

DNA Identification of Missing-Identity Children from the Holocaust

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Of the 1,600,000 Jewish children who lived in Europe before World War II, only 100,000 survived the Holocaust. Most child survivors were hidden children, shuttered away in attics, cellars, convents, or farms. Unfortunately, in the chaos that reigned after Europe was liberated, restoring children to their birth families was especially difficult—many parents perished in the camps, children were often too young to know their own names, and some children had been moved countless times to keep them safe. Today, there are still hundreds of child survivors who have been unable to discover their birth identities.

Identifinders International is conducting a pilot study to determine if autosomal SNP testing, used in conjunction with genealogical research, can identify such “missing-identity” children and assist them in recovering lost family connections. Using commercially available autosomal SNP testing and analysis available through 23andMe, we have tested two female candidates from Poland who lost their birth identities when they were placed as infants with non-Jewish families for protection during the Holocaust. The project has faced many challenges. Not only does the endogamous nature of the Jewish population lead to predicted relationships with Jewish autosomal matches that are probably closer than they actually are, family histories associated with these autosomal matches have been fragmented by the annihilation of the generation who would normally be the repository of such information. Nevertheless, geographical and historical similarities among their matches have revealed valuable information about the origins of the two women. It is expected that as genealogy-related autosomal databases grow in size, a more coherent picture of the women’s family origins will emerge, perhaps leading to specific family names and locations.