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Transferring Memory: The Task of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors

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Night Fragments

night fragments created
in fire shadows
we are the last and the first
the last to taste ashes
from the cursed century's valley
of unwilling passers through
where God revealed His face
to them alone;
and the first
transfixed by still burning yesterdays
to reach beyond heaven and its clouds
beyond crimson ghost illusions
into ourselves
imploding
in search of memory

(by MZR)

Many if not most children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors live with ghosts. We are haunted much in the way a cemetery is haunted. We bear within us the shadows and echoes of an anguished dying we never experienced or witnessed. One of my ghosts is a little boy named Benjamin who arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp with his parents 67 years ago, on the night of 3/4 August 1943. In her posthumously published memoirs, my mother, Dr. Hadassah Rosensaft, recalled her final moments with her son, my brother:

"We were guarded by SS men and women. One SS man was standing in front of the people and he started the selection. With a single movement of his finger, he was sending some people to the right and some to the left... Men were separated from women. People with children were sent to one side, and young people were separated from older looking ones. No one was allowed to go from one group to the other. Our 5 1/2-year-old son went with his father. Something that will haunt me to the end of my days occurred during those first moments. As we were separated, our son turned to me and asked, 'Mommy, are we going to live or die?' I didn't answer this question."[1]

Benjamin is one of more than 1,000,000 Jewish children who were murdered in the Holocaust. Since my mother's death in 1997, he has existed inside of me. I see his face in my mind, try to imagine his voice, his fear as the gas chamber doors slammed shut, his final tears. If I were to forget him, he would disappear.

The preservation and transfer of memory is the most critical mission that children and grandchildren of survivors must undertake so as to ensure meaningful and authentic Holocaust remembrance in future generations. As the ranks of survivors steadily dwindle, this task becomes ever more urgent.

Growing up, we whose parents had come out of the Shoah believed that they were indestructible. After all, they overcame the German efforts to murder them, survived ghettos and death camps, and rebuilt their lives after the war. They also had a special appreciation and zest for life. In our eyes, they were truly the "greatest generation." It seemed to us that our parents would be here forever, and that they would always protect us, their children.

But age and the frailties of the human body are proving to be inexorable. All too soon, the voices of those who suffered alongside the murdered victims of the Holocaust will no longer be heard. Many sons and daughters of survivors have already lost one or both of their parents. My father, the fiery leader of the survivors of Bergen-Belsen, died in 1975 at the age of 64. My mother, one of the founders of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC died 22 years later. Most survivors today are in their eighties, and many are in failing health.

The principal responsibility for transmitting the survivors' legacy of remembrance into the future has now shifted to their children and grandchildren. In his keynote address at the First International Conference of Children of Holocaust Survivors in 1984, Elie Wiesel mandated us to do what the survivors "have tried to do — and more: to keep our tale alive — and sacred."[2] It is up to us to integrate our parents' and grandparents' memories, spirit, and perseverance into the Jewish community's and the world's collective consciousness.

I do not mean to imply that the transmission, the transference if you will, of memory should be our only priority. Our identity imposes other obligations on us as well. We must do everything in our power to enable all survivors to live out their remaining days in dignity. Tens of thousands of them live a precarious existence. Close to 25 percent of Holocaust survivors in the United States, and an even greater percentage of the survivors in Israel live at or below the poverty level.3 Often forced to decide whether to use their meager resources to buy food or medicine, whether to heat their homes or get their glasses fixed, they urgently need far more assistance than the meager monthly payments many but by no means all of them have been accorded under the German reparations law.

We also have a moral responsibility not to stand idly by, in the words of Mordechai Gebirtig's famous song, "Es Brent" (It is Burning), "with folded arms" (mit ferleygte hent),[4] while human beings anywhere in the world are oppressed or persecuted. We have no right to criticize the world for not coming to the aid of our parents and grandparents during the 1930's and 1940's unless we do everything in our power to fight all forms of contemporary racial, religious or ethnic hatred and to prevent contemporary genocides, whether in Darfur, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, or elsewhere. If we learn only one lesson from the cataclysm known as the Holocaust, it must be that the ultimate consequence of silence and indifference to the dire plight of others was embodied forever in the fires of Auschwitz and the mass-graves of Bergen-Belsen.

