

## Explanations For Survival By Jewish Survivors Of The Holocaust

### Exploring The 'Hows' And The 'Whys' – The Means And The Meaning

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'I survived because I was young, and healthy, and strong, and could run fast. Because they used to come in the woods with the machine guns and you started running. If you were lucky, the bullet didn't hit you [...] I can't say that I was singled out [for survival]. I don't feel that. I was lucky. And most of the survivors, [if] you ask them how did they survive, unless they are really the frummet [most religious], they will tell you they were lucky.'

*Dorothy, child survivor*

'There is really nothing more to say, except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.'

*Toni Morrison, 'The Bluest Eye'*

What causal attributions do Jewish survivors of the Holocaust make to explain how they survived the Nazis' and other perpetrators' systematic torture and annihilation of European Jewry? Exploring survival statements – *how* an individual survived, i.e., in what manner or way, by what means – raises many questions that have only recently begun to be addressed by the psychological or Holocaust literature.<sup>1</sup> What can such causal attributions tell us about the way people process traumatic events? More than half a century after World War II, what sense has been made of the senseless, by those who have experienced the Holocaust first-hand? With many of the survivors now at the end of their lives, how do they look back on their experiences for 'final' understanding or resolution?

Attribution theory emphasizes beliefs and the interpretation of experience. The attribution process is often driven by a negative event, or an event of great significance.

When one encounters a sudden threat or change in one's environment, one will initiate a causal search in an effort to understand the reasons for that threat or change. Attributional search is thought to be initiated so as to understand, predict, and control threat, and hence may be especially functional early on in the adjustment process.<sup>2</sup>

The process of attributional search, then, can help an individual regain a sense of control, which is an important component of recovery from trauma.<sup>3</sup>

The function of attributions is to make the world a safer place by reducing uncertainty to a set of explanations or meanings for why things happen as they do. We then feel a sense of cognitive mastery over the world, as well as having the tools to handle specific events.<sup>4</sup>

What can causal attributions tell us about survivors' need for control in an uncontrollable, chaotic world? Further, are the attributions survivors make internal or external? Internal attributions include factors like intelligence and skill, facility with languages other than Yiddish that could enable one's survival, and having agency, or being 'an intentional doer selecting, constructing, and regulating one's own activity to realize certain outcomes'.<sup>5</sup> Decision-making abilities and perseverance are internal attributions survivors cite which can be placed under the larger category of agency. Self-efficacy, or a belief in oneself and one's abilities, is a related concept.

External attributions include factors unrelated to, or outside of the survivor's psychological makeup, behavior, or control, such as the help of others (although this, of course, can be seen as actively or passively solicited by a survivor), God, fate, luck, miracles, and random circumstance or chance. Included within the matrix of external attributions, as well, are personal characteristics that do not imply internal control, that just 'are', such as physical appearance, the ability to 'pass' as an 'Aryan', age, or good health.

Do survivors commonly give multiple attributions for survival, perhaps choosing different attributions for each 'moment of crisis',<sup>6</sup> even mixing the internal and external within one survival story – as Dorothy does in the opening quotation, citing her youth, general good health, ability to run fast, and luck, all within practically the same sentence? Or are survivors generally consistent in their attributions – consistently crediting God, for example, or consistently crediting their own agency? Are survivors more likely to credit their survival to some external factor or 'force', rather than credit themselves with their own survival? A recent study has found external attributions to be more commonly cited by survivors.<sup>7</sup> If that is the case, what could account for it? In contrast, for those survivors who offer internal attributions, and are therefore able to give themselves at least partial credit for surviving the Holocaust and a sense of agency in the war, what makes that possible for them? What do their attributions tell us about how well they have been able to either assimilate their traumatic experiences into their already existing belief systems about self and world, or else accommodate those belief systems to a new post-Holocaust reality?<sup>8</sup> What do they tell us about their sense of self-efficacy going into the war?

