Coping Strategies of Jewish Children Who Suffered the Holocaust

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Jewish children who suffered the Holocaust were faced with many challenges that disrupted the normal course of their lives. Under the Nazi regime, many children were dislodged from their homes, experienced separation from family members, or were placed in unsanitary and dangerous ghettos or concentration camps. Due to these life-changing occurrences, children found various ways to cope with the physical and emotional stress that was now a part of their everyday lives. At a time when the Nazis sought to stifle Jewish individuality, some Jewish children sought comfort from toys and play, while others used artwork, journal writing, and dramatic performance as both a means of escape from the horrors around them and as a tool for expressing the inner turmoil and confusion in their lives.

Jewish children suffered both physically and psychologically from the atrocities of the Holocaust. The lack of normalcy, sense of a loss of identity, and feeling of a lost childhood never left many of the survivors. To overcome the detrimental effects of the chaos within their lives, children turned to playing with games and toys to recapture a sense of familiarity and comfort that they had had before the Holocaust. Some ghettos provided opportunities for children to pursue art and dramatic performance as a means of finding an escape and source of expression in their lives. Youth and student organizations within the ghettos fostered solidarity between children in a similar situation and provided an opportunity for group dedication towards a common goal, in a life otherwise wracked with boredom. Finally, some children found journal writing to be a comfort and source of purpose for lives seemingly lacking meaning. Generally, Jewish children used art, play, writing, and

study to distract themselves from the horrors around them, find purpose in their lives, and overcome the physical and psychological damage of the Holocaust.

Jewish children were psychologically affected by the Holocaust due to their loss of childhood, which was taken from them during the years of the Nazi regime. During this time, they were increasingly prohibited from many common childhood enjoyments. For example, a young girl wrote about the growing restrictions on the lives of Jews. She described the lack of entertainment, as Jews were banned from many amusing activities of leisure, had limited hours for shopping, and boundaries on public transportation.[1] Children were also torn from their childhood homes as a result of the Holocaust. In his diary, Yitzhak Rudashevski, a Jewish teenage boy, described his feelings of despair when he was forced to leave his home for the Jewish ghetto, claiming that he was losing everything he had known that had been a comfort to him.[2] Children in the ghettos often had to care for their parents as these adult figures succumbed to despair and were no longer capable of caring for themselves.[3] It is clear that child victims of the Holocaust were forced to mature sooner than the average child due to the constant violence, fear, and hunger that were characteristic of Jew's lives during this time. One child Holocaust survivor, Regine Donner, summed up her experience by saying, "I missed out on my childhood and the best of my adolescent years."[4] Another Jewish child, Hanus Hachenburg, living in the transit camp Theresienstadt, wrote a poem exemplifying this transformative power of the Nazi regime. Hachenberg stated, "I was once a little child, three years ago. That child who longed for other worlds. But now I am no more a child, for I have learned to hate. I am a grown-up person now, I have known fear."[5] It seems that the atrocities of daily life and the quest for survival turned these children into premature adults. Some children who were able to adapt to the ambiguous circumstances or had the ability to remain with family members were able to return to their childhood

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1. Carol Ann Lee, *Anne Frank and the Children of the Holocaust*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 103.
2. Yitzhak Rudashevski, "Long Live Youth!" ed. Jacob Boas (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 51.
3. Nicholas Stargardt, "Children's Art of the Holocaust," *Past and Present* 161, no. 1 (1998): 226.
4. Regine Donner, "Life in the Shadows: Hidden Children and the Holocaust," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/hiddenchildren/insideX/.
5. Hanus Hachenburg, "Terezin," in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 22-3.

following the war. However, no one ever forgot the horror, terror, and violence of this time. The hardships that the children suffered forced them to become adults mentally, even when they were still physically young.

If a child was alone, he or she was left to rely on his own means for survival, at a time when children needed their parents for support and guidance the most. The fear of being alone was one of the most poignant of terrors for children during the Holocaust.[6] When parents could be ripped away at a moment's notice, children were continually forced to fend for themselves in an atmosphere of death. Leah Hammerstein Silverstein describes the feeling of complete abandon:

> *With nobody to console you, with nobody to tell you it's okay, it'll be better, hold on. Total isolation, total loneliness. It's a terrible feeling. You know, you are among people and you are like on an island all alone. There is nobody you can go to ask for help. You can nobody ask for advice. You had to make life-threatening decisions all by yourself in a very short time, and you never knew whether your decision will be beneficial to you or detrimental to your existence.*[7]

Children like Silverstein, but particularly those who had experienced the Holocaust in their infancy, often had difficulty developing affection or intimacy with others, as they had either been alone in their struggle, or their parents were psychologically unable to help them.[8] The feeling of being alone, deeply affected child victims of the Holocaust for years to come.

