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“BORN INTO A BROKEN WORLD”

THE HOLOCAUST CARRIER

ABSTRACT In this article, a second-generation author explores the conflicts and challenges of post-war Jewish identity and the inheritance from her father, through the medium of literature by and about sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors.

Keywords: Holocaust, memoir, second-generation, postmemory, identity

Studying works by children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors began with a desire to connect with other people who were like me and an urgent curiosity about my own identity: who I was, where I came from. It dovetailed into the desire to tell a story, to break free – if such a thing were possible – from the pressure of silence. I remember asking my parents why we didn't celebrate Christmas or Easter like our neighbors and being told that it was because we were Jews. For a long time, I thought being Jewish meant not celebrating holidays. Years later, I asked my father why, if he hadn't wanted to tell his children about any of the bad things, he hadn't shared some of the good things about being Jewish. "What good things?" he replied.

When I was in graduate school in Boston, my older daughter was in second grade and a new pupil at a progressive Jewish day school. I wanted her to know something about her Jewish heritage.

In second grade, my daughter's teacher brought in a friend, Hope Berger, who was a poet. She was the daughter of two survivors. Hope was younger than I was, which was unusual – my father had been only sixteen when he was liberated, so I was often twenty years younger than the children of survivors I interviewed, who had been born right after the war. Not only was she the daughter of survivors – her parents were from the same area where my father had been born: Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Hope had just completed a graduate program in creative writing and had deposited her thesis – a poetry manuscript – at Boston College. The title of the collection was "Born into a Broken World: A True Story."

It was through the absence of family that I learned my father was a survivor. Someone explained to me that uncles are the brothers of your mother or your father. One night, as my mother was tucking me into bed, I asked her which of my uncles were her brothers and which were my father's. My mother told me that they were all her brothers, and that my grandparents were her mother and father. She said that my father didn't have any family – that they had been killed in a war.

My father was a successful attorney. I don't think most people realized that he hadn't been born in the United States. After my little sister was born, he felt that the house we were living in was too small. He planted us in an affluent, conservative Christian neighborhood in Phoenix, Arizona. A Black man – a doctor – had moved into the neighborhood six years before and, in 1969, six months before we moved into our new house, a final attack drove Dr. Laing out. I sometimes wonder that my father didn't have second thoughts, but I think he believed that prejudice revolved around perceived difference. There was nothing about the way we lived that would indicate that we were different.

There was only one thing about me that was easily identifiable as Jewish, and that was my last name. My father never changed his last name, although the spelling changed when he came to the United States. I am so grateful that my father never changed our name, which I vowed at an early age never to change, as a tribute to our lost family. I had never met anyone with the same last name, and I didn't want the name to disappear

and be lost. I had no idea that Jacobowitz – Yakubovitch – was an incredibly common Eastern European Jewish last name. The promise of America, to my father, was tied up in an idea that if you didn't do anything different, you wouldn't be perceived as anyone different. But my last name meant that without celebrating holidays, without going to Hebrew school, without knowing any Hebrew, without going to synagogue, I might as well have been walking around with a gigantic sign on my forehead that read: JEW. It set up life-long challenges of identity for me.

When I was in my early twenties and earning a master's degree in history – writing a thesis on Etty Hillesum – I thought again about how much I wanted to know our own story. I asked my father again if he would tell me something about his past. The only clues I had found were in a little packet of photographs and documents my father had saved from when he was in displaced persons' camps in Austria. These were the earliest photographs we had of my father – they were tiny, black and white, and he was usually in a cluster of boys. The documents were in languages I couldn't understand.

My father again said no, and then I tried writing him a letter to explain how much it meant to me. Because it was always difficult for me to talk to my father, I had gotten in the habit of writing him letters. I found the letter recently, amongst personal letters my father had saved. The next time we got together, he suggested that if I really wanted to know something about the past, I should come with him and his cousins on a trip they were planning. Moshe and Sarah were brother and sister, and my father's first cousins. Sarah was his age and Moshe was a year older. They had grown up together. Sarah married her husband Ben in a DP camp in Bad Gastein, Austria, in 1946, when she was sixteen. Moshe, Ben and Sarah lived in Israel – they were all returning to Austria for the 40th wedding anniversary.