A related, but different research question is *why* an individual survived the Holocaust, for what reason or purpose – a topic that has not been adequately addressed in the literature. In other words, how do survivors answer the painful existential questions: What meaning have I found in my own survival? And: Why did I survive when so many of my family members and friends did not? The search for a reason, or the search for meaning is, according to Frankl, considered to be 'the primary motivational force in man'.<sup>9</sup> Quoting Nietzsche, Frankl believed that 'he who knows the "why" for his existence, will be able to bear almost any "how"'.<sup>10</sup> Thus Frankl felt that the need for an individual to have a meaning or purpose in life actually helped some Jews survive the concentration camps; those who did not have

such a purpose or reason to go on living were less likely to make it to the end of the war. The 'will to meaning' therefore has survival value for Frankl. It is 'the reaching out beyond ourselves for something other than ourselves. Under the same conditions, those who were oriented toward the future, toward a meaning that waited to be fulfilled – these persons were more likely to survive.'<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not Frankl was correct in this assertion, the psychological literature indicates that those who are able to find meaning after trauma cope better and are more resilient than those who do not. Those who continue to struggle for meaning, or who cannot find it, are considered somehow less adaptable and resilient.<sup>12</sup> This paper challenges that assumption. The struggle to find meaning in one's survival after enduring the senseless cruelty of the Nazis and their collaborators should be viewed as a strength and sign of resilience in and of itself, whether or not that struggle is ultimately 'resolved'.

In fact, the ability to find meaning in the wake of extremely traumatic events may be far more difficult than making a causal attribution for one's survival. The answers understandably involve an often intense, existential struggle. Indeed, 'since why is difficult to handle, [perhaps] one must take refuge in how'.<sup>13</sup> Still, some survivors can be very articulate and clear about the meaning or purpose they've found in their survival – for example, 'to tell the story so the Holocaust will never be repeated', or 'to continue the Jewish people and its traditions'. But others can be just as articulate in describing their very painful individual struggles to find meaning. We can learn much from both the struggle and its 'resolution'.

Two methodological notes are in order here. First, the 'hows' and the 'whys' of survival statements have been conflated in the handful of studies that have researched the topic of causal attributions. Eitinger, a survivor himself, conducted an early study, asking his respondents: 'Why did you survive?' and getting responses that were really answers to the question: 'How did you survive?' However, Eitinger was not looking for an answer to the 'why' question of existential meaning and purpose.<sup>14</sup> Conducting his own study a decade later, Matussek also asks his survivor respondents: 'Why did you survive?' and gets responses to the question: 'How did you survive?'<sup>15</sup> Schiff, in his doctoral dissertation, uses the interrogative words 'how' and 'why' interchangeably when both posing and analyzing questions about survival to his respondents – i.e., inconsistently asking, 'How did you survive?' and 'Why did you survive?' and then analyzing the responses by conflating the two, as if means and meaning were one and the same.<sup>16</sup> This can lead, of course, to ambiguous responses, as well as ambiguous results, as Suedfeld has also aptly noted and corrected in his own study.<sup>17</sup> 'How' and 'why' are two separate questions, and should not be confused and conflated. The means and the meaning are not the same. However, they may be inextricably linked.

Second, this study is not concerned with historical 'facts', nor with what outside observers may consider as the 'objective' reasons why and how someone survived the Nazi horrors. The 'objective' reasons for survival are perhaps ultimately unknowable. Rather, as Schiff also emphasizes,<sup>18</sup> this study is concerned with the belief systems of the survivors themselves, the meaning they put to their experiences, the narratives they tell, the words they choose, and the understandings they've come to, after many years of struggle.

The exploration of causal attributions of survivors was conducted using the data from the Transcending Trauma Project (TTP). The TTP is a qualitative study of the coping mechanisms Jewish survivors of the Holocaust used to rebuild their lives after the war.<sup>19</sup> Over one hundred survivors have been interviewed for the TTP, as well as their spouses, children, and grandchildren. The semi-structured interview protocol includes questions on: pre-war life, relationships, and belief systems; war trauma and loss; and post-war relationships, belief systems, and rebuilding, with an emphasis on coping and adaptation, on strengths rather than pathologies. The sample is a non-clinical, non-random, 'snowball' sample, which is not generalizable to the entire survivor population. However, it may be more representative of that population than many earlier, clinically-based studies which focused on pathology rather than resilience and adaptation.<sup>20</sup>

While most survivor respondents in the TTP sample for this study were not directly asked the questions: 'How did you survive the war?' and 'Why did you survive the war?' – and if they were, they were not asked the questions in any systematic or consistent manner – the survivors' interviews, which range in length from two to eighteen hours over several months, are full of causal attributions regarding survival. For a smaller percentage of respondents, statements of meaning and purpose after survival are expressed, as well.

