

## **Child Survivors and Children of Survivors: A 30 Year International Perspective**

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Good shabbes, boker tov, bonjour, dobry den! I thank our hosts here in Michigan for inviting me here this morning and, in turn, welcome all of you to this 18th World Conference of Child Survivors and Children of Survivors.

When the current war in the Middle East was in its third week, I began to think about this conference and amending what I had prepared as my keynote address, a 30 –year overview of the survivor community in an international context. I wondered: Should I scrap it completely and react to the emergency? What was a reasonable way for me to respond to the President of Iran's pronouncements about destroying Israel? Should I be thinking or taking action? Writing? Sending money? Making an inventory of friends and allies? Or were these the hypervigilant post-traumatic stress reactions that so many of us share in the wake of the Holocaust?

I thought about the reasons for this community to meet and what we had to discuss. In some ways, we are an extremely heterogeneous group, representing not only many countries and several generations but many parts of the religious, political, cultural and economic spectrum. Some of us have been active members of the post-Holocaust community for decades; others have just discovered it. Some of us are activists who come from a tradition of activism while others are artists, or educators, or healers, or people who contribute to life as mothers, fathers, and members of the community. But in other ways, we are an extremely homogenous group: all of our lives have been marked by the second world war; many of our responses – conscious and unconscious – have been shaped by that heritage. Whatever our views are or have been about Israel and Israeli policies in the past, we have all been riveted by the current crisis in the Middle East, trying to manage our anxiety while at the same time going about the business of our daily lives.

Like you, I have felt many things: anger, confusion, helplessness, fear, a desire to do something useful. Like many of you I find it very difficult to think clearly about the events of the past month and to accurately gauge my own reactions as well as the reactions of other people. I decided not to scrap the overview but have rewritten this address with all this in mind.

First, let me set out the perspectives I speak from. I was born in Prague in 1947. My parents were the sole survivors of their immediate families. Some of you know that my father was a water polo player who made the controversial decision to participate in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. My mother was a dress designer. They were secular Jews who socialized with Jews and Christians alike both in prewar Prague and post-war New York City.

I grew up in Manhattan, then did my undergraduate studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem where, incidentally, there was a terrorist attack in the cafeteria back in 1969. The summer before, I had travelled to what was then Czechoslovakia to visit relatives, got caught in the Soviet invasion and began my journalistic career on a typewriter in a Prague apartment.

My first job as a journalist was for the Jerusalem Post. I'm married to a former French Jew; my two sons children grew up in Massachusetts. Our extended family includes ultra-orthodox mizrachi Jews living in France and Israel as well as a convert to Judaism in New York and a Bangladeshi in London. All these relationships condition my thinking about issues central to our community.

It was Faulkner who wrote: what is past is never dead; it isn't even past. I'm aware that for me, as for many of you, the Holocaust conditions my responses not only to the news from the Middle East but to the events of everyday life. I don't wake up every morning thinking about Auschwitz. I don't believe in a universal Holocaust pathology that applies to every survivor family, but I do believe that the Holocaust created a particular subculture, with a set of particular features. Questions such as: what would I do if my children's lives were threatened? Or: would I hide a friend who needed shelter if the penalty was death? Would my friend do the same for me? are never far from my consciousness. Like many of you, I've always felt the absence of family and community and the presence of an identification with oppressed people that I ascribe to my background.

I was in Jerusalem working as a reporter in the years after the Six Day War, when I first identified the group of people who came to be known as second generation or children of survivors. Back then, in the late 1960s, all over the world the Shoah was largely the private matter of the community who had managed to survive it. The vast majority of « victims of the Holocaust» – for «victim» was still the word used to describe them -- kept their

stories to themselves. Victimhood, particularly in Israel was seen as shameful, not something to be advertised. It belonged to the Diaspora, and was associated with Kafka – not Herzl.