Only five months after the end of World War II, in the face of the British government's concerted efforts to limit Jewish immigration to Palestine, the survivors in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps of Germany and Austria demanded the right to rebuild their lives in a Jewish homeland, a Jewish state. In September of 1945, the delegates to the first congress of liberated Jews in the British Zone of Germany that my father, Josef Rosensaft, convened in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp (commonly referred to simply as Belsen) formally adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and expressing their "sorrow and indignation that almost six months after liberation, we still find ourselves in guarded camps on British soil soaked with the blood of our people. We proclaim that we will not be driven back into the lands which have become the graveyards of our people."[5]

Shortly thereafter, my father, the chairman of both the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the British Zone of Germany and of the Jewish Committee that administered the Belsen DP camp, publicly attacked the British authorities' efforts to stifle the survivors' Zionist sentiments. According to an interview with The New York Times in which my father denounced the living conditions at Belsen, "Jewish nationalists and Zionist activities are discouraged, Dr. [sic] Rosensaft added, charging that the British exerted censorship over the inmates' news sheets in that the Jews are not allowed to proclaim in print their desire to emigrate to Palestine."[6]

In December of 1945, my father was invited to the United States to address the first post-war conference of the United Jewish Appeal in Atlantic City. Palestine, he declared on that occasion, was the only place in the world

“willing, able, and ready to open its doors to the broken and shattered Jews of war-ravaged Europe.”[7] Testifying before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine in early 1946, he told its members that if the survivors would not be allowed to go to Palestine, “We shall go back to Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz, and you will bear the moral responsibility for it.”[8]

It is not surprising, therefore, that the survivors’ dedication to the Zionist dream that had fortified them in ghettos and death camps has instilled in most of their children and grandchildren a powerful intuitive commitment to the permanence and lasting security of the State of Israel. The emergence of Israel as a haven for homeless Jews was one of the first rays of light to pierce the darkness of mourning and despair after the Holocaust. In April of 1946, when my mother escorted 1,000 Jewish orphans to Palestine, she fervently believed that they and their children and grandchildren would henceforth be safe. For us, therefore, the ongoing threats of destruction by the likes of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or Hamas and Hezbollah leaders transcend political rhetoric.

We have grown up not only with Israel as a central element of our Jewish consciousness, but with a very real appreciation that the absence of a Jewish homeland, of a haven for persecuted Jews, during the 1930’s and 1940’s contributed to the murder of our families.

The sons and daughters of the survivors do not conform to any stereotype. Among us are Holocaust remembrance activists such as Rositta Kenigsberg, executive vice president of the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center in Hollywood, Florida, Dr. Romana Strochlitz Primus, president of the Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut, and Dr. Joel M. Geiderman, co-chair of the Emergency Department at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, with whom I had the privilege of serving on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council; Hannah Rosenthal, the US State Department’s Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism; and psychologist Eva Fogelman, who pioneered support groups for children of survivors in the 1970s.

Our ranks also include Helen Epstein, author of the influential 1979 book, Children of the Holocaust: Conversations With Sons and Daughters of Survivors; former World Jewish Congress Executive Director Elan Steinberg, the strategist behind the successful effort to wrest US$1.25 billion of Holocaust assets from Swiss banks; Rav Aluf (Lieutenant General) Benny Gantz, Chief of Staff of the Israel Armed Forces; Helena Glaser, the international president of WIZO, the Women’s International Zionist Organization, and chairperson of the General Council or the World Zionist Organization; my wife, Jean Bloch Rosensaft, an art historian and museum director who has curated numerous exhibitions of art by survivors and children of survivors as well as an international traveling photo exhibition about the Belsen DP camp; Israeli clinical psychologist Yaffa Singer, an internationally recognized authority on post-traumatic stress disorder in military personnel and veterans; novelists Lily Brett, Thane Rosenbaum and Melvin Jules Bukiet; Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic artist Art Spiegelman; Rabbi Marc Schneier, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, who promotes Jewish-Muslim understanding; CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer; Thomas Feyer, the New York Times Letters Editor, and New York Times reporter Joseph Berger; Vivian Bernstein, co-chief of the Group Programmes Unit of the Department of Public Information at the United Nations; Ilan Ramon, the Israeli astronaut who was tragically killed on February 1, 2003, when the Space Shuttle Columbia