A content analysis was conducted on 73 interviews in order to try to establish patterns of causal attributions within the sample, and perhaps discover more categories than had some of the earlier studies. The interviews were systematically combed for every causal attribution related to the war and every statement related to the search for meaning. In addition, six survivors were reinterviewed and asked the specific questions: 'How did you survive the war?' and 'Why did you survive the war?' and these interviews, not surprisingly, led to more nuanced understandings of those survivors' causal attributions. In retrospect, it might have been more useful to phrase the 'how' question as Suedfeld did – 'What factors do you think were important in your surviving the Holocaust?' – because even when separating out the 'how' and 'why' questions in this way, the differences were not always apparent to the survivors. As we have seen, even native English speakers often conflate these terms.

The resulting categories differ somewhat from the earlier studies, which have far broader and ill-defined categories. In Schiff's case, for example, the broader categories may have been due to the small N (20) of his sample. Eitinger was working with a much larger N (158), yet he still collapses many categories into single, large groups which lose a lot of their meaning. For example, his category 'mere chance' includes 'all those who gave this answer directly or indirectly, i.e., those who talked about "fate", or "destiny", and so on, but who had no concrete information to offer beyond this.'<sup>21</sup> However, 'fate' and 'destiny' are understood by many survivors to be very different from 'mere chance', or what I am calling 'random circumstance'; such words imply some sort of outside 'force' or predetermination that 'mere chance' does not. These are nuances that should ideally be clarified with each survivor respondent, and meanings should not be assumed – and they should particularly not be assumed when the respondents are not speaking the mother tongue of the interviewer.<sup>22</sup> In Eitinger's study, such terms are not clearly defined.

Under the category 'was just lucky', Eitinger includes 'all those who were of the opinion that they had survived owing to special circumstances, such as comparatively protected working conditions, indoor work, occupation in workshops, special knowledge which was appreciated, and so on. Actually there is no special fundamental difference between these two groups; in later estimations we can put them under one heading.'<sup>23</sup> Further, it's unclear whether Eitinger's respondents actually used the word 'luck', or if these are Eitinger's own interpretations of the different situations his survivor respondents cited, such as 'protected working conditions', to which *Eitinger*, and not his respondents, attributed the word 'luck'.

Of note is the fact that 'God' or 'miracle' is not cited at all by Eitinger, as either a category or subcategory. Schiff notes this as well, and suspects Eitinger subsumes 'God' under the category for chance and fate.<sup>24</sup> Eitinger includes the category 'help of others', or what he calls: 'was with friends and relatives'. The other categories he includes are: 'own efforts', 'did not participate', and 'the question was not asked or the answer was not satisfactory'.<sup>25</sup> Of all of these categories of causal attributions, the largest by far was 'mere chance' – perhaps due to the broad boundaries of the category – followed by 'luck', 'was with friends and relatives', 'own efforts', 'the question was not asked or the answer was not satisfactory' and 'did not participate'.<sup>26</sup>

Matussek's study, which included both Jewish and Gentile survivors, including political prisoners, gave categories which include 'discipline and self-control', 'chance or luck', 'camaraderie with fellow inmates', 'family memories', 'religious faith', and 'faith in political convictions'.<sup>27</sup> Categories like 'help from others' are conspicuously absent. Matussek doesn't explain how he phrased the questions meant to elicit 'reasons for survival', nor does he explain how he arrived at his categories, or what is included in them. For example, under the category of 'religious faith', it is unclear whether he is including statements of clear and direct divine intervention, such as: 'God helped me', as well as statements of religious practice, which don't always make a clear connection between faith in God and practice of ritual, such as: 'I prayed a lot, and that helped.' The two biggest categories in Matussek's sample, very close to each other in frequency, are 'discipline and self-control' (22.8%), and 'chance or luck' (21.1%), categories which are internal and external, respectively. He notes that 'interviewees often gave no reasons for their survival, but equally often other interviewees cited more than one reason'.<sup>28</sup>

Schiff's more recent study includes the following categories, in order of frequency, and does not differentiate them as internal and external attributions: 'destiny', which 'involves the workings of a force that is greater than oneself; known by other names such as the divine, the miraculous as well as fate';<sup>29</sup> 'no explanation', which means that the survivor cannot give an explanation; 'help', which includes aid from friends as well as Gentiles; 'luck', which 'includes all variations on the theme of chance'; and 'personal characteristics', under which heading he subsumes both agency and non-agentic characteristics, such as age, appearance, and gender. These categories could be further refined and meanings more carefully delineated. Schiff has essentially done what he criticizes Eitinger for; he has made his categories too broad and ill-defined, but again, at least the broadness can be explained by the small N.

