

70 Years after Auschwitz: What Have We Learned from Holocaust Survivors, and from History?

by
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This year marks the 70th year since the end of World War II and the “War Within a War” that we know as the Holocaust. The Holocaust, the period of history that encompassed the years 1933-1945, was the attempt on the part of the Nazis and their many sympathizers and collaborators throughout Europe to systematically murder every Jew on the continent using all of the advanced legal, economic and technological means in existence at the time. Millions of bystanders, for a variety of reasons, inadvertently or intentionally contributed to the tragedy that resulted in the murder of over 6 million Jews and many millions of others in what most historians call the “seminal event of the 20th Century”. Though relatively few, the courage of those known as “upstanders” succeeded in saving the lives of some who would otherwise have been condemned to death, an important commentary on the human potential to choose good over evil, even at great risk to themselves. Some of these are acknowledged in the “Garden of the Righteous” at Yad Vashem, Israel’s memorial to the victims of The Holocaust in Jerusalem.

When the war ended and the thousands of concentration, work, and death camps that remained were liberated by the Allied forces, the world was forced to come to grips with the horrendous results of unchecked hatred and bigotry. Even General Dwight D. Eisenhower was shocked to the core by his first-hand observation of a liberated death camp, and ordered journalists to record for history the human degradation and devastation to assure future generations would remember what happened there. Ike knew that time has a way of softening the impact of gross human tragedy, or worse, allowing people to even deny that such tragedies occurred. He also knew that those who survived this tragedy would someday not be around to give first-hand testimony of what happened.

During my career, I devoted considerable time to the study of the Holocaust, teaching and writing about it and, with many dedicated colleagues including Harry Furman, Ken Tubertini from Vineland High School, and Edwin Reynolds from Teaneck High School, and with the steadfast and enlightened support of the N.J. Commission on Holocaust Education and its Executive Director, Dr. Paul B. Winkler, and many others, training educators throughout the United States and around the world in the ways to teach this important subject in classrooms. A profound part of our experience was meeting and learning from hundreds of those who survived the Holocaust. Over the years, many Holocaust Survivors have chosen to share their experiences with students and teachers, often enduring the pain of remembrance in order

that others could learn. In Vineland, NJ, the home of over 200 families of Holocaust Survivors, a small group of very courageous Survivors responded to our invitations to share their experiences with students at Vineland High School beginning in the mid-1970's. At that time, for a variety of reasons, very few Survivors spoke publicly, and for some even privately, about the Holocaust: language barriers, lack of confidence, concern that their stories would not be believed, and their unwillingness to burden their own children with the horror of their past, were among the factors that affected Survivors' decisions.

Nationally, virtually no one was speaking or teaching about the Holocaust in the public schools, nor was there much mention of it in the media. However, local Survivors such as Morris Indyg, Helen Finkelstein, Sol Finkelstein, Myer Glick (and later, Myer's wife Nella) and others, were among the first to come forward, and their interactions with our students had an impact that transcended anything that could be learned from textbooks. Since that time, many Survivors have spoken publicly, written their memoirs, and/or have given formal video testimony that will help to ensure the survival of their eye-witness accounts.

What have we learned from Holocaust Survivors? What did they endure? How were their lives changed? How did the Holocaust experience affect their faith? What effect did it have on their trust of others, or of governments? What did they have to do to survive? How did they recover and reconstitute their lives after the Holocaust?

What have we learned from Holocaust Survivors, and what did Holocaust Survivors endure? First of all, we have learned that not all Holocaust Survivors had the same experiences. Some were children, such as friend Maud Dahme, a member of the N.J. Commission on Holocaust Education, whose experience of being hidden by a Christian family in The Netherlands at great risk to themselves is captured in the NJN Public Television Documentary "*The Hidden Child*;" some endured the wrath of the concentration and death camps; others escaped into the woods, and still others to areas outside the reach of the Nazis. Virtually all experienced the loss of freedoms that were guaranteed to all citizens in their respective countries. For example, in Germany beginning in 1936, the Nuremberg Laws went into effect that stripped Jews of most rights that affected their businesses, careers, marriage rights, rights to assemble, vote, formal education, etc. Gradually, the Nazi philosophy of racial anti-Semitism, the mistaken belief that Jews constituted a separate, and inferior, race, was used to further isolate them from the rest of society.

Many of the economic and political ills that followed World War I were blamed on the Jews, and the Nazi propaganda machine encouraged people to turn against their Jewish neighbors and friends. German Jews, most of whose families had lived in Germany for generations, and who felt secure in one of the most highly educated and culturally advanced countries in the world, became outcasts in their own land. While some left Germany when the signs of trouble emerged in the mid-late 1930's, most had faith that "this too shall pass," as had numerous relatively temporary outbursts against them in the past. Holocaust Survivors tell us of the pain they endured as they experienced the gradual loss of their way of life, their feelings of abandonment by their friends and neighbors, the destruction of their businesses and desecration of their places of worship, and a systematic process that was designed to

dehumanize and eventually kill them. "Why?" was a question that many asked then, and still ask today. Gradually, the Jews were ordered to leave their homes and report to centers to be transported to "the East" where, they were told, they would be "resettled." Those who resisted were often shot on the spot or removed from their families and dealt with harshly.