Sarah and Ben visited once, when I was fourteen. I wished that I could understand Yiddish, so that I could know what they were talking about with my father. I asked him why they called him "Chaim," and he replied, "Because that's my name." I had only ever known him as Henry. Once we were on the trip, my father and I were spending all of our time together. My father had to translate as I interviewed his cousins. We slept side-by-side at night. I had never traveled with him before. While we were on the trip, my father said that he would tell me his story – with conditions. He only wanted to tell it once; he never wanted to talk about it again, and he didn't ever want to read anything I might write.

I think there were multiple reasons why my father didn't want to talk about or mention his past when I was growing up. He felt he didn't have the words. He wasn't sure what he would have to say were things that should be said. My father has never given interviews or spoken publicly. He once told me he would rather be shot. I always felt conflicted about wanting to know about my father's past, as if it were unseemly or inappropriate. Bernice Eisenstein, a Canadian graphic artist, in her memoir *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2004), writes: [F]rom early on, I knew that the past was something not to be ventured into. I had learned from the handful of times I had asked. My father could only begin to answer with a few willing words and then stop. He would cry. Sitting in

*silence beside him, I did not want to make him go further. I was left to find the pieces of his past, led by the wish to have more.*¹

I didn't want to cause my father more pain.

Another reason why I think my father found it easier not to speak about the past is because so little remained that anyone could connect with, or to. He came from a place where people weren't allowed to go – it had been part of Czechoslovakia when he was born there, then passed into the control of the Hungarians, and became part of the Soviet Union after the war. The Russians didn't grant visas because it was a border area and considered a security risk. My father had also left illegally, after the border was closed – he was always convinced that if he returned, he would be arrested. He didn't have family there; his father passed away when I was just a baby. If more of his family had been intact, and he had been from somewhere like Vienna or Prague, maybe we would have taken trips and gone back to see where he was from, or had reunions with other family members. But maybe not – my father never even took us to Israel.

When my father's area became part of an independent Ukraine, that's when it became possible to visit. I was able to purchase an invitation to visit Ukraine from a company in Moscow, which allowed me to apply for a visa. I went in 1994 and returned with a prized possession: a forestry map of my father's area, from the wall of a Ukrainian rest stop – I traded an AAA map of Europe to get it.

My father also explained to me recently that the way he thought of it was that the Germans had had that first part of his life. The second part – the rest of it – belonged to him. He applied this even to the idea of reparation. I found a letter dated May 1960 – around the time that my older sister was born – that showed my father received a one-time compensation payment from the German government in the amount of \$440.70. When other opportunities for reparation became available, he didn't pursue them. He told me that he didn't feel you could put a price on what had been lost, and that he would have found it disturbing to receive an envelope every month at his office with the seal of the German government stamped on it, to remind him again of what he was trying so hard to forget.

Sometimes when I was young, my father suggested that he didn't speak about the past because he didn't remember it or think about it. He likened it to greyhound racing dogs. He said that once a racing dog turns around to look back, he never runs again – he's "out of the game." But when I was in my twenties and my father was divorced and living alone, we were spending more time together. I asked my father how often he thought about the Holocaust. "Every day," he said. "And every night."

My father has nightmares – my mother told me about them, and his second wife mentioned them as well. As a child, I slept too far away – our bedrooms were on the opposite side of the house from our parents. When I stay with him, sometimes for protracted visits, I hear him at night. When I ask him about them, he's very open – we have a closeness as adults that I could never even have imagined we might have when I was a child. "It depends what side I'm sleeping on," he told me. "If I'm sleeping on my right

¹ B. Eisenstein, *I Was the Child of Holocaust Survivors*, Toronto 2006, p. 36.

side, I'm fine. But if I roll over onto my left side, I have nightmares – I think I'm back in the camps." In Arnold Zable's memoir *Jewels and Ashes*, he describes an exchange with his mother: *'What did you dream about last night?'*, I ask. *'Nothing,'* she replies. *'And besides, is dreaming going to bring them back to life?'*²