Suedfeld, in his study of attributions of survivors, clearly separates causal attributions into internal and external categories. Internal categories include 'determination, hope, and persistence', 'secretiveness', 'being careful', 'intelligence', 'good health', and 'strong sense of identity', among others.<sup>30</sup> Under external attributions, he includes 'social support', 'fate, luck, chance, God', 'help from family', 'help from Gentiles', 'hiding', 'age', and 'Aryan appearance', among others. Similar to the earlier studies, he includes fate, luck, chance, and God in a single category, even though his N is arguably large enough to further refine this category (N=143). In contrast, he separates 'help from others' into several different categories: 'social support', 'help from family', 'help from friends', and 'help from Gentiles'.

For the current study, the following categories were obtained (listed in order of frequency, from most commonly cited to least):

### External Attributions

1. **Help of Others**, a category which includes relatives, friends, and Gentiles, although this could be further refined into two categories: relatives/friends, and Gentiles.
2. **Luck**, which includes the Yiddish word, *mazel*, connoting 'in the stars', which often implies an outside force.
3. **God**, which includes God's direct intervention, God's desire for the survivor to live, and/or the survivor's faith in God.
4. **Miracle**, which does not always imply a Deity, but can be, in some cases, merely a figure of speech. Also included in this category are dead relatives the survivor feels are watching over him/her, dead relatives coming in a premonition or dream, and a *malach*, or angel – described as a being in human form, who steps into the survivor's life in order to direct him/her to safety, and then disappears from sight.
5. **Personal Characteristics**, a category which includes appearance, or 'passing as Aryan', and age (youth), characteristics that are not a function of the individual's agency.
6. **Fate**, which includes the concept of *Bashert*, or something that is 'meant to be', or predetermined.
7. **Random Circumstance**, or pure chance, conceptualized as different from 'luck', resulting from entirely random situations which have no predetermined plan behind them.

### Internal Attributions

1. **Agency**, which includes making decisions, taking risks, claiming at least partial credit for one's own survival or for the survival of others.
2. **Will to Live**, or 'survival instinct', what survivors describe as an almost primal need to hang onto life, no matter what.
3. **Reason to Live**, which includes: following the directives of family members to survive; staying alive in order to tell the world what happened; desire to reunite with family members; desire for revenge (this last being a surprisingly small number).

4. **Personal Characteristics**, a parallel category to that included in external attributions, but implying a more active role than the external attributes of ‘appearance’, or ‘age’. Subsumed in this category are: intelligence, skill, the ability to run quickly, hyper-vigilance, knowledge and facility with languages other than Yiddish; charm, which was used to the survivor’s advantage to elicit help from others; optimism; and lack of fear.
5. **No Reason**, either because it is not found in the narrative, or the respondent actually said, ‘I don’t know how I survived’.

The following table illustrates the categories and their frequencies. Note that many survivors give more than one attribution, and therefore the totals exceed the N.

**Table 1: Causal Attributions (N=73)**

External		Internal	
Help from Others	45	Agency	25
Luck	37	Will to Live	23
God	29	Reason to Live	15
Miracle	24	Personal Characteristics	15
Personal Characteristics	12	No reason	10
Fate	4		
Random Circumstance	3		
<b>Total</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>

The main finding concurs with Suedfeld’s study:<sup>31</sup> There were far more external than internal attributions. The largest external attribution category, help of others, was also the largest in the Suedfeld study, which, if he had conflated ‘social support’, ‘help from friends’, ‘help from family’, and ‘help from Gentiles’, would have been even larger. Also similar to Suedfeld’s study, ‘luck’ and ‘God’ are the next largest external attribution categories, although Suedfeld makes these one category. Still, the pattern is similar in our study; survivors seem more willing to credit external factors for their survival than they are to credit themselves.

As in Matussek’s, Schiff’s, and Suedfeld’s studies, the majority of our respondents gave multiple attributions for survival, often mixing internal and external attributions, and often within the same sentence. For example, Dov, who survived in hiding in Poland, escaping many *Aktions* of the Nazis, says: ‘Who was lucky, or alert enough, or had luck enough, or had a place to hide, could survive again and again and again. That’s what happened to me. I was maybe *very* alert, very quick reactions, and had a lot of luck. I survived many *Aktions*.’ Almost in one sentence, we find the internal, personal characteristics of hyper-vigilance and quick reactions, and the external attributions of luck, and having a hiding place.