Jews in Eastern Europe became targets as the Nazis invaded their countries, often isolated in ghettos of cities where they were held under inhumane conditions, where they saw many die of disease or starvation. Gradually, the ghettos of Eastern Europe were "liquidated," meaning the Jews were rounded up and taken to the various work, concentration and death camps, where they were either immediately gassed, then burned in the crematoria, or became slave laborers in the nearby Nazi-controlled industries. Survivors talk about the constant stench of burning bodies and the unsanitary conditions of the camps, the ever-present lice that tormented them day and night, the fellow-humans who descended into hopelessness and committed suicide, and those who were determined to bear any burden in order to survive. The beatings, the interminable roll calls standing in the rain, snow and mud left indelible scars on their memories. Near-starvation decimated the lives of those in the camps, until many succumbed to its effects. The skeletal bodies of the dead found in the concentration and death camps at the war's end, and the condition of the "walking dead" who survived, are vivid testimony to the inhumane treatment at the hands of the Nazi perpetrators. Survivors live with the memories of being separated from their loved ones and, in so many cases, never seeing them again.

A number of Survivors tell of the loneliness they experienced after learning that they were the only surviving members of their families, or the fruitless searches after the war to find members of their families. A good friend, Holocaust survivor Margit Feldman, wrote in her memoir, *Margit: A Teenager's Journey Through the Holocaust and Beyond*, "From the region of Zemplen Megye [Hungary] fifteen thousand Jews were deported, and only two hundred and fifty survived. From my own family, sixty-eight were deported, and only two survived." These are but a few of the horrible experiences shared with us by Survivors over our years of interaction with them.

How did the experience of the Holocaust affect the faith of those who survived? Survivors' responses to this question have been very varied. For some, their faith remained sustained in spite of the incredible atrocities and injustices they witnessed and endured. One Survivor told me "Without my faith, I would have succumbed to complete hopelessness and would not have survived. My own survival and that of others reinforced my religious faith." A number of others shared their disillusionment with their religious faith, often asking, "Where is my God?" or "How could God allow this to happen?" While most Survivors we have met reconciled their feelings regarding the importance of their faith, in spite of their experiences, a few have abandoned the faith that they believe abandoned them. Some remained committed to the preservation of Judaism as an organized faith...without God. The role of God, and religious faith in general, in our lives shall remain a question debated by intelligent people forever. It is not difficult to understand why Holocaust Survivors differ in their interpretations of how their faith either sustained them, or abandoned them during the darkest moments of their lives.

What did Holocaust Survivors have to do to survive? Faced with daily threats on their lives, and gradually aware of the intention of the Nazis and their collaborators throughout Europe, Survivors have

spoken about how they survived the Holocaust experience. Most indicated that they did whatever they had to do to live another day. Some used their cunning to “engineer” themselves into “jobs” that temporarily granted them some assurance of safety. They attempted to make themselves as indispensable to the Nazi officials as possible. In some cases, survival was achieved by sheer luck, being in the right place at the right time, or not being in the wrong place. One Survivor shared with me his experience of standing for a roll call for many hours after someone in his barracks stole some food. When no one was willing to identify the alleged thief, the Nazi officer began to shoot individuals one at a time until someone came forth. The first person shot was right next to him...a totally random decision by the officer. “It could have been me,” the Survivor lamented.

Doing what they were ordered to do undoubtedly enabled many to survive, as those who chose to challenge the authority of the Nazi guards or officials were summarily executed, usually in the presence of other prisoners. Many Survivors recall how, in spite of Nazi prohibitions, they gathered in their barracks to pray to their God, to share their thoughts and feelings and to comfort one another. In a few cases, revolts were planned, as was the case in the Sobibor death camp in Poland, as related by one of the few remaining Survivors of that successful revolt, Esther Terner Raab, of Vineland, New Jersey, whose experience is the subject of the poignant play by Richard Rashke, “Dear Esther.” Some Survivors, such as Vera Herman Goodkin of New Jersey, were fortunate to have been among thousands saved through the efforts of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg.

What effect did it have on Survivors’ trust of others, or of governments? Virtually all Survivors shared with us their initial feelings of distrust of others, and disillusionment with governments, feelings that most have resolved to some degree in the years since the Holocaust. German Jewish Survivors we have met tell of the terrible feelings of seeing long-time friends and neighbors turn against them as the roundup of Jews began; the disillusionment with those same close friends and neighbors who became bystanders to their plight; the sense of betrayal by the country in which their families had lived for many generations, and in many cases, fathers and grandfathers who fought in the German Army during World War I.