My father once told me that he hadn't wanted to marry a survivor because he felt that it would be difficult for two survivors to raise healthy children. And he didn't want to live somewhere where there was a large survivor community – he said that when survivors get together, they can't help but talk about the past. He thought it would be better if my mother raised us. Her parents were from Poland and Galicia, but she had been born in Chicago. My father had grown up in the Carpathian Mountains, in a community of Spinka Hasidim. He said that coming to America was not only a journey of distance, but the equivalent of coming forward a hundred years into the future. In the documentary *A Life Apart: The Hasidim in America* (1997), children of survivors described a generation gap so wide that parents seemed more like grandparents.³

My father didn't hug, didn't hold, wasn't physical, didn't snuggle – I don't remember sharing secrets or spending time together. Bernice Eisenstein also found it difficult to feel her father's love. He used to claim that he would *lie down in front of a truck* for her.⁴ *I never doubted the fierce love my father had for me*, Eisenstein writes, *but there were times when I longed for a simpler, less heroic, expression of it. An openness or curiosity about what I was thinking or what my interests were.*⁵ I wanted to be useful – my father remembers letting me tie his shoes for him once I learned how to do it in kindergarten. Although he was very comfortable with babies – he had been the eldest child at home – I think growing children were a different matter. He didn't tell us that he loved us. My mother was afraid it was something children needed to hear – their compromise was that my father wrote it on little pieces of paper and, occasionally, we were instructed to pull one of those little pieces of paper out of a jar. Years later, my father told me that, when he came to America, he didn't like the way Americans seemed to throw around the phrase "I love you." He thought it didn't mean anything. My father believed that you showed people that you loved them by demonstrating your love. For my father, that meant working, and being there.

I very much wanted feel close to my father, but I had no idea how to make that kind of closeness happen. I recognized the same longing or frustration when I began to work with second-generation texts. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986)⁶ enabled Spiegelman to forge a bond with his father – as he described, they came together on the "common ground" of Auschwitz. Spiegelman said, *From the book, a reader might get the impression that the conversations depicted in the narrative were just one small part, a facet of my*

² A. Zable, *Jewels and Ashes*, San Diego 1994, p. 164.

³ Daum M., Rudavsky O. (directors), *A Life Apart: Hasidim in America*, music by Y. Strom, Film, 1997.

⁴ B. Eisenstein, *I Was the Child...*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶ A. Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, New York 1986.

relationship with my father. In fact, however, they were my relationship with my father. I was doing them to have a relationship with my father (Weschler 64–65).⁷

My father had never been close to his own father and had no idea what constituted a “normal” or desirable parent/child relationship. He never really had a childhood. In 2015, my father and I were together, sitting side-by-side, when he turned to me and said softly, almost reflectively, *I was fifteen and three months when I was taken to Auschwitz*. My younger daughter had just turned fifteen. My father didn’t know that he was withholding himself from his children – he felt that he was giving us everything he had to give, and that he was protecting us. When my father was once asked how his being a survivor had affected his family, he replied, *It hasn’t – fortunately I’ve been able to keep them from all of that*. A man who was hidden as a child during the war once told me that it took him years to realize that every time his children asked him something about his own childhood and he didn’t answer or gave some kind of vague reply, he was lying to them.

My father couldn’t tell three little girls what had happened to him, or about what had happened to his family. In a recent interview, British playwright Tom Stoppard, whose new play finally deals with the subject of his Jewish heritage, recounts, *My mother essentially drew a line and didn’t look back... I just looked in one direction: forward*.⁸ Only after his mother’s death did he discover that all four of his grandparents and his mother’s three sisters had all perished during the Holocaust.