Morris, who survived several camps, says, ‘Was I *that* lucky? I wasn’t the smartest guy. I had no big education. But I see that a person doesn’t have to go to college to have sense, to make decisions. But I know one thing: That in dire times like this, the human being became an animal. The instinct for survival takes over and there’s nothing stronger than your survival instinct.’ Morris articulates a sense of agency in

talking about his survival. He does not seem to credit luck, but rather the decisions he made, as well as an instinctual drive or will to survive.

Only fifteen in our sample gave single, consistent attributions, either mentioned once in the interview, or several times. Of these, most credited 'help from others' (7) and almost all of these were child survivors who credited their parents or another adult. For example, Olga, who survived Auschwitz, says,

I don't think I would have survived if my mom wouldn't have been with me. And I don't think I would have survived if my sister wouldn't have been with me. And I think each of us wouldn't have made it alone. First of all, you'd have no reason to try. I was quite ill. And without my mom, without my sister, I know I would have never made it.

Other single attributions include God: 'God was with me. God was holding a hand above my head, that I should live.' Miracle: 'My survival was absolutely a miracle. An intervention by the Almighty.' The will to live: 'The will to live. The will to go on and live. That's all. I didn't have some expectations, big ones. Just to go on and live.'

Rather than puzzling over multiple attributions and their implied or actual inconsistencies, it would seem more useful to puzzle over those survivors who are able to give single, consistent attributions. What might contribute to their surety in offering a single cause to explain such a chaotic, inexplicable, catastrophic event as the Holocaust? Surely the multiple explanations for survival the majority of survivors offer, the 'maneuvering back and forth between possibilities', is exactly what Schiff says it is; it serves as a mechanism for 'integrating the story of survival'.<sup>32</sup> Our sample indicates that, in most cases, survivors are still puzzling over how they survived. In the midst of the inconsistencies of causal attributions, they are wrestling with world views and philosophies of life.

Inge speaks of the ramifications of randomness:

So often it was really completely random whether somebody survived or didn't survive. And I suppose maybe in some way this feeling of randomness probably gives you a little bit of a feeling of insecurity. You can't really believe in an ordered universe that if you do everything by the rules nothing bad will happen to you. Maybe I have more of a sense of an element of chance in existence than some people would as a result of this.

Many of our responses are fraught with ambiguities and contradictions. Lenka survived Auschwitz with her sisters as an adolescent.

In the concentration camp, survival nine times out of ten was accidental, where you have no control over things. A very small percentage of the time we had choices, when we made choices. When something happened, I always made the right choice accidentally, it was always the right choice.

For Lenka, survival is 'accidental', or random. And even when she speaks of 'choice', which implies a sense of her own agency, she will say she made the right choice 'accidentally'. She claims agency and refuses it at the same time.

Why do the survivors in our sample seem to have such difficulty claiming agency? Agency in our sample does not seem related to either gender or Holocaust experience. Those who credit themselves even partially with their own survival are fairly evenly divided between men and women, although one could assume that women might be less likely to 'own' a sense of agency. Esther says, 'I always make sure we have bread. I was the one. Nobody else, just me. I felt smart. My grandfather gave me that idea. He said, "if you were a man, you'd be a rabbi"?' Charles says: 'Naturally I give myself credit. If I wouldn't be there, my wife wouldn't be with me, and she wouldn't have survived, either.'

Those who claim agency also run the gamut of Holocaust experiences. Someone who spent the war years in hiding might be better able to credit him or herself with survival because of the myriad decisions, risk-taking, and day-to-day efforts to survive, than an individual who spent time in a concentration camp, where one was confronted almost daily with a series of tragically 'choiceless choices', as Langer so poignantly describes.<sup>33</sup> But our sample is fairly evenly divided between concentration camp experiences and spending the war in hiding. Esther's quote may give us a clue as to why some survivors were able to credit themselves for their survival. As a child, she was given a strong sense of self-efficacy by her grandfather. She felt she could be effective in the world and had a strong belief in herself before the Holocaust descended upon her and her family. Perhaps this is one reason why she may be better able than some others to credit herself. She also survived with family members generally intact, and this may be a factor, as well.