Jewish children of the Holocaust suffered from constant change, confusion, and uncertainty about identity. Children were often sent into hiding for their own protection, oftentimes being separated from their parents. For this reason, many children felt abandoned by their parents who left them in hiding, even though it was for the child's own safety.[9] Before being sent away, the children were ordered

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6. Ibid.
7. Leah Hammerstein Silverstein, "Personal Histories: Children," United States Holocaust *Memorial Museum*, http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/phistories/.
8. Brenner and Kestenberg, *The Last Witness*, 2-8.
9. Ibid., 37.

to memorize a new identity and never to reveal that they were Jewish. Some, after being sent to a Catholic monastery, would be required to memorize Catholic prayers and attend mass.[10] In pretending to become someone else, some children came to believe their own lie, adopting the Christian faith and identity they had so long faked.[11] Other children could not remember their real parents and wanted instead to stay with their foster families after the war.[12] Some did not even know that they were Jewish until many years later when they were informed by their foster families. In these situations, children were uprooted and transported to unknown locations, often without much warning. They were taken to places where they knew no one and were expected to disregard their past and true identity. The confusion and identity crises that resulted often could not be resolved, even after the war.

Children also experienced emotional degradation due to the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime. In the early years of Nazi rule, children witnessed prejudice on a daily basis, especially in their schooling. The young Jews were bullied by their non-Jewish peers, abandoned by their friends, and forced to suffer through anti-Semitic lectures from their teachers.[13] Children accustomed to believing their teachers' words as truth would often be extremely affected by an instructor's racist remarks. Moreover, "the external pressure and constant exclusion, the abandonment by peers, all had a tremendous impact on their self-esteem."[14] Starting in November of 1938, schools under the power of the Nazi regime became segregated, with Jewish children being forced to leave Aryan schools.[15] Some were able to attend Jewish-only schools, but other Jewish children, like David Rubinowicz, could not. After the Jewish regulation forbidding Jewish students to attend school, David wrote, "When I think of how I used to go to school, I feel like bursting into tears, and today I must stay at home and can't go anywhere."[16] These children would watch the other

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10. Michael Leapman, *Witnesses to War: Eight True-Life Stories of Nazi Persecution*, (London: Penguin Group, 1998), 12, 48-51.
11. Brenner and Kestenberg, *The Last Witness, 40*.
12. Lee, *Anne Frank*, 125-6.
13. Ibid., 31-2.
14. Brenner and Kestenberg, *The Last Witness*, 194-5.
15. Lee, *Anne Frank*, 48.
16. David Rubinowicz, *We Are Witnesses: Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust*, ed. Jacob Boas (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 14.

"Aryan" children with jealousy and confusion. As a result, the Jewish children were constantly assaulted with the idea of being "unnatural," that their very existence was counter to nature, and that not only were they inferior, but that they somehow deserved to die because of their mediocrity.

Despite the many ways in which children were emotionally affected by the horrors of the Holocaust, there were a select few who were able to make the best of the situation and learn to work through the deprivation. For example, "Many young hidden children learned a great deal from having been hardened and used to overcoming obstacles. Having been helped themselves, many hidden children have become altruistic people who respond well to groups of peers."[17] Unfortunately, these children were the rare few. The effects of the Holocaust traumatized many children, some for the rest of their lives. Whether they were in hiding or inside a Jewish ghetto, children were forced to find alternate ways to thrive both physically and emotionally. They were able to do this through the invention of games, artwork, study, and peer groups in order to find comfort and purpose despite their disruptive lives.

Children in ghettos used their toys and games as both a distraction from the bleak environment of death, and as a means of giving their world a sense of normalcy. Since many children had had their toys confiscated by the Nazis, the youths had to be inventive by developing games of their own within the ghettos. One such example was the use of empty cigarette packages to make a card game.[18] Others attempted to use their imagination in order to distract themselves from what was really happening around them. To do this, many children created fantasy worlds in their play. For example, one girl in Italy "created a fantasy play world with the help of scissors and a cardboard box."[19] Likewise, one boy pretended that his life of constantly avoiding the Nazis was a big game like that of hide and seek.[20] Indeed, this play is often seen as a type of therapy that has been shown to provide the traumatized child with the opportunity to restructure traumatic events to provide them

17. Brenner and Kestenberg, *The Last Witness*, 34.
18. Lee, *Anne Frank*, 74.1
19. Hilda R. Glazer, "Children and Play in the Holocaust: Friedl Dicker-Brandeis—Heroic Child Therapist," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education & Development 37*, no. 4 (1999).
20. Leapman, *Witnesses to War*, 82.

with meaning, to gain control over such events, and to achieve a sense of control over psychological safety.[21] Jewish children were able to reconstruct their lives through play in a way that made them less violent, disruptive, and abnormal.