Israel had established a Holocaust Memorial in 1953 but, as I perceived it as a student, the Shoah was seen and used as prequel to the Zionist narrative; the New Jew was necessary and idealized; the Diaspora Jew and his world moribund and discredited. Holocaust survivors as well as Mizrahi Jews such as the Yemenites played a role in the national mythology but were expected to shed their pasts, transcend their limitations and model themselves on the new Israeli prototype: the sabra. It was a compelling idea and I remember trying to model myself along its lines, working in the fields of a kibbutz, learning not only modern Hebrew but how to live by a calendar that was organized around the Jewish week rather than the Christian one.

At the time, the books of Auschwitz survivor Yehiel Dinur — who felt he had lost his original identity in the war and therefore wrote under the pen name Katzetnik or «concentration camp survivor» -- were read in Israel as sensational horror stories, just as the survivors on my kibbutz were regarded as perhaps interesting but very weird people.

Dinur had published his survivor memoir in 1945. Like Elie Wiesel in France, Primo Levi in Italy, Arnost Lustig in Czechoslovakia, Wladyslaw Szpilman, subject of Roman Polanski's his film "The Pianist", Dinur was ready to tell his experience immediately after the war but not many people wanted to read about it.

Everywhere, in the years following World War Two, the immediate task was rebuilding, rebuilding lives and recreating families, communities and, in some cases, entire countries. Thousands of survivors forged a post-war community in the DP camps. They identified as survivors of Nazi extermination plans (even if they had survived the harsh conditions of the Soviet Union). They named themselves the She'erit Hapletah (or in Yiddish as sheyres hapleyte), a biblical reference to the surviving remnant which escaped destruction and "carried the promise of a future." They were committed to Zionism and Jewish identity. They held their own commemorations and organized social groups for their children.

But at least as many survivors did not experience DP camps. Some returned as individuals to what had been their homes; others emigrated to places they had never lived before and were suspicious of all organizations. They ranged in age, spoke different languages, came from different cultures, and traditions. Some were Zionists, some Communists, some assimilationists, some pious Jews. Their wartime experience also divided them. Some had spent six years in concentration camps or ghettos; others spent six weeks in a labor brigade. Some had passed the war moving about the streets of cities on false papers; others were hidden in barns or closets or holes in the ground, unable to move. Some had survived with a mother or father or sister or friend; others, entirely alone. Those who had fought the Nazis as members of partisan groups or foreign armies saw themselves as fighters; many of those who had been incarcerated saw themselves as prisoners; many who had escaped to places like Iran or Siberia placed themselves in a hierarchy of suffering and even felt that they were not really survivors.

Some survivors chose immediate emigration to what was then Palestine because the war had made or confirmed their Zionism. Some chose India or Australia or Chile because it seemed the most different from Europe. In an effort to protect their new families, an unknown number of survivors changed their names and identified themselves as Christians.

Although some survivors were incapacitated and hospitalized at liberation, most tried to get back to normal life as quickly as possible. Although many were plagued by health problems, flashbacks and nightmares, they kept their problems within the family, believing that they would find little understanding in the post-war world. For the most part, they were right. Very few people, including psychiatrists and physicians, wanted to hear about the war – even in their consultation rooms. In a time before instant media coverage or much international travel, the actual scenes of the Nazi crime were out of sight, out of mind in much of Europe as well as in much of the United States, most of them behind the Iron Curtain. Within the Communist countries, anti-Semitism was official policy and identifying as a Jew usually meant difficulty in school and in the workplace. During historical commemorations of the war, no official mention was made of the Final Solution and the Jews who were exterminated were, for the most part, subsumed under the category "Victims of Fascism."

Wherever they lived, child survivors and children of survivors grew up in two parallel cultures – public and private. Growing up in Manhattan, I was sent to synagogue and Sunday School by my parents who wanted me to know what being Jewish entailed. But in the 1950s, in the largely American Jewish congregation, my friends had been told not to stare at the tattoo on my mother's arm and not to ask any questions.