Survivor respondents give us possible explanations for the general reluctance to claim that their own actions resulted in surviving the Holocaust. First, as Ann tells us: 'You knew that if you will escape, if you will run away, even if you'll find a place where to hide, that because of saving yourself, ten other innocent people would later on die.' In such lethal circumstances, how can an individual claim agency? But more than this, there may be an inability or unwillingness for many to claim agency because that would imply they were smarter, more decisive, more worthy, etcetera, than those relatives and friends who did not survive, what Schiff has called 'narrative humbling'. 'Drawing distinctions between oneself and the dead is problematic.'<sup>34</sup> More important, perhaps, giving external attributions such as 'luck', 'random circumstance or chance', and 'other people', takes away some of the onus or burden of guilt. Not 'survivor guilt' in the sense of feeling personally responsible for the deaths of others – a charge survivors have understandably resented that has peppered the pathologizing literature regarding survivors – but 'guilt' in the sense of feeling a need to justify one's own existence when so many were killed.

In addition, perhaps, by taking credit for one's own survival, that individual is vulnerable to the question: Could I have saved others? Abdication from agency may be a more adaptable response in this situation.<sup>35</sup> It may be safer to put the credit 'out there', rather than 'in here'. Placing responsibility outside oneself is an adaptive narrative, perhaps, in the case of Holocaust survivors, and one that may allow the survivor to alleviate whatever burden he or she may feel in her own survival. The

survivor may be left with an uncomfortable feeling of needing always to justify one's own life, by doing enough 'good deeds', for example, or having a positive influence on the world. To reinvolve Frankl, 'Each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for his own life*; to life he can only respond by being responsible.'<sup>36</sup> Surely survivors were starkly and brutally 'questioned by life' in the Holocaust, and some answer for their lives by searching for meaning and purpose in the aftermath.

As Eric articulates,

I go through these guilt feelings sometimes [...] when I think about [...] and wonder about my life. What have I accomplished? There are probably children that were killed there who probably could have contributed a lot more to the world than I have or ever could. And yet on the other hand, I look and I see I've got a wonderful wife, I've got three lovely children. I suppose we did our share to an extent. But I often wonder: Why me? Why did we survive? It's a bit of a guilt trip. More than a bit, sometimes.

Eric 'responds by being responsible', spending a great deal of his time in altruistic pursuits, searching for reasons to justify his existence.

This study's second, related research question is *why* did you survive the war? Eric's response is a good example of TTP sample respondents who are still searching for meaning in their survival, almost sixty years after the war. Indeed, only eighteen in our sample were able to articulate finding a meaning and purpose for their lives. Of those, six gave more than one meaning. The categories and frequencies follow in Table 2, again, in order of most to least frequently cited. Because more than one category was sometimes cited by an individual, the N does not correspond with the frequencies.

**Table 2: Meaning of Survival (N=18)\***

- 1) To continue the chain of the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition (12)
- 2) To be a witness, to tell the story (9)
- 3) Questions survival and its ultimate meaning – has found no answer (7)
- 4) Gratefulness for life and an understanding of what is important in life (2)
- 5) Revenge (2)
- 6) To help others (2)
- 7) To build the State of Israel (1)

The biggest category, to continue the Jewish people and the chain of Jewish tradition, is articulated by Betty, who survived Auschwitz as an adolescent.

You know something, what went through my head, back as a child of fifteen, sixteen, then? I want to get married. I want to bring a new generation. I want to show that there's still some Jews [...] I feel that God put me on this earth to accomplish something. And if I would [give up my religion], then Hitler won. And I don't want Hitler should win. I want to bring a new generation and a religion, and they should multiply what we lost.

Atalia has found meaning in remembrance. She considers herself a witness. She speaks of Emanuel, a young doctor who survived the Warsaw Ghetto, only to find himself on a train to Auschwitz. Atalia tells of how she was suffocating on the train from the crush of bodies, the heat, and the stench. Emanuel, a friend of hers, notices a small opening at the top of the cattle car, and makes a wider hole, big enough to jump out. He convinces Atalia and two other young people to escape with him. They jump from the train. Atalia only sprains her ankle, but the other three young men are shot by Nazi guards. Emanuel is eviscerated by bullets.

As he lay dying, he said, "There is no way I can make it. I'll be dead in a few minutes. Run, run – we are close to a town. They must have alerted the SS. Please, please, run and live. Live! How else will anybody ever remember me? Everybody else is dead." I never did forget Emanuel. I keep up his *yahrzeit* anniversary and *Yizkor* every year, just like for my parents and brother, on the 9th of Av. Because I never knew the name of his father, I say, "Emanuel ben Israel". If there ever was a true son of Israel, he sure was him.

