

# KISSES TO THE CHILDREN

*by James DeMetro*

Despite its loveliness, the title “KISSES TO THE CHILDREN” put me off. I did not look forward to seeing this film, and the first few minutes confirmed my initial trepidation. Watching the gathering of Jews by the Nazis, with special focus on the children, made the horrible unbearable. But I stayed with it and soon found myself totally engrossed. This is a poignant and moving documentary, a most impressive addition to the rich archive of Holocaust historical films.

The five individuals whose testimony forms the core of the film are immensely appealing. They speak with feeling, intelligence and dignity, and what they say reveals fascinating psychological depth. Often what they do not recall or are unable to talk about is as telling as what they do remember and discuss. Their personal accounts of survival add an indelible humanity to the history and cover a wide range of issues, from social isolation to survivor guilt. The recollected songs, the diary of captivity, a young victim’s essay about boats—all these prove to be incredibly moving documents of personal history and enrich this touching film.

The film is beautifully directed, the camera sensitive to the nuances embodied in what the five survivors say and do. Particularly shattering is the visit to the concentration camp when the film suddenly loses its voice and becomes silent, giving stunning new meaning to the unspeakable. The scene in which Mario walks through a garden with his granddaughter picking flowers proves to be a heartbreaking recreation of Marios’s own childhood experience of picking chamomile flowers in futile expectation of his father’s return.

All in all, this is a most rewarding film that ultimately is life affirming. While the childhood experiences of the five individuals have affected and even shaped their very lives as adults, life continues and a new generation flourishes to remember the one that has been sacrificed.

**James DeMetro**

Director of the New York Greek Film Festival

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## Bridges of memory

by Hagen Fleischer

The United Nations has designated the 27<sup>th</sup> of January as an International Day of Commemoration for the millions of victims of the Nazi Holocaust during World War II: it was chosen as the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the biggest death camp, by advancing Soviet troops. The victims of the genocide include at least 60,000 Greek Jews of the 73,000 that – according to the census of 1940 – lived in occupied Greece.

Of the “lucky ones”, few would have survived without the help of their fellow citizens, mostly anonymous, but also those belonging to organized bodies: the Resistance, the Church, even the Police. Of course, as is the case in every occupied country there were also those who aided and abetted in the crime, receiving a handful of the silver of betrayal. After the war – and partly to the present day - Greek Jews on the one side and many Greeks of the majority on the other, have set forth divergent, one-dimensional and often competitive accounts of the same historical events.

In Vassilis Loules’ award-winning documentary film *“Kisses to the children”*, three women and two men who were children aged from 5 to 11 during the occupation, speak. Invited to my postgraduate seminar, the director spoke to young historians about how a film on the Holocaust could be made in which the protagonists are not survivors of Auschwitz but *hidden children*, an unknown category to most people. He purposely wanted to focus on this group of victims of Nazi ferocity, in other words on individuals who lived for months, years in the shadow, uprooted fugitives. Their Christian fellow countrymen hid them at the risk of their own life. Rosina Asser-Pardo, “our own Anne Frank” – after escaping from the ghetto (where “*I couldn’t play*”) – remained for 548 endless days hiding in an apartment in Thessaloniki. She did not dare make a noise. Only at nights she would peek through the window at the streets, at the city “cleansed” of the Jewish element. Let’s imagine the relentless silence, the unfamiliar darkness in which they were forced to live, far from friends and relatives, since most of them had been dispatched to Auschwitz. “*Of my own family,*” another narrator from Thessaloniki points out, “*23 people were lost*”... Later, the hidden children felt as though they were the “only survivors”, since few of their coreligionists returned from the purgatory, and those that did were usually silent about their *extreme experience*.

At the end of the documentary, Marios Soussis strolls with his granddaughter; they pick flowers and he confides to her the hidden message of the modest chamomile: it has therapeutic abilities. He has tried them himself as a boy, tirelessly picking chamomile flowers to cure his father when he would come home sick from the (endless) journey – as his grandmother comforted him infusing him with vital hope... Now it is his turn to hand over the baton.

So the once hidden children turn out to be bridge builders, in a multiple sense: bridges of memory between generations, bridges of understanding between Jews and non-Jews, even bridges of communication and reconciliation with the descendants of the perpetrators.

The director did not just want to make a dramatic film on the Holocaust. He wanted to focus on the hollow terror and the exclusion these children experienced in abjectly abnormal circumstances. There is no coercion of one's emotions, while the narrators speak with unadorned. The bravery of the people, the (not in name only) Christians who risked their lives helping these children is crystal clear. At the same time the film outlines the continued corrosion of the country's Jewish communities even after the liberation. The normalcy of life had been lost, nothing was the same any more and this is revealed in a poetic way in the film. Even so Rosina Asser-Pardo clarifies: *"I have rid myself of my hatred. It's the people who try to imitate the Nazis that I hate now."* Rosina is building bridges. But not for those who are waiting to tear them down. It is the duty of us all to be vigilant.