It was many years after that I discovered that over half of them were the children of European Jews who had immigrated to America just a decade before my own parents and had barely escaped the war.

My cousin Miki, growing up in Prague during those same years of McCarthyism in America and Stalinism in Soviet-occupied Europe, was raised in ignorance of Jewish tradition and identity. Although Miki's grandfather had been a leading Czech Zionist before the war, and his mother worked as secretary to Prague's Rabbi, she never took him to a synagogues and told him nothing about Judaism. Miki married a Christian and raised his children in the Czech church. His profile is typical not only of many Czech Jews but Jews in Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and parts of what used to be the Soviet Union.

In western Europe of the 1950s and 1960s, the situation for child survivors and children of survivors was different from Miki's but only in degree. Although French war orphans, hidden children, and children of the «deported» as they are called in French, had contact with one another, exploration of their common past remained as minimal as it did in other countries. Although anti-semitism was not official government policy in western as it was in eastern Europe, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, France, and Holland each had a different official narrative of the war and a different post-war attitude toward its surviving Jews. It was not, until recently, dangerous to be Jewish in post-war western Europe but a sense of shame often came with the identity. Jews were a foreign minority in almost all the places they remained or emigrated to after the war and often isolated. My husband's parents, for example, were Roumanian Jews who moved from Bucharest to Paris in 1949. They told him almost nothing about their lives before arriving in France and as a result he has very little idea of his family history. Last year, when my book *Children of the Holocaust*, was published in Paris and we went there, my husband first discovered what I had called "a peer group without a sign" some 30 years earlier.

In the United States, the many immigrants and minority groups, together with America's unequivocal position as a liberator nation made matters somewhat easier for survivors and members of the second generation. But even in the liberator countries – the UK, Canada, and the U.S. the ethos was assimilation, not unlike the situation in Israel. Child survivors, especially, were in the 1950s and early 1960s urged to shed their accents, forget their past and become indistinguishable from children and teenagers of their new countries. They responded eagerly, not only because that was the cultural imperative but because of their great need and desire to belong.

Older survivors, who could not shed their accents or habits of mind had even more difficulty finding compassionate listeners than they did finding new jobs. Even other Jews, even pre-war Jewish refugees from Nazism were problematic listeners because discussion of the Holocaust reminded them of their own vulnerability as well as relatives left behind in Europe. Their stories elicited fear, guilt, shame and suspicion: what kind of people could survivors be to have survived Hitler?

In America, the media played a tremendous role in validating survivor experience and dramatizing the death of the European Jewish community. At a time when the print media were the major source of news, large circulation magazines such as *Life* and *Look* brought large photographs of barbed wire fences, piles of human skeletons, and emaciated concentration camp prisoners onto the kitchen tables of American homes. Via radio, a small number of trusted newsmen like Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite had brought into American living rooms nation-wide what they had seen in Europe.

The American publishing industry followed up on the news media. The *Diary of Anne Frank* was published in English in 1951. John Hersey's *The Wall*, a popular account of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was published in 1950, and Leon Uris's novel *Exodus* in 1958. Like the *Diary of Anne Frank*, *Exodus* became an immediate international best-seller that was read by millions of people. Unlike the *Diary*, however, *Exodus* linked camp survivors to the establishment of Israel in a direct and dramatic way. It is important to point out here that at the time these books came out, Jews had little public presence in American media. Multi-culturalism was not yet a concept let alone a reality. Many American Jews in the post-war period were "passing" by changing their names and religious affiliation. Many neighborhoods and some entire American towns were still barring Jews, businesses discriminated against Jews, universities practiced quotas for Jewish students and Hollywood studios required it. Holocaust refugees were called greeners and were often viewed as an embarrassment to the Jewish community, who needed to be Americanized as quickly as possible.