Dorothy, who survived the war as a thirteen year old alone in the forest and dodging Ukrainian bullets, has also found meaning in remembrance, and believes her mother's letter to her was a reminder to tell the world what happened to the Jews.

If I survived, I should tell the world what those beasts did to the Jews. And that sort of helped me go public, when I started speaking at schools, and wherever I go, because I feel that was a message from my mother. I had a mission, because of the letter my mother gave me. My mother had thrown me a message that I must survive [...] one of us has to survive, and one of us has to tell the world.

This study raises more questions than it answers, which call for further exploration. Regarding the search for meaning in survival: Why are some survivors able to find meaning and purpose in their survival while others are not? Is the inability to find meaning related to the severity of the trauma, or the extent of the losses? Did those who were able to find meaning survive with several family members intact? What is the relationship between having feelings of what the literature has – not without controversy – referred to as 'survivor guilt', and the inability to find meaning in survival? What is the relationship between age at the onset of trauma and the ability to find meaning afterwards? Are those people who have strong religious belief better able to find meaning in their suffering than those without belief, or vice-versa? When do survivors come to a sense of meaning – soon after the Holocaust years, later, or at the end of life? Does that meaning change over time? Does the inability to find meaning indicate, as the psychological literature tells us, that such a survivor is coping and adapting less well, is less resilient, than those who have been able to find meaning for their lives? Or is there, in fact, tremendous strength to be found in the struggle itself?

Regarding causal attributions for survival, this study seems to indicate that external attributions may be psychologically 'safer' for this particular population of Holocaust survivors, more adaptive, and therefore will be far more common than

internal ones in their narratives. By attributing one's survival to something 'out there', often vague and nebulous and beyond one's control or ultimate understanding, survivors are able to alleviate some of the onus of survival itself. It could be argued that many survivors would feel it a tremendous *chutzpah* or hubris to credit themselves in any way with their own survival. To give themselves credit would make them somehow better, smarter, and by implication, more 'worthy' than their murdered family members and friends. Yet some people can give themselves credit, and perhaps those are the people who went into the war with a strong sense of self-efficacy, a belief in their own abilities to get out of it alive. Further, perhaps people who did not have a strong belief in God going into the war, would be less likely to attribute their survival to God, or to concepts like fate or luck, which imply some sort of belief system in something vaguely 'out there'. As Schiff points out, an external attribution such as 'fate' or 'destiny' can also imply a 'chosen-ness' that some survivors may find uncomfortable.<sup>37</sup>

Still, as one of our respondents articulates, external attributions for one's survival are not so easy to accept, either, especially in relation to the question of God's role in the Holocaust, a topic which is beyond the scope of this paper. In some cases, it would appear from this survivor's quotation, it's best to live without an explanation.

If I was to accept that God was part of my surviving, then [...] how do I explain the part that so many did not survive? If God had to do with one, then God had to do with the other. And I just couldn't accept either explanation.

## Notes

- 1 Brian Schiff, *Telling survival and the Holocaust* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1997.) Peter Suedfeld, 'Specific and general attribution patterns of Holocaust survivors', in *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, vol. 35, 2003, pp. 133-142.
- 2 S. E. Taylor, R. R. Lichtman, and J. V. Wood, 'Attributions, beliefs about control, and adjustment to breast cancer', in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46, no. 3, 1984, p. 490.
- 3 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, New York, 1992.
- 4 M. H. Miner and J. McKnight, 'Religious attributions: Situational factors and effects on coping', in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 38, no. 2, 1999, pp. 274-286.
- 5 Albert Bandura, 'Social cognitive theory of personality', in L. A. Pervin and O. P. John (eds), *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, 2nd edn, New York, 1999, pp. 154-196.
- 6 Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust*, p. 84.
- 7 Suedfeld, 'Specific and general attributional patterns.'
- 8 There is a useful discussion of assimilation and accommodation of traumatic experiences in Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions*, New York, 1992.
- 9 Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York, 1959, p. 54.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 12 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, New York, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions*; L. McCann and L.A. Pearlman, *Psychological Trauma and the Adult Survivor: Theory, Therapy, and Transformation*, New York, 1990; Donald Meichenbaum and Deborah Fitzpatrick, 'A constructivist narrative perspective on stress and coping: Stress inoculation applications', in L. Goldberger and S. Breznitz (eds), *Handbook of Stress: Theoretical and clinical aspects*, New York, 1993, pp. 706-723; M. S. Miles and E. K. Crandall, 'The search for meaning and its potential for affecting growth in bereaved parents', in R.H. Moos (ed.), *Coping with Crises: An Integrated Approach*, New York, 1986, pp. 235-243; P. T. T. Morelli, 'Trauma and Healing: The Construction of Meaning among Survivors of the Cambodian Holocaust', in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 57 (9-A), 1996, p. 4133; S.S. Schwartzberg, 'Struggling for meaning: How HIV-positive gay men make sense of AIDS', in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 24, 1993, pp. 483-490; R. G.

