

CONVERSATIONS THAT CONTINUE LONG AFTER THEY ARE OVER: THE IMPACT OF THE RESEARCH ON THE RESEARCHER

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This narrative explores variant ways a phenomenological study involving eight adult child survivors of the Holocaust contributed to significant shifts in the researcher's worldview, and to her identities as a social work practitioner and educator, mother, and member of a religious and cultural community. In addition to briefly summarizing the study process and findings, the author further considers the life lessons taught to her by the eight participants. These lessons include being present in one's own life, relational resilience, the sustaining and restorative potential of kinship bonds, and commitment to social activism, humility, and gratitude. A core lesson is the fundamental belief that there is good in others and in the world, despite continued evidence to the contrary.

* Participant names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

I completed and defended my doctoral dissertation in December 2004. For my dissertation I interviewed eight adults who survived the Nazi Holocaust as children. Although five years have passed since I conducted those interviews, the conversations remain very much alive in me, as do many of the lessons about life, loss, love, family, and kinship bonds, resourcefulness, and renewal that these seven women and one man taught me. Rarely does a day pass when I do not think of something or react to something in my life, in my community, or to the news of the world that does not somehow connect back to them. I am aware on an almost daily basis that the conversations we had, and what I learned from them, continue to reverberate in my personal and professional lives. These lessons are important to me as a social worker, but resonate most deeply with me as a Jew. Bearing witness to the stories of Holocaust survivors and ensuring that these stories do not disappear is both a privilege and a communal obligation. Each time I think of my respondents, recall something that they shared with me, or refer to them in written work or in the classroom, I feel that I am consciously preserving their stories so that they do not disappear as the aging survivor community dwindles.

Doing this research changed me. It catalyzed palpable shifts in my worldview and in the many selves that are constitutive of me:

the mother, the educator, the socially conscious clinical social worker, the Jew, and the woman. It forced me to challenge many of my own assumptions about the ways in which I view others, and about the world I live in. Wiersma (1992) maintains, "The stories a person tells about his or her life are recognized to be not only expressive but formative as well...these stories interpret our experience and shape our lives" (p. 195). My dissertation was a collection of life stories that were entrusted to me, which I shared with others. In doing so, I re-authored aspects of my own personal narrative. For the first time in my life, my Jewish identity was given freedom for open expression in a professional sphere. To do this research, it was necessary for me to fully inhabit and give voice to my Jewish identity. Though neither a survivor nor a descendant of survivors, I strongly feel that being Jewish gave me a kind of "insider" status that contributed to my respondents' willingness to share their very personal and powerful stories with me. Moreover, I believe that being self-identified as a Jew gave my research—the interviews and the written product—greater transparency and authenticity. This added to the credibility of the study from a scholarly perspective, but created deeper personal meaning for me. In the years since I concluded the study and defended my dissertation, these conversations continue within me, though the tape recorder was turned off years ago.



I learned much from *Alisa, Dzidzia, Ena, Eva, Fred, Monique, Jutka, and Liane. Most importantly, because of what they taught me, I view people with a more respectful and strengths-oriented lens. I am less apt to partialize and individualize their problems, and more able to organically contextualize people's lives—taking into consideration the profound and differential impact that racism, oppression, socioeconomic disadvantage, and marginalization has had on their lives. This has had a lasting impact on my interpersonal relationships, my clinical practice, and the ways in which I teach social work students. Additionally, though their stories were often painful and always poignant, I experienced a renewed sense of faith in the capacities that human beings have to endure tremendous hardships and create lives that are full of meaning, while living and coping with the remnants of traumatic pasts. These were unanticipated gifts.

“Why Are You Doing This?”

Locating the Researcher

This journey began in the months preceding my written comprehensive exams which were due at the end of the second year of my doctoral course work. I was working in a psychiatric partial hospital at the time, as well as doing private practice. Day after day, and group after group, I noted the alarming prevalence of clients who had sustained physical and sexual abuse. I began to keep track of this data over a period of four months and estimated that 85% of my female clients were survivors of sexual abuse. Moreover, I was struck by the varying impact of these abuse histories on their mental health and functioning, relationships, and overall quality of life. Initially, I thought I'd launch a study that evaluated the efficacy of doing short-term group treatment with survivors of sexual abuse in a partial hospital setting. Unfortunately, a managed care company purchased the hospital, and service delivery was altered by the dictates of new management. I was, however, left with the pressing question: “Why are some of my clients who were trauma survivors able to cope reasonably well most

of the time, despite their trauma, and others are essentially paralyzed by it?”