The American ideal was homogenous and all Jews except the ultra- orthodox tried to fit into that framework. It was not until 1960, when Israeli Security Service agents kidnapped Adolf Eichmann in Argentina and brought him to trial in Israel that the survivor community first became a collective public presence and the focus of any sustained public attention. Most of the world did not yet have access to television at the time, but in the United States, most people already did. In 1961, they saw Holocaust survivors giving eyewitness testimony,

including Yeniel Dinur, who fainted during the proceedings and Jewish resisters who did not. Many writers also covered the trial including Hannah Arendt whose controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* became a major publishing event.

I emphasize the nature of the media then because, unlike in today's fractured and competitive international media environment, public consciousness of Jews, the Holocaust, and the then relatively new State of Israel was determined by a relatively small group of people. The Eichmann Trial has been generally described as cathartic for the survivor community and a significant event in American culture but unlike the Truth and Reconciliation procedures in South Africa, for instance, most of the world didn't register it. For most of us, it was an important landmark. I remember sitting with my parents before our television set, understanding that something deeply private had become public.

Not long after that, the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization was founded in New York City. Taking pride in their active role in resisting the Nazis, closely bonded by language and culture, they became the most cohesive group of survivors but still far from the larger, nationally recognized demographic group they would later become.

What would become known as identity politics was at the time still subsumed to the American dictum *e pluribus unum* – or «one nation from many» -- and would be brought to the forefront by African-Americans in the civil rights Movement. That raising of collective consciousness would spur rethinking of collective identity by women and many other ethnic groups in the United States, including Jews. When the Six Day War broke out in 1967, American Jews reacted intensely and began to engage in a major re-examination of Jewish identity. After 1976, when Alex Haley published *Roots* and the television mini-series of this African-American genealogical saga garnered millions of viewers around the world, some of the same writers produced the mini-series *Holocaust*, which made the arcane term a household word. This media popularization and dissemination ushered in an era of the Holocaust as hot topic throughout the world.

Universities and colleges expanded their offerings about it; survivors who were not professional writers felt encouraged to write memoirs of their own; American cities planned their own Holocaust monuments and centers; a United States Council on the Holocaust was established. By 1993, when the U.S. Holocaust Museum opened in Washington, D.C. it rapidly became one of the most popular museums in our capital. When I was a child, a demanding boss was called a "slave-driver." Now, he's "the office Nazi." The Holocaust has become a metaphor for Right to Life activists who use it to describe abortion. The swastika has become an all-purpose symbol of oppression, routinely used in provocative ways by all kinds of political groups, including not only by Arabs and Jews in the context of the Middle East, but Jews opposed to Jews, African to Africans, Europeans to Europeans, Americans to Americans. The vocabulary and iconography that we once regarded as a private family language – words like concentration camp, kapo, gas; images of smokestacks, cattle cars and ovens – has become part of public discourse, a kind of shorthand that is especially potent in caricature.

It is one of the many ironies of life in our community that Holocaust imagery is now being used both to portray Jews as perpetrators AND to once again portray them as objects to be exterminated. Iran is currently hosting an exhibit of Holocaust caricature and its president is delivering the same lines that Hitler once delivered: Jews are to be hunted down and eliminated.

We are plunged into a crisis. How do we distinguish past from present? Are we reliving the 1930s? Or is this something completely different? Who is the victim, who is the perpetrator and who is the bystander? Whom can we trust?

The world has become more psychologically sophisticated since 1945. Trauma has become a household word and the term victim has been transformed into the term survivor. Holocaust survivors are but one subgroup alongside cancer, hurricane and abuse survivors. Many persecuted groups have adopted the tri-partite formulation of "victim, perpetrator, and bystander." An army of people now speak and write about the sequelae of the Holocaust, including not only survivors but historians and political scientists but philosophers, theologians, law professors, sociologists, neurobiologists and educators – producing vast quantities of material, especially in the burgeoning field of trauma and memory. Child survivors and members of the Second Generation are at the forefront of all these groups. I've met them in Budapest, in Prague, in Paris and London, in Mexico City as well as in Tel Aviv. Like Jews in general and historically, they have gravitated toward the helping professions and toward the healing wings of the arts, education and law.