disintegrated during reentry 16 minutes before its scheduled landing; Polish born Jerzy Warman, a prominent activist in the United States during the 1980's and early 1990's on behalf of Poland's Solidarity movement; film historian Annette Insdorf and documentary filmmakers Jeffrey Tuchman and Aviva Kempner; actress Blanche Baker who won an Emmy for her portrayal of Anna Weiss in the television miniseries Holocaust; Michael Korenblit, the co-founder of the Respect Diversity Foundation which teaches tolerance to students in Oklahoma; American Jewish Committee Executive Vice President David Harris; New Jersey real estate developer and philanthropist Leonard Wilf; Serena Woolrich, the founder of "Allgenerations," an Internet clearinghouse of information for survivors and their families; museum architect Daniel Libeskind; and Israeli singer Yehuda Poliker who composed the classic rock ballad, "This Is Treblinka Station," to name only a few.

Of course, not all children and grandchildren of survivors or refugees from Nazi persecution identify as such. Even though he is the son of a German-Jewish refugee, Billy Joel, for example, has never, to the best of my knowledge, made any attempt to perpetuate or even acknowledge Holocaust memory in his lyrics. His one "social consciousness" song, We Didn't Start the Fire, merely sandwiches Eichmann, without commentary, between Hemingway and Robert Heinlein's sci-fi novel, Strangers in a Strange Land, among the personalities and events that Joel sees as epitomizing the second half of the 20th Century.[9]

The reality is that we are no more homogeneous than our parents or grandparents. The European Jews swept up in the Holocaust covered their totality, from the fervently observant to the defiantly secular, from Yiddishists and Hebraists to those who were so thoroughly assimilated that they barely acknowledged their Jewish roots. In the crowded barracks of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Bergen-Belsen, the formerly wealthy slept alongside Jews who had been destitute and others from all economic strata in between. The SS doctors who carried out the selections for the gas chambers did not differentiate between Jewish intellectuals and laborers, or rabbis and businessmen, or lawyers and pickpockets.

The children and grandchildren of survivors are equally diverse. The only thing we all have in common is that our parents went through the Holocaust, but that fact is sufficient for us to instinctively know and understand one another. Still, we, too, subdivide ourselves.

Those of us born in DP camps shortly after the end of World War II have an intuitive affinity with one another. Like our parents and grandparents, we communicate in our own shorthand. Not long ago, I met Solomon Greenspan, the president of a prestigious golf club on the New Jersey shore and discovered that we shared a similar past. "I was born in Foehrenwald," a DP camp in the American Zone, he told me. "Bergen-Belsen," I replied. There was no need for lengthy explanations. We knew each other's histories without having to exchange any additional words.

Then there are the children and grandchildren of partisans, whose homes were different than those of camp survivors, or those of Jews who had spent the war years in Siberia, or pre-war refugees from Nazi Germany. It goes without saying that Polish Jews are culturally distinct from German Jews (known to Eastern European Jews as

yekes), who in turn have little in common with Hungarian survivors. And when a former camp inmate married a hidden child, or a Jew who survived on forged papers, the dynamics changed yet again.

