidden Child."

"It brings back a lot of memories and I can attest to all of it as one of them," Dahme told The Jewish State following the lecture.

The 6-year-old Dahme and her sister survived as hidden children after being separated from their parents. Remarkably, they were reunited with both their parents after the war, though she said that it was difficult for her "to adjust to a new life again." Though it became easier with time, Dahme said she never had the kind of relationship with her parents that she has had with her own daughter.