It was also around this time that a documentary about an adolescent survivor of the Holocaust won an Academy Award. I saw the film and read the book upon which the film was based. The author survived forced labor and deportation to a death camp where she nearly died of typhus and starvation. After liberation, she married and created a thriving family. She was candid about the lasting effects that the war had had on her, while retaining a fundamental vivacity and optimism that intrigued me. I found myself pondering the question: “How did she do this after losing most of her family in the death camps, after having witnessed the atrocities committed in the camps, and after having almost died herself in Auschwitz?” From these curiosities, my study was born.

The dissertation phase of my doctorate took seven years, and in the interim, colleagues, child survivors, mentors, and family members frequently asked me why I chose this particular topic. In October of 1996, I met with Elie Wiesel, (Nobel Prize-winning author and survivor, known for his memoir *Night*) at his Boston University office to discuss my proposal, and this was one of the first questions that he asked me. At that point, I was not entirely sure why I was drawn to this work. Perhaps this sounds contrived, but I felt like I almost had to do it. I felt driven to do it. When I shared this with others, most assumed that I was either the child or grandchild of a child survivor, but I am neither. In fact, I have no known Holocaust survivors in my family. The Holocaust, however, has resided in my consciousness since childhood. I learned about it in religious school and have vivid memories of reading Holocaust memoirs during my adolescence. I visited Yad Veshem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem, when I was thirteen, and still recall how terrified I was of the artifacts and imagery displayed there. Yet I always sought to learn more about it even when I was fearful. Perhaps there is a connection between my own sense of luck and privilege, and the fear that these kinds of events could happen to me and to my loved ones. Although unlikely, the Holocaust

and the numerous cases of communal genocide that have happened around the world in the sixty years since liberation have demonstrated that it is possible.

In retrospect, of all the possible research choices I had heretofore considered, this topic was the one I found most compelling. I knew that I could remain invested in this work over the long haul and that I might be able to make some kind of a contribution to the Jewish community. Indeed, at the start of the process, this mattered more to me than advancing knowledge and understanding within my profession. I also thought that this research would allow me to integrate and utilize different aspects of my identity: as a clinician interested in and experienced with trauma work and wanting to expand my knowledge base, and as a Jew who has always been involved with and connected to a cultural, ethnic, and spiritual community.

Holocaust Literature

Historically there has been a tension in clinical Holocaust literature about survivors' post-war lives, and the literature broad and divided with regard to the extent and depth of the long-term effects associated with the Holocaust (Bar-On, et al. 1998). In an effort to narrow the field, I consulted with experts—those whose work I had read, and those who had provided direct services to child survivors in their clinical work. Based on their recommendations, I began a three-month period of total literary immersion and intensive study. I read articles, books, memoirs, and historical treatises and viewed documentaries. Child survivors' experiences during and after the Holocaust were noticeably under-represented in the literature. I became curious about the impact of those experiences on their lives and the meaning, if any, that they made of those experiences.

The literature was divided into two distinct themes. Some literature claimed that survivors managed to do quite well in spite of their traumatic experiences and were successful in most aspects of their lives. Other literature argued that the effects of the Holocaust on survivors caused many to suffer from lifelong depression, anxiety, attachment disturbances,

marital difficulties, and social withdrawal (Bar-on, et al. 1998).

Literature specific to child survivors initially represented them as a homogeneous group thwarted by chronic and persistent psychopathology, but over the last decade there have been shifts towards a more strengths-based approach. Some studies countered this image by showcasing child survivors' resilience, professional achievements (particularly in the helping professions, medicine, and sciences), and commitment to social justice and activism (Lomranz, 2000; Suedfeld, 1996, 1998, 2001).

As I became more familiar with the literature, it occurred to me that the voices of the survivors themselves were glaringly absent from most Holocaust studies. Their thoughts, feelings, and opinions were rarely prominently featured. As a researcher, I knew that this represented a knowledge gap. My reaction to this as a Jew, however, was more visceral. Though I understood that clinicians and researchers had made important contributions to further collective understanding of the impact of the Holocaust on survivors, those under study had become the subjects of an ongoing and intense dialectic, but were often excluded from it. So, in an effort to rectify this I sought to create a study that would enable child survivors to speak for themselves, and allow their words to inform my emerging understanding. I felt that this was my responsibility as a Jewish social work researcher, and this foundational principal ultimately governed my methodological choices.

The Research

The central research question that framed this study was: How do adult child survivors of the Holocaust describe their experiences and relate them to their post-war lives?

Under the aegis of an extremely sensitive and attuned chair and second reader who understood how central my religious and cultural identity was to me, I decided to do a phenomenological study that employed grounded theory methods of data collection and analysis, and they wholeheartedly supported this. Because phenomenological

research is about the impact of lived experience and the meanings that people make of those experiences, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with four standard questions and a series of probes. The aim was to give respondents latitude to speak about what was most important to them and to render a "...deeper and richer portrait" (Suedfeld, 1996, p. 169) that might better demonstrate their strengths and coping techniques as well as vulnerabilities and personal challenges (Suedfeld, 1996).