One further note of caution is essential here. Children of survivors are frequently the subject of psychological studies dissecting our supposed pathology, trauma, guilt complexes, collective idiosyncrasies, and other alleged common characteristics. Such theses are often skewed and must be read (or lectures heard) with an enormous grain of salt. Their conclusions are generally rooted in control groups consisting of individuals who have sought counseling or treatment from a therapist or other mental health professional. It is as if one were to extrapolate the drinking habits of all adult Americans from interviews with members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I do not mean to suggest that all children of survivors are free of emotional issues. There are those who have been unable to come to terms with their parents' experiences, or who have grown up in homes in which the dark imagery of the Holocaust was overwhelming. At the same time, I firmly believe that most of us look upon our parents and grandparents as role models and a source of strength. As Elie Wiesel told us in 1984 at the First International Conference of Children of Holocaust Survivors, "The great majority of you remain healthy and generous, with a sense of humor, with a sense of literature and culture and humanity. That you are so well-adjusted seems almost abnormal. Logically, most of you should have ended up on the analyst's couch, if not elsewhere. The fact is that you have managed to rechannel your sadness, your anger, your inherited memories into such humanistic endeavors as medicine, law, social action, education, philanthropy. In other words, you are really the worthy children of your parents."[10]

While each of us has come to terms with our unique identity as children and grandchildren of survivors in an individual, often multifaceted way, together we have a better understanding of and sensitivity to our parents' and grandparents' experiences than anyone else. Because we lived with them, listened to them, observed them as they confronted their nightmares, we have in effect become their attestors.

On 15 April 1945, when British troops entered the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, near the German city of Hanover, they discovered more than 10,000 bodies scattered about the camp, and some 58,000 surviving inmates, the overwhelming majority of them Jews, who were suffering from a combination of typhus, tuberculosis, dysentery, extreme malnutrition, and countless other virulent diseases. Most were too weak even to walk.

"The hand of Adonai came upon me," declared the prophet Ezekiel. He took me out by the spirit of Adonai and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live again?" And I replied, "O Lord Adonai, only You know." And he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the words of Adonai. Thus said the Lord Adonai Elohim to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again."[11]

In a lecture describing conditions at Bergen-Belsen when the camp was liberated, Lieutenant Colonel M.W. Gonin, the British officer who commanded the 11th Light Field Ambulance during the camp's liberation, said that there were "at least 20,000 sick suffering from the most virulent diseases known to man, all of whom required urgent hospital

treatment and 30,000 men and women who might die if they were not treated, but who certainly would die if they were not fed and removed from the horror camp. What we had not got was nurses, doctors, beds, bedding, clothes, drugs, dressings, thermometers, bedpans or any of the essentials of medical treatment, and worst of all, no common language.[12]

Within a few days following the liberation, Brigadier H. L. Glyn-Hughes, the Deputy Director of Medical Services of the British Army of the Rhine, appointed my mother, a not yet 33-year-old Jewish dentist from Sosnowiec, Poland, who had studied medicine in France, to organize and head a group of doctors and nurses among the survivors to help care for the camp's thousands of critically ill inmates. My mother's parents and first husband had all been gassed at Auschwitz-Birkenau together with her son, Benjamin, and she herself had spent more than 15 months there before being sent to Belsen in November 1944. For weeks on end, my mother and her team of 28 doctors and 620 other female and male volunteers, only a few of whom were trained nurses, worked round the clock with the military doctors to try to save as many of the survivors as possible. Despite their desperate efforts — it was not until 11 May 1945, that the daily death rate fell below 100 — the Holocaust claimed 13,944 additional victims during the two months after the liberation.

"Ezekiel continued, And He said to me, "O son of man, these bones are the whole House of Israel." They say, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, we are doomed." Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: "Thus said the Lord Adonai: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the Land of Israel . . . . I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil."[13]

This intersection of history with Biblical prophecy helps explain and define who we are. The end of the war found the survivors alone, mostly abandoned, forced to face a grim reality. "For the greater part of the liberated Jews of Bergen-Belsen," my mother recalled many years later, "there was no ecstasy, no joy at our liberation. We had lost our families, our homes. We had no place to go, nobody to hug, nobody who was waiting for us, anywhere. We had been liberated from death and from the fear of death, but we were not free from the fear of life."[14]

One of the most incomprehensible aspects of our parents' and grandparents' survival was their inner strength, their ability for the most part to look toward the future. They instinctively understood that they could not wallow in anguish or despair. My friend, Romana Primus, who was also born in the Belsen DP camp, tells the story of how, shortly after his liberation there, her father, Sigmund Strochlitz, borrowed a motorcycle and took her mother for a ride. They rode without a destination, purely for joy, to celebrate their freedom.