In her memoir *Full Circle*, Gila Diamond, reflecting on hearing a passionate rendition of “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” sung by a young woman on a bus during the Vietnam War, writes [O]ur mothers and fathers had been in another war, a war too demented, a war so devoid of reason, that there were no songs written about it. And we, their children, could not sing of that war. We couldn’t even talk about it – for nobody talked to us. But the passion of that war was there. It became part of us and we grew up with its demons inside us.⁹

The earliest published works by children of survivors appeared in 1979: *Living After the Holocaust: Reflections of Children of Survivors in America*, edited by Lucy Y. Steinitz and David M. Szonyi, and Helen Epstein’s *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters*. Both books took a journalistic approach to exploring second generation identity. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* was published in 1986. Aaron Hass, a second-generation psychologist, published *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation* in 1991. Dina Wardi, an Israel psychologist, wrote *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust* in 1992. She observed that it wasn’t uncommon for survivors to break silence with one child – often a daughter – in order to witness and transmit vital Holocaust memories. She dubbed those children “memorial candles.” Both detailed the struggle of survivors to forget. Wardi quotes Aaron Appelfeld, who offered,

⁷ L. Weschler, “Art’s Father, Vladek’s Son,” in L. Weschler, *Shapinsky’s Karma, Boggs’s Bills, and Other True-Life Tales*, San Francisco 1988, pp. 64–65.

⁸ M. Dowd, “Tom Stoppard Finally Looks Into His Shadow,” *The New York Times*, 7 September 2022.

⁹ G. Diamond, *Full Circle*, Jerusalem–New York 1994, p. 12.

*All those who remembered were blown away afterwards like sawdust in the wind. Their brooding thoughts drove them insane, their memories drove them insane. Only those who had the ability to forget lived long. All those who possessed excellent memories died.*¹⁰ Wardi writes, *Only those who succeeded in dissociating themselves totally from their past were able to survive.*¹¹

Elie Wiesel argued in *One Generation After* (1987) that it was very important for children of survivors to bear witness. He wrote: *As a Jew, you are entitled, indeed required, to speak in the name of all Jews. Your word, therefore, takes on immeasurable significance and ancient resonance; it involves others: your ancestors from the most distant past... To betray the present means to destroy the past. Whereas to fulfill oneself means choosing to be a link between past and future, between remorse and consolation, between the primary silence of creation and the silence that weighed on Treblinka.*¹² I'm not sure that I feel entitled to speak "in the name of all Jews," but I felt from an early age that it was important to not deny the past. In a keynote speech, Wiesel said, *I believe a person who listens to a witness becomes a witness.*¹³

Eva Hoffman, in *After Such Knowledge* (2004), describes the second generation as a *hinge generation* and suggests that the *doubling back of memory* involves a double process: *a reckoning not only with the Shoah, but with our relationship to those who had lived through it, to our parents and elders.*¹⁴ Marianne Hirsch, in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), focuses on those who grow up heavily influenced or even dominated by the weight of memories and the trauma of experiences not their own. When I think about postmemory, I think about those who hear too much, like the children in Carl Friedman's novel *Nightfather* (1994) or the writer and artist Maurice Sendak, who felt haunted by the relatives who had died in the Holocaust and by the survivors who would visit his parents.¹⁵

But there are also those who grow up with silence. Susan Faludi said of her father Steven, a survivor from Hungary, *[H]e has so much not to talk about.*¹⁶ Writes Lily Rattok in her introduction to Israeli author Savyon Liebrecht's *Apples from the Desert: In a 1992 interview with the poet Amalia Argaman-Barnea, Liebrecht spoke about the "silent home;" she cited as an example of the conspiracy of silence her own reluctance to question her father about the family he had before the war. The existence of that family was revealed to her only through an old photograph in a family album, in which her father is*

¹⁰ D. Wardi, *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust*, London–New York 1992, p. 23.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² E. Wiesel, *One Generation After*, New York 1987, p. 168.

¹³ J. Berger, "The 'Second Generation' Reflects on the Holocaust," *The New York Times*, 17 January 2000, A12.

¹⁴ E. Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, New York 2004, p. 181.

¹⁵ D.R. Goldman, "In the Shadow of the Holocaust, Murray Sendak Shows Us Ourselves," *ReformJudaism.org*, 11 May 2012, at <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/shadow-holocaust-murray-sendak-shows-us-ourselves>, 19 July 2023.

¹⁶ P.L. Brown, "Sympathy for Men, Empathy with One," *The New York Times*, 21 October 1999, F15.

seen smiling happily in the company of a woman and a little girl. The wall of silence did not crumble when the writer took a trip to Poland with her parents. Even though her father made an attempt to tell her about his past life, during a train ride to Treblinka concentration camp, he did so in Polish, a language that he had never spoken to her before and that she did not understand.¹⁷ There are children of survivors who don't know where their parents were born, or their parents' real names.