Toys gave a source of comfort and solace for children who otherwise would have been alone in the world. In these positions, the children's toys took on special meaning. Not only were they the supposed recipients of violence actually perpetrated against the children, they were also seen as substitute family in the case that the child's actual family was killed or became separated. Nina Weilova, a ten-year-old girl, recorded her experience "not as through her own sufferings, but by the injuries inflicted upon her doll." In this way, it could be possible that "the first reaction of the child [was] to shield herself from the full emotional meaning of the attacks on herself and those she [loved] by directing them at a loved object instead."[22] In the situation of separation from family members, a beloved toy could be the only source of support the child had. For hidden children, their toys could "help forge a bond between the children and rescuers or reaffirm a tie to their missing parents or family."[23] Fred Lessing's stuffed bear was his only friend and source of comfort during his time separated from his parents hiding in Holland.[24] Lacking the love necessary for comfort in their turbulent lives, children would often rely on the imaginary love received from their stuffed animals.[25] Children's toys were used both as a way to come to terms with the visible violence around them and as a replacement for the love and support of family following separation.

The transit camp Theresienstadt, located in the present-day Czech Repubic, was unique in the way that children had the opportunity to pursue art under the direction of the teacher Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. Dicker-Brandeis taught the children artistic techniques and encouraged them to express their inner emotions through artistic means.[26] Her instruction helped bring happiness to camp life for children by

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21. Glazer, "Children and Play."
22. Stargardt, "Children's Art," 231.
23. "Life in Shadows: Hidden Children and the Holocaust," U*nited States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/hiddenchildren/insideX/.
24. Fred Lessing, "My Bear and Me; A Dual Experience," *Anti-Defamation League*, http://www.adl.org/hidden/between_religions/hc_7-1-bear.asp.
25. Glazer, "Children and Play."
26. Stargardt, "Children's Art," 193-4.

teaching them to make art as a way to escape the fear and hardships of daily life.[27] A look at the children's results showed that a great many chose to focus their free drawings on a glorified image of home. Due to the large number of these paintings, it is likely that Dicker-Brandeis had given the children a theme to follow. However, it is still interesting to examine the "home" that the children show. Oftentimes, the children depicted home as "houses nestled among the hills or trees, idealized houses in the country which have little connection either with the barracks of Theresienstadt or indeed the urban environments from which so many of the [children] came."[28] There is indeed a feeling of optimism that radiates from the drawings. One picture features a beautiful green garden with two girls lying amid colorful flowers.[29] Another is a colorful image of children playing in a park.[30] While some sought to depict camp life, very few children chose to portray scenes of violence or death that were likely seen every day in the camp.[31] Of the camp pictures, the majority were not dismal or even fearful. Rather, they were completed with cheerful colors. One image of Theresienstadt appeared to be a quaint village surrounded by greenery.[32] It seems as if the children were using their artwork to depict the world they wished was their own. There were no picturesque houses in the country, no bountiful feasts, and no park for play within Theresienstadt. These things existed only in the children's imaginations, and then upon the paper they chose to create them on. It could be that "the children saw what the grown-ups didn't want to see – he beauties beyond the village gates, the green meadows and the bluish hills, the animals, the birds, [and] the butterflies."[33] The children's artwork helped them to create a world they were no longer a part of in real life, providing a means of expression and an outlet for inner emotions.

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27. Lee, *Anne Frank*, 154-5.
28. Stargardt, "Children's Art," 220.
29. Ruth Cechova, "Garden," in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 24-5.
30. Gabi Freilova, "Children in the Park," in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 48-9.
31. Stargardt, "Children's Art," 198-204.
32. Hanus Weinberg, "View of Terezin," in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 16.
33. Jiri Wiel, epilogue to *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 59-61.

In Theresienstadt, children also found enjoyment through participation in performance art. Children actively participated in the performance of musicals and plays.[34] Some were even members of a children's choir. One performance of the children's opera Brundibar was so popular amongst both children and adults that it was performed fifty-nine times in the concentration camp. This performance was such a success most likely due to the fact that "the opera ends with the children's triumph over the evil monster Brundibar, climaxing with a rousing chorus of victory and hope."[35] Participating in and viewing this performance gave encouragement to the Jews who were fighting their own daily battles against the monstrous Nazis. A little happiness and distraction from their lives was well needed amidst the starvation, destruction, and moral deprivation within the ghettos.