As a young boy, I served newspapers to a number of Holocaust Survivors who relocated to Vineland, N.J. following World War II. I vividly recall asking my father about these customers, some of whom had numbers tattooed on their forearms, some of whom always had their curtains drawn or shades closed on the windows of their homes. When I knocked on their doors to collect delivery fees each week, it was not unusual for someone to briefly pull back a drape or raise a curtain to see who was at the door. I felt uncomfortable, as if I was being treated with suspicion. My father said to me, “Rich, these are Jewish refugees who were in concentration camps, some of whom lost many members of their families. Be understanding of why they might be suspicious of others.” Most Survivors gradually became more trusting of their new neighbors and their new country, and have raised their new families here and have thrived. One Survivor, talking about her children and grandchildren, all born in the United States, spoke of them as “My revenge against Hitler.”

How did Holocaust Survivors recover and reconstitute their lives after the Holocaust? Total “recovery” from the Holocaust experience may never be possible. Survivors have spoken about nightmares that

continue to jar them awake at night; some shared photographs of family members who did not survive, with pain palpable in their faces; some cannot forgive those who perpetrated the dehumanization and murder of their people, their families, their friends; some continue to wonder whether the world could have done more to help them and end the tragedy sooner; some ask how countries of the world, including the United States, could have harbored former Nazis after the war. Thus, “recovery” must always be a loose term when speaking of Holocaust Survivors. Most would agree that complete recovery is an impossibility.

Most Survivors, somehow, were able to gradually grapple with the realities that faced them, and began the long process of reconstituting their lives. Most of those who lost spouses and family members during the Holocaust eventually remarried and began new families. All Survivors we have met recounted how they had to work hard, sometimes at jobs that did not match their previous lines of work, in order to support themselves and their families. Some received grants to enter the field of agriculture. In Vineland, N.J. many Survivors became chicken farmers. My friend Harry Furman’s father, Morris, a survivor of Auschwitz, was asked by Harry why he went into the chicken business. His dad, who was born in Lithuania and was a successful businessman before the Holocaust, replied “It was simple. I didn’t have to know English to speak to the chickens. They understood Yiddish perfectly well.” Most leaned on their faith, which was inextricably connected to their culture, to help them reshape their lives and preserve their connection to other Jews. Education is a powerful Jewish value, central to their faith. Thus, most Jewish Survivors made the education of their children a top priority. They sacrificed to enable their children to succeed in life. When you speak to Holocaust Survivors about their children and grandchildren, it is little wonder that they speak with pride about the quality of their education and the professions that are represented among them. Truly, some feel it was evidence that “Hitler did not succeed.” The success of their children and grandchildren provides some solace, some hope, some sense of satisfaction that the tragedy of the Holocaust did not prevent the continuation of linkages in their human family.

While modern-day deniers of the Holocaust continue their attempts to convince us that the Holocaust did not occur, or that the actual numbers of Jews killed in the gas chambers and killing fields of Europe were extremely low, or that the Holocaust was a figment of Jewish propaganda, fortunately for all of us, the historical record stands as the guardian of truth. The eye-witnesses to the tragedy, both Jewish and non-Jewish, have told and recorded their testimonies for posterity. The Germans themselves were so diligent in their attention to detail that their own millions of photographs and documents serve as indictments of their attempt to murder every Jew (and other scapegoats as well) in Europe. Thus, we know much of what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust. It was a reality, perhaps the lowest point in human history, when a legal government of one of the most civilized countries of the world used the most advanced technology, legal and educational systems, transportation network, scientific knowledge, and the skills of numerous professions, to plan and murder what turned out to be over 6 million Jews of Europe, and millions of others for a variety of reasons.

History is supposed to teach us to learn from our mistakes. George Santayana once stated, “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.” While the Holocaust remains as the seminal event of the 20th century, and perhaps the most horrific genocide in human history, we all know that elements

that brought on the Holocaust can still be found in our contemporary world: prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, dehumanization, apathy, and genocide.....Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, Darfur, Nigeria, Serbia, The current outrageous murderous rampage of ISIS, whose selective distortion and abuse of the Islamic faith embodies the seeds of yet another genocide, should concern us all.

Pastor Martin Niemoller, a founder of the Confessing Church in Germany, who was arrested and sent to a concentration camp by the Nazis for his anti-Nazi beliefs , warned humanity about the predictable results of being silent bystanders to acts of inhumanity. He said,

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak up because I was not a Communist. They came for the union leaders, and I did not speak up because I was not a union leader. They came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak up for me.

One wonders whether our attention to genocide only becomes focused when WE or OURS become the victims of its wrath...too late to save ourselves and those we love. Let's hope not. How will the world respond to the current threat posed by ISIS? Let's hope we have finally learned from history.

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