When silence is breached, painful secrets are revealed. Julie Salamon describes a father who had a wife and daughter who perished during the Holocaust in her novel *White Lies* (1987) and in her memoir *The Net of Dreams: A Family's Search for a Rightful Place* (1996). In Thomas Friedmann's *Damaged Goods* (1984), a son finds out he is not his father's firstborn. In Lev Raphael's novel *Winter Eyes* (1992) and Helen Fremont's memoir *After Long Silence: A Memoir* (1999), children who didn't know about their heritage find out that their parents were Jewish Holocaust survivors. Kati Martón, raised as a Roman Catholic, found out in 1978 that her grandparents had been in one of the first transports to Auschwitz. She writes, *I was shocked, not because I minded being Jewish – I did not really know what that meant – but because I was stunned that something so essential had been kept from me.*¹⁸

These are challenges to identity. Alain Finkielkraut, in *The Imaginary Jew* (1980), suggests that the Holocaust radically changed Jewish identity. He suggests that, *because of the enormity of the physical and cultural losses during the Holocaust, the only connection to the past the son or the daughter of the survivor can have is to a kind of identity as a victim – it is inauthentic, a connection to a world more imaginary than real.*¹⁹ Bernice Eisenstein also wonders if she embraced her second-generation identity in order to feel special. In a chapter entitled "Yiddish Holds the World," she writes, *Is it funny, is it sad enough? Am I too whiny, too angry, too petulant? Boo hoo, poor little survivors' child. Have I managed to avoid using every cliché there is out there relating to the Holocaust? You see, I have this problem – growing up in the household of my parents was not tragic, but their past was. My life was not cursed, theirs was. They were born under an unfavorable star and forced to sew it onto their clothing. Yet here I am, some Jewish Sisyphus, pushing history and memory uphill, wondering what I'm supposed to be, and what I really feel like is a rebellious child, wanting to stand before my parents and say, Here, take – it's yours, I don't want it.*²⁰

I don't believe that my identity as someone second-generation revolves around my desire to be seen as a victim. It's a particular and peculiar inheritance – I think it has made some of us very empathetic and sensitive to the suffering of others. Janet Jacobs, in *The Holocaust Across Generations* (2016), explores what she terms "descendent identity." Those who hear the stories of the past and have a strong attachment to survivors

¹⁷ S. Liebrecht, *Apples from the Desert: Selected Stories*, Forward by G. Paley, Introduction by L. Rattok, New York 1998, pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ K. Martón, "Making Peace with the Past," *Newsweek*, 17 February 1997, p. 44.

¹⁹ A. Finkielkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, transl. by K. O'Neill, D. Suchoff, Lincoln-London 1980, p. 171.

²⁰ B. Eisenstein, *I Was the Child...*, p. 53.

become "Holocaust carriers" and "trauma carriers,"²¹ Stories are essential. Bernice Eisenstein writes of her father, *He could not speak about the past, and because I was unable to trace my way there, it was difficult for me to reach my own feelings.*²²

Santiago H. Amigorena, a third generation French-Argentine writer and director, writes in *The Ghetto Within* (2022), *Twenty-five years ago, I began writing a book to oppose the silence that has stifled me since birth.*²³ Kati Martón writes of her parents, *They had too much history. I did not have enough.*²⁴ When my father finally shared his story with me, we grew much closer. Because he could never enter fully into my world, he let me enter his. I was no longer a generic American. *It's not that I was never going to tell you about my past, my father told me recently. It was important to me that it be your choice.*

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²¹ J.L. Jacobs, *The Holocaust Across Generations: Trauma and Its Inheritance Among Descendants of Survivors*, New York 2016, p. 125.

²² B. Eisenstein, *I Was the Child...*, pp. 96-97.

²³ S.H. Amigorena, *The Ghetto Within: A Novel*, trans. by F. Wynne, New York 2022, ix.

²⁴ K. Martón, "Making Peace with the Past," p. 44.

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