Unfortunately, Theresienstadt was an abnormality amongst the concentration camps; the majority did not provide for the privileges these children received. Terezin (Theresienstadt) was uniquely designed in order to be a model "in an effort to convince a commission of foreigners from the Red Cross that Terezin was a place where adults and children alike could live." However, this outside image was all a ruse. The inhabitants of Terezin were condemned to die just as they were in the other camps throughout Europe.[36] Extremely few other children in the camps had the opportunity or the means to participate in painting groups or performances. Even within the ghettos, these sorts of activities would be quite limited. Theresienstadt, therefore, provides a unique, but limited view of the emotions of youth in the camps and their actions toward improving camp life. Even if children in other camps or ghettos were able to come by the materials necessary for such activities, carrying them out would have had to be done under the strictest of secrecy. Despite these limitations, Theresienstadt gives contemporaries a vivid look into the life of Jews within the camp and their means of coping with everyday life.

Some children were able to find purpose and comradeship within school and youth groups organized inside the ghettos. Although generally prohibited by the Nazis, schools and youth groups were occasionally formed in secret within the

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34. Lee, *Anne Frank*, 154.
35. Stargardt, "Children's Art," 207.
36. Wiel, "Epilogue," 59-61.

ghettos.[37] Oftentimes, these school settings were provided by teachers risking Nazi retribution in order to instruct the youth.[38] Yitzhak Rudashevski, a Jewish teenage boy, acquired emotional support from his schooling in the ghetto, explaining that his love of learning was what kept him motivated in spite of the Nazis' degradation of the Jews. He viewed his determination to receive an education as an act of defiance, no matter how small, in the face of Nazi persecutors, and found comfort in the fact that he could still find little ways of improving himself, even in the ghetto.[39] Additionally, Rudashevski was able to join a children's club within his ghetto. It was a place where children could gather to "do their homework, learn a trade, discuss literature, history, mathematics, work on plays, or simply relax."[40] Members could socialize and find comfort from people their own age who were experiencing similar hardships. One day, the club even had a party. The intimacy and warmth of the gathering brought hope to the partygoers. The club was a great source of happiness and joy for the children, even in the midst of suffering.[41] As a result, Rudashevski had a positive view of his life. Despite the fact that he was restricted to the ghetto, Rudashevski claimed that as long as he remained busy, he could find meaning in his life and remain hopeful and confident for the future. Rudashevski's positivity is evident in his writing when he says "I often reflect, this is supposedly the ghetto, yet I have such a rich life of intellectual work: I study, I read, I visit club circles. Time runs by so quickly and there is so much work to be done, lectures, social gatherings. I often forget that I am in the ghetto."[42] For children like Rudashevski, ghetto schools and youth clubs provided children with a purpose in their lives, an escape from everyday boredom, and a source of comradeship with their peers.

Children also found a purpose for life through writing, hoping for their literary works to record their story as a legacy for historians, serve as an outlet for revealing personal uncertainties, and bear witness to the atrocities of the Nazis'

37. Leapman, *Witnesses to War*, 73-4.
38. Lee, Anne Frank, 75.
39. Rudashevski, "Long Live Youth!" 63.
40. Jacob Boas, We Are Witnesses: Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 64.
41. Ibid., 64-5.
42. Rudashevski, "Long Live Youth!" 68-71.

persecutions. Rudashevski spent a large amount of time comprising literary works as a member of the club within his ghetto. At the club, Rudashevski was able to collaborate with his peers in the creation of a children's newspaper in the ghetto. He also spent time comprising a history of his courtyard, meticulously interviewing residents and ensuring to record every detail of life, no matter how glum. Lastly, he found it important to create a collection of ghetto folklore saying, "it must be collected and cherished as a treasure for the future."[43] Writing was frequently seen a popular pastime during the Holocaust, as is shown through the countless diaries written by children and adults during and after this time. One of the most popular, the diary of Anne Frank, chronicles Frank's time spent in hiding during the Nazi persecution. She describes the everyday emotions, thoughts, aspirations, and happenings in her life within the secret annex. Frank's diary, like those of many other Holocaust victims and survivors, was used as a source to relieve thoughts. Individual frustrations and anxieties that could not be spoken or made sense of aloud found rest and clarity within the openness of writing.[44] Not only would their writings help relieve personal distress for the author; they would also leave behind a memory of the sufferings of a people targeted by the Nazis for the study of generations to come. Jakob, a boy in the displaced persons camp of Aschau who recorded his testimony, "adopted the attitude of a witness during the Holocaust in order to enable him to survive and remain as mentally intact as possible."[45] He sought to observe his surroundings and remember the discussions of adults around him in order to relay his experience after the war was over. The goal of preserving history empowered Jakob and many others to find the strength for survival. This determination helped counteract the trauma of suffering. Despite the negative affects of the torment, writing about these happenings ensured that they would live on for future generations to understand what happened and prevent them from ever occurring again. It is also a testimony against the evil perpetrators. Those that survive who are able to explain in specific detail what had been done would be extremely useful for verbal and