**Hagen Fleischer**

Professor of History at the University of Athens

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[http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_civ\\_2\\_27/01/2013\\_509072](http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_w_articles_civ_2_27/01/2013_509072)

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## Ino and I

(On the occasion of the documentary film "*Kisses to the Children*")

*by Vassilis Vassilikos*

Once, when talking about Thessaloniki I had noted that "*this city had wounded me unimaginably*". It was the city to which my family migrated in 1941 to avoid the Bulgarian occupation in Kavala.

It was in Thessaloniki that I spent my childhood in the years of the war, playing with kids my age in the churchyard of Aghia Theodora, shooting empty cans or pressing our ears against the telegraph poles to hear the hum of the infinite world. One day one of my friends, Ino, left on a cart from Egnatia Street with the caravan of Jews, with the enormous yellow star on his sleeve. And he never came back.

These memories awoke when I saw Vassilis Loules' documentary "*Kisses to the Children*". The stories of Rosina, Iossif, Eftyhia, Shelly and Marios who were saved from the Holocaust thanks to the Christian families that adopted them, bring to life the memory of thousands of Jewish children: those who never had the chance to grow up. And we who grew up in the same city with their absence, we lived through the second annihilation they suffered after the concentration camps. They shrank as a presence and they were annihilated as memory in a city that was developing and meticulously hiding its wounds and its guilt.

Through the moving stories of the five children who were saved, Loules' documentary also brings back some of the values we must rediscover, like those of solidarity and the comradeship that some people offered the Jews and that some paid for with their lives.

**Vassilis Vassilikos**

Writer

*(Vassilikos is the award-winning writer of "Z")*

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## **The children who remained children**

(on the documentary film "*Kisses to the children*")

*by Yorgos Chronas*

Children's toys in the hands of children. Music from little Teddy bears, dolls, brightly colored balls, trains going nowhere and the accounts of five children – who were saved from the Nazi hunt. Contradictions. The children who remained children for ever. With muses and frozen smiles lingering over their heads. Divine souls who were lost like images and whose haunted voices still linger over wells, yards, drawing rooms next to siblings – also lost – and relatives. Relatives whose photograph is faded so that you cannot distinguish who survived, who were erased from the map. And everywhere silence. The Holocaust with the sounds of toys the children will never hold in their hands. Grownups whose accounts are like rare literature. Vassilis Loules prepared a documentary of genius – a documentary of heartbreak – that I cannot describe any more. Because it is tearing me apart. It makes me ashamed that I can see.

So I write.

**Yorgos Chronas**

Poet, Writer

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## **The hidden**

(on the occasion of the documentary film "*Kisses to the children*")

*by Kostas Spiropoulos*

Documentary films like *Kisses to the children* by Vassilis Loules come to fill a significant blank in the narrative of the decade of the '40s: the Greek dimension of the Holocaust. The vacuum in the public account of the turbulent decade of the '40s when it comes to the Jews obviously forms part and parcel and is due to the systematic attempt to forcibly impose a blanket of silence surrounding the resistance and the domestic conflicts that led to the Civil War.

Nevertheless, the blanket of silence as regards the Greek aspect of the Holocaust conceals in Greece, as in other European countries, guilt syndromes. It is impossible to incorporate the true stories of people into the dichotomous narration of the Occupation "over here we have the conquerors and the perpetrators and over there the victims".

In the specific film a distinction is made between Greek rescuers and Greek informers in the film's plot which vividly depicts a representative segment of the social anthropogeography of the Occupation. To this day the five children are torn in their consciousness between painful memory and benevolent oblivion, between the void in the life of the hidden and subsequently after their survival, between the loss, temporary or irrevocable of the parents and the painful weaning from the guardians who hid them. It is on this triptych canvas that the plot of the film is woven in such a way as to pose problems for the festival and television programmers as regards the typology of the film. Is it an historical or psychographic documentary? Is it a film where the protagonists are the children or the adults? Is it one more film about the Holocaust? Those in charge of European channels wonder. Those who see the film will feel in their souls the vibrations from the emotions that this documentary generates and activates, vindicating the characterization of the film – documentary. Not because it borrows or uses elements of fiction but because it directs the documentation and the testimonies with unique skill. It is one of the few films where the use of testimonies keeps you riveted both because of the way the film is shot and because of the director's position to leave the testimonies bare and to use the documentation not to "dress" the words with images but as functionally autonomous narrative subjects.

The making of *Kisses to the Children* took seven years of persistent creation. In a fascinating way the five children who were reborn present us with the gift of a life where memory gives it meaning for what is to come. A small postscript – seven years ago I had devoted 12 journalistic lines to the director and, through the processes of the "StoryDoc" seminars I observed how the talent and experience of Vassilis Loules created a film – jewel. A precious film which I had the privilege to program during my stint in public television.

**Kostas Spiropoulos**

Journalist

Former General Manager of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation - ERT S.A.

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