- Tedeschi, C. L. Park, and L. G. Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis*, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1998. However, not everyone agrees. See, for example, R. L. Silver, C. Boon, and M. H. Stones, 'Searching for meaning in misfortune: Making sense of incest', in *Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 2, 1983, pp. 81-102. Some traumatic events are simply too catastrophic for the survivor to find any meaning or purpose in the aftermath.
- 13 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York, 1970/1994, p. 7.
- 14 Leon Eitinger, *Concentration Camp Survivors in Norway and Israel*, Oslo, 1964.
- 15 Paul Matussek, *Internment in Concentration Camps and Its Consequences*, New York, 1975.
- 16 Brian Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1997).
- 17 Suedfeld, 'Specific and general attributional patterns', p. 13. Suedfeld solved the ambiguity of the question format by asking: 'What factors do you think were important for your surviving the Holocaust?'
- 18 Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust*, p. 77.
- 19 Bea Hollander-Goldfein, *Towards an Integrated Model of Coping and Adaptation after Extreme Trauma*. Paper delivered at the Transcending Trauma Conference, Penn Valley, Pennsylvania, December, 2001.
- 20 See, for example, Leon Eitinger, 'Pathology of the concentration camp syndrome. Preliminary report', in *Archives of General Psychiatry* 5, 1961, pp. 371-379; Leon Eitinger, *Concentration Camp Survivors in Norway and Israel*, Oslo, 1964; Henry Krystal, *Massive Psychic Trauma*, New York, 1968; Paul Matussek, *Internment in Concentration Camps and Its Consequences*, New York, 1975; W.C. Niederland, 'The psychiatric evaluation of emotional disorders in survivors of Nazi persecution', in H. Krystal, (ed.), *Massive Psychic Trauma*, New York, 1968. More current literature is finally beginning to focus on the resilience of survivors rather than the pathologies. But many of the earlier studies were based on either clinical populations, or on interviews with survivors who were involved in trying to obtain reparations from the German government. Such studies were heavily skewed towards pathology rather than the strengths and resilience of survivors.
- 21 Eitinger, *Concentration Camp Survivors*, p. 79.
- 22 When conducting a second interview with a survivor who had given multiple causal attributions of 'miracle', continued clarification revealed that 'miracle' was merely a figure of speech for this gentleman. It certainly did not imply the work of a Deity; in fact, just the opposite: The survivor admitted he had lost his faith after the war. It's not possible to reinterview all the survivors for clarifications, but for the purposes of this study, six survivors who were willing to be reinterviewed provided a great deal of nuanced insight into concepts many of us assume we know the meanings of, and take for granted, like 'luck', 'fate', and 'miracle'.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust*, p. 32.
- 25 Ibid., p. 78.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Matussek, *Internment in Concentration Camps*, p. 32.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust*, p. 78.
- 30 Suedfeld, 'Specific and general attributional patterns', (pre-publication pagination provided by the author), p. 27.
- 31 Suedfeld, 'Specific and general attributional patterns.'
- 32 Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust*, p. 81.
- 33 Lawrence Langer, 'The dilemma of choice in the death camps', in J. K. Roth and M. Berenbaum (eds), *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, New York, 1989, pp. 222-233. An example Langer gives of what he calls 'choiceless choice' is a mother who gives birth in concentration camp, and has to choose between killing her infant at birth, or going together with the baby to the gas chamber.
- 34 Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust*, p. 86.
- 35 Bea Hollander-Goldfein, personal communication, December, 2002.
- 36 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 172. Emphasis added.
- 37 Schiff, *Telling Survival and the Holocaust*, p. 86.

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