As the conceptual framework and methodology took shape, I hoped that my dissertation and my findings might illuminate the importance of child survivors' experiences as they related to the Holocaust and the wellspring of emotional and practical knowledge they had to impart to the greater human community.



Sample Characteristics and Data Collection

In this study, child survivors were defined as adults who were between birth and thirteen years of age from 1933 to 1945 and living in any Nazi-occupied territory. This purposive, non-probability sample consisted of eight self-selected respondents identified primarily through telephone and email referrals.

Respondents had to meet the inclusionary criteria of being Jewish and born into any Nazi-occupied territory between 1933, the year Hitler ascended to the position of Reich Chancellor, and 1945, the year of European liberation. I chose to focus on this particular age group because it was under-represented in Holocaust research and literature.

Data sources included the audiotapes and transcripts from initial and follow-up interviews. There were twelve interviews in all: eight interviews and four debriefs. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. Additional data sources included respondent fact sheets (detailed facts, dates, demographic information, and identified themes from each interview), respondent time lines, which helped me visualize each life story and identify themes, and story summaries (a two-page synopsis of each life story). These summaries became the basis for later codes and thematic categories.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data analysis began with interview transcription and occurred through a series of open and selective coding passes, memos, and thematic content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The respondents shared several similarities that added to their exceptionality. They were close in age, having been born between 1934 and 1937. Seven came from educated, upper-middle-class families who lived in cosmopolitan European cities prior to Nazi invasion. Six spent the war years with one or both parents and seven had at least one surviving parent after liberation. Only one respondent was orphaned during the war. Prior to Nazi invasion, their parents enjoyed membership in vocations related to commerce and medicine; most were highly educated and affluent. Some of their parents were respected and prominent citizens of the communities in which they lived.

Each respondent graduated from college. Four held Masters Degrees; two earned their doctorates; and one became a physician. Seven were married with children, and five had grandchildren. Six expressed interest and involvement in organized social action efforts. Seven identified themselves as child survivors; five claimed active participation in the Jewish community, belonged to a synagogue, or both.

These eight individuals were anything but one dimensional. They were ordinary and extraordinary. They were not super heroes, but were special. They were complicated. They were audacious and fragile. They were curious and intellectually gifted. They were guarded and self-protective, yet generous, kind, and hospitable. Among them were avid gourmards, swimmers, gardeners, balletomanes, skiers, lovers of music, opera, and ballroom dancing, voracious readers, and filmgoers. As a group, they were devoted to their professions, their families, and their friends. And, as a group they were committed to their physical and emotional self-care and the well being of others. They taught me that suffering does not summarily result in loss of faith or hope, and that oppression does not automatically condemn one to a lifetime of isolation or inexorable cynicism. At a time when

I myself have felt disenchanted with the human community, mistrustful of and betrayed by government, they taught me the value of not losing sight of the good that continues to live on in the world.

This study also found that these eight child survivors of the Holocaust survived the war because they were fortunate to have remained in connection with significant others who cared for and protected them throughout the war. These critical relationships, consisting of parents, uncles, elder siblings, and gentile rescuers, enabled these survivors as children to not feel alone in the world, provided some form of companionship or kinship, and met instrumental needs. Moreover, by bearing witness to others taking actions to safeguard their lives and provide for them, these respondents internalized a sense of innate worth that may have helped them to retain their basic assumptive worlds (a belief that there is good in the world, that the world makes sense, and that they have inherent value as human beings) and cultivate their resilience (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Walsh, 2003). Through these empathic, often nurturing, life-sustaining attachments, the eight respondents in my study evolved into well-educated, professionally successful, compassionate adults who believed in the inherent goodness of others and sought to do good in the world through their respective professions and the promotion of social justice.

Each child survivor in this study spent between one and four years in a hostile, damaged world. Each experienced the feeling of being hunted by a nefarious presence that sought his or her total destruction. Their survival is miraculous. Yet, through kinship and connections, and lives devoted to self-knowledge, self-care, and altruism, all of them attempted to repair the same world that had tried to erase them from it.

Each respondent attributed his or her survival to "luck," or at least one providential event that defied logic but favorably altered his or her situation. For some, luck appeared in the form of a careless border guard, a sympathetic policeman, a compassionate stationmaster; surviving hunger, a warning of impending danger, or making it to the right place at the right time. Sometimes luck was a

function of access to resources and connections with the people who made procuring resources possible. Or, it was the byproduct of ingenuity and courage—successfully bargaining with the Gestapo to obtain food or negotiate the removal of names from a deportation list.