43. Ibid., 66-8.
44. Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, (Doubleday: Garden City, 1967).
45. Boaz Cohen and Rita Harvath, "Young Witnesses in the DP Camps: Children's Holocaust Testimony in Context," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 11, no. 1 (2012): 115.

written evidence.[46] Therefore, not only was writing a source of personal comfort for the writer, it also served to provide history with an account of the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Poetry was another form of writing that children used to express their inner emotions that could not be spoken aloud. Children's poetry in Theresienstadt [Terezin] contained both positive and negative views of the children's situation within the camp. These poems depicted the daily suffering, the pervasive fear, and constant hunger that represented camp life. However, at the same time, many poems revealed some children's positivity amid their suffering. For example, in one poem a child describes his homesickness, yet still retained hope to return home in the future.[47] Another child's poem entitled, "It Depends How You Look at It," even stated, "Terezin is full of beauty." He found comfort from the fact that "Death after all claims everyone," even the Nazis. Death would bring justice to those who deserved it.[48] Moreover, these children were able to look beyond the death and violence to admire the beauty of the earth both inside and outside the confines of the camp walls. They were able to see the beauty amidst the anguish and find positivity for life and purpose. A child's poem entitled "On a Sunny Evening" exclaims, "If in barbed wire, things can bloom, why couldn't I? I will not die!"[49] Therefore, it seems that the children of Theresienstadt used their poetry as a way to relieve their inner feelings and reactions to life – be they fear, distress, sadness, or happiness.

While writing was was a popular way for both children and adults to both make sense of their experiences and serve as a means of preserving history, it is necessary to note that the majority of Jews did not have the opportunity or the resources to provide a written record. In the ghettos and camps any and all possessions were extremely valuable as the Nazis attempted to confiscate everything the Jews owned. Most had neither paper to write on nor a pencil to write with. Some were able to

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46. Ibid.
47. "Homesick," in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration* Camp, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 36.
48. Miroslaw Kosek, "It Depends How You Look at It," in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 17.
49. On a Sunny Evening" in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 53.

overcome this difficulty by recording their camp experiences after the war, like Jakob, or record their life while in hiding, like Frank. Since many Jews lacked the means to do so, it is remarkable that so many Jews were able to leave records at all. This reinforces the fact that writing was extremely important for the Jews. It was significant enough that they would go through risk and detriment to provide a written account of their experience.

In all, scholarly research shows that children were better suited to discover a means of coping with the horrors of the Holocaust than were their parents or other adults. Children had a better sense of attachment to their imagination and could therefore devise a way to escape from the destruction around them and enter a pretend fantasy where everything was normal. Unlike adults, children were used to playing with games and toys. During the years of the Nazi regime, these toys and games took on special meaning, but were nothing out of the ordinary for children to do. While it was often difficult for children to retain their childhood, it was indeed the facets of youth and childish interest that made it possible for them to cope with the devastation and fear to which their parents often succumbed. If the children could not find distraction from their lives, they needed a purpose to live. Writing, studying, and club activities often provided this purpose, filling the children's lives with meaning and a goal to work towards in their lives. Lacking any of these means, children could easily fall into despair and die.

Jewish children employed many different methods of coping with the brutality of the Holocaust. Some sought the comfort of toys and stuffed animals to replace the loneliness that resulted from the death or separation of family members. Others used play, games, artwork, and their imaginations to escape from the world of ghettos and murder, entering a place of their own creation that provided normalcy and reflected their previous lives. Performances within the ghettos brought hope and happiness to adults, children, participants, and spectators alike. School, youth organizations, and writing gave children an outlet for expression, comfort, and purpose. Despite the anti-Semitism, violence, emotional distress, and confusion of the Nazi regime, children who were able to find a way to make sense of their lives and work toward a goal discovered a reason and motivation to live.

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