The terms «hidden child» and «children of survivors» have, I think, served their function and become increasingly become inappropriate for the group assembled here. We are, most of us, between 40 and 70,

parents and sometimes grandparents — not children. We are a far more homogenous and empowered group than our parents: the overwhelming majority of us are extraordinarily well-educated, have businesses or professions, own our own homes, enjoy access to people and places our parents could not have imagined. Although we grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust and many of us served as what Israeli psychologist Dina Wardi called 'memorial candles,' preserving and transmitting family history, most of us are fully engaged in the present working in many sectors of the Jewish and the American world.

Our hosts here in Detroit have modeled a multifaceted way of engaging our pasts in the service of the present. They are engaged on many fronts: for many years they have provided an extended family for the entire greater Detroit survivor community; they have been engaged in the care of aging survivors; they have become an important force within the local Jewish community; and at the same time have worked for many years on outreach to other ethnic Americans including the Arab-Americans of the greater Detroit area. Some of them will be discussing their activities in workshops this weekend.

I believe that activities such as theirs are crucial as we try to find our way through what is perhaps the most anxiety-provoking time for our community since the Holocaust. Issues of memory have been superceded by current events. Anti-semitic rhetoric has reached a level that our generation has until now not experienced in real time and anti-semitic violence has reached a new level as well. In every country of Europe, Jewish museums and synagogues and libraries are now barricaded and guarded by police and despite their efforts, Jewish schools and buildings are destroyed and Jews are injured and sometimes – most recently in Paris and Seattle – murdered because they are Jews.

This state of vulnerability has led to major migrations. One million mizrachi Jews have over the past 30 years left their homes in the countries like Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Iran and Iraq because of personal experience of anti-Jewish violence. Even more have left the Soviet Union and one could argue that in Israel, Jews have been living with the prospect of being fired upon or blown up since the establishment of the state.

The war triggered by Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon has raised our anxiety not only about the safety of Israel's young men and women, but of our own, on increasingly dangerous college campuses and community centers such as the one in Seattle where six women were shot. Antisemitic violence has spread throughout the United States, making it necessary for American and Canadian Jews to take precautions that we thought only applied elsewhere. This atmosphere is particularly disturbing to our survivor community, which is acutely attuned to phenomena we recognize from our traumatic recent history.

How do we assess the situation accurately, differentiating it from events in our past? Can we act more effectively? How do we manage the anxiety or depression provoked by such disturbing events? What can we do?

It's not the job of this keynote address to provide answers to these questions. It's a collective effort and I know that many options and opinions will be discussed at this conference. Pessimism, as a friend of mine noted, is a luxury that we cannot indulge. Whatever our opinions have been about Israel and Israeli policies in the past and whatever our differences of opinion now, there is no question that the current situation requires our attention and unconditional support. None of us can do everything but all of us can do something meaningful. And we can try to bring the special knowledge and strengths we have as members of the survivor community to bear on this current crisis.

Like many of you, I have been spending time on the internet, reading some of the press from Israel and Europe as well as the U.S. and e-mails from friends. I'd like to end this address with a message that appeared on the listserv [allgenerations@aol.com](mailto:allgenerations@aol.com). It came from a survivor at Lohamei HaGhetta'ot, The Ghetto Fighters' Museum between Nahariya and Acco, situated on a kibbutz about 9 miles from the Lebanese border. For more than a month, hundreds of Katyusha rockets landed on kibbutz property almost every day. Most of the museum staff lived in bomb shelters and it seemed pointless to try to keep the museum open. But they did, because they considered the museum a symbol of Jewish resistance with a special mission in Israeli society. Their only visitors turned out to be an Israeli military unit that was among the first to fight Hezbollah. The soldiers came to the Museum looking for guidance and a kind of inspiration. It is in the spirit of those museum workers that I open this conference and wish you a productive weekend.

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