What was most surprising to me about the findings was that when I asked each respondent how present the Holocaust was in his or her daily life, each reported that it was not. Collectively, they told me that the past had its place and usually remained there. Only in times of stress, like the attacks of September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, a spate of suicide bombs exploding in Israeli neighborhoods, or extreme familial crises, did the past infiltrate the present in any negative or substantive way. And, when it did, each had an exquisitely developed repertoire of coping strategies that helped them get through vulnerable times.

Personal Transformations and Lessons Learned

Earlier I stated that this research changed me. As I think back on the experience, doing this work as a Jew triggered personal and professional transformations and altered my worldview. Through my conversations with my respondents and by listening to their stories over and over again, I learned that I must strive to be present in my own life, to consciously cherish simple moments, and to tell loved ones how I feel about them in the moment because once that moment is gone, it can never be reclaimed. I learned that safety and security are gifts, and that I must never take my loved ones and my privileges for granted.

I wish to reflect upon one internal process that bears mentioning and exemplifies these lessons more clearly. As previously stated, I spent three months at the start of my work immersing myself in the Holocaust. In addition to the literature, I watched films, went to Holocaust art exhibits, and visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., to walk through the exhibits and do some archival research. I visited Yad Veshem in Jerusalem and met with an archivist there as well. A strange and disturbing thing occurred. While doing this research, life went

on. I cared for my children. I went to movies. I taught classes and saw clients in my practice. I spent time with friends and family. I went shopping. I lived my life. But often, while living in the present, my thoughts were in the Holocaust. This made me look at the people around me differently, and it made me feel different as a mother. I found myself wondering who amongst my non-Jewish friends would help me or hide my children if our lives were threatened? I found myself wondering if I had been living in Europe during Nazi occupation, would our neighbors have betrayed us to the Gestapo. My third reader, Dr. Bernice Lerner, referred to this as living a "double life."

Another example of living a "double life" occurred when I performed mental "selections" while standing on line at the supermarket or post office. I will explain what this means. Immediately upon arrival at a concentration or death camp, Jews and other prisoners were made to remove their clothes, line up, and run in front of the Camp Commandant and a camp doctor. One of these officials would determine, based on age, gender, and appearance of health, who would be conscripted for forced labor and who would be put to immediate death. This was known as selection. I learned early in the process that because I had small children, I would have been separated from them as soon as we disembarked from the cattle car that delivered us to the camp. One of two additional scenarios would have happened: we would have been put to death together, or my children would have been taken from me and put to death upon arrival at a camp, while I remained alive as long as I could contribute to the slave labor force.

In order to do this research, daily I had to confront and live with that which terrifies a mother most: separation from her children, the powerlessness to protect her children, and the death of her children. Most child survivors' experiences entailed forced separations. Mothers had to leave their children in the care of strangers with the hope of saving their lives. Mothers had to put their children on trains that would take them to foreign countries and hopefully out of harm's way. Children

witnessed their mothers' deaths. Mothers witnessed the torture and murder of their own children. Children said goodbye to mothers and fathers whom they would never see again.

I gave birth to my two children while doing this work, and I often thought of them as I was reading, interviewing, or writing my dissertation. Every day for years I lived in the stories of people who had endured these kinds of separations and losses. These stories and the images that they conjured frightened me, made me anxious, and gave me nightmares. I often spoke about this with my dissertation committee, who supported and normalized these reactions. My wonderfully sensitive third reader, Bernice, who had written her dissertation on child survivors as well, told me that living a "double life" was necessary. One had to try to find a way to fathom all that is unfathomable about the Holocaust. Somehow, after she told me this, I did not feel the need to do this as often and eventually stopped. But even now, years later, I still catch myself starting to "select" while on a line in a public place.



I conclude this narrative by acknowledging my eight respondents and a few of the ways in which I was moved by their sagacity:

I wish to thank Alisa, Dzidzia, Ena, Eva, Fred, Monique, Jutka, and Liane. Without your courage, willingness to teach, and generosity of spirit and time, this study would not have been possible. I learned so much from each of you and my life has been enriched by all of you. From you I have learned humility and gratitude. I believe that I take less for granted now than before I did this study. And I am aware of my blessings in a way that I was not before (Grossman Leeman, 2004).

Coda

A few years ago on a sunny, summer day, I was in my backyard playing with my children who were very young at the time. It was a gorgeous day, and as my son ran through the sprinkler, I pushed my daughter on a swing. She giggled each time she headed towards the cerulean sky, and my son shrieked as he ran through the frigid water. I recall that day with great clarity, and the feeling that I was extremely blessed. I was able to play with my children in a safe and lovely setting, and I felt immense gratitude. I was also aware that in an instant, our lives could irrevocably change and it all could be taken away from me. I distinctly remember putting my hand on my heart and thanking G-d for my children's health, for our many privileges, and for being able to be with them in that simple and precious moment.

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