And so faith and romance were allowed to blossom again after ghettos, gas chambers, crematoria, and mass-graves, but without blinders, without illusions. My parents met several weeks after their liberation and fell in love, but they did not marry until more than a year later. It was too soon, their wounds were still too open, too raw. As my mother told the story, one evening shortly after they had met, my father took her back to her room and stayed. In the late spring and summer of 1945, when survivors in the Belsen DP camp told my father that they wanted to get married, he counseled them to wait. "Why don't you live together for a while," he said, "to see whether you really

have enough in common to build a future together, to create a new family, or whether you are just looking for human companionship, for some warmth to ease your loneliness."[15]

My mother died hours after the end of Rosh Hashanah in 1997. Six months later, I took our daughter, Jodi, then a college sophomore, to Poland for the first time. She and my mother had been very close and had spent a great deal of time together as Jodi was growing up. We went to Warsaw and Krakow, and then to Auschwitz. It was a gray day, with a constant drizzle. I showed Jodi Block 11 at Auschwitz, the death block where my father was tortured for months, and then we went to Birkenau. We walked in silence past the decaying wooden barracks. After 15 or 20 minutes, Jodi turned to me and said, "You know, it looks exactly the way Dassah [which is what she called my mother, Hadassah] described it." I realized that a transfer of memory had taken place. My daughter, born 33 years after the Holocaust, had recognized Birkenau through my mother's eyes, through my mother's memories, which Jodi had absorbed into her consciousness.

The following year, in June of 1999, Azi Schwartz, a 17-year old Israeli, stood outside Block 24 at Birkenau and opened a letter from his grandmother who had been deported there from the Slovak town of Dunaszerdahely in July of 1944. "Did you see my beautiful black braids?" she wrote. "My dad's tefillin? Did you see my mom's wig? Did you see their shoes? We arrived to Auschwitz on the last transport. My wounds will never heal. Now you know why I often cry, especially on Friday nights and on holidays. I was fifteen years old when my life changed."

At the Passover Seder we recite, Be-chol dor vador chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo ke-ilu hu yatza mi-mitzrayim – In each generation, it is incumbent on each of us to see ourselves as if we had come out of Egypt.

We have been entrusted with a precious and fragile inheritance. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, each of us, and our children and our children's children, must also see ourselves as if we had emerged from Auschwitz, Belsen, and all the other camps and ghettos, the forests and secret hiding places of Nazi Europe. And to do so, we, and our children, and our children's children, must discover the past by immersing ourselves as best we can in our parents' and grandparents' memories until they become a part of us.

Azi Schwarz, now the Cantor of Manhattan's Park Avenue Synagogue, is deeply conscious of his identity as the grandson of Holocaust survivors. Whenever he prays, he explains, and especially when he evokes the memory of the victims of the Shoah in the El Maleh Rachamim memorial prayer, he sees in his mind "the letter my grandmother gave me with instructions to open and read it while standing outside her barrack at Auschwitz. I see the number on my grandfather's arm. I remember all the murdered composers and singers, all the melodies that were destroyed. I also hear the sound of sirens during an air raid. I think of my father who was wounded escaping from a burning tank during the Yom Kippur War. I feel the tears of the mother of a friend who was killed defending the State of Israel."

We are indeed the bridge between two worlds. My twin grandchildren are almost two and a half years old. Some day, I will tell them about Benjamin so that he may become a lasting presence in their lives. And my wife, Jeanie, will tell them about her grandfather, Joshua Bloch, who was shot by the Germans on August 2, 1941, together with other leaders of the Jewish community in the Belarussian town of Ivie. Others will do likewise for grandparents,

great-grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts who were gassed, or starved in a ghetto, or succumbed to typhus in a concentration camp, or were betrayed by their Christian neighbors.

We who are haunted by the past must now pass on our legacy of ghosts.

About the author

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Notes:

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11. Ezekiel, 37:1-6

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