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# Jewishness: Expression, Identity, and Representation

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# Holocaust Narratives and their Impact: Personal Identification and Communal Roles

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SCHOLARLY ATTENTION within the humanities and social sciences has converged on aspects of trauma and its aftermath, especially the effect of trauma on personal and cultural formations of identity. Studies that range in perspective from the anthropological, the sociological, and the historical to the literary, the psychological, and the philosophical examine the long-term consequences of the experience of trauma on human beings and how their constructions of traumatic memories shape the meanings they attribute to these events (Brenner 2004; Lifton 1993; Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth 1996). Researchers from a variety of perspectives have investigated the history of the concept of trauma, and have offered their observations on the impact of overwhelming life experiences on those affected by genocidal persecution (Caruth 1996; Leys 2000).

For the Jewish historical and cultural narrative, particularly of the last century, the experience of trauma and dislocation is communicated on two levels, as family discourse and as communal oral history. Friesel (1994) has noted the ways in which the Holocaust affects contemporary Jewish consciousness. Bar-On (1999) describes the interpretative strategies that survivors and their children employ to communicate real and imagined lessons of the Holocaust. From these and other studies, the forms of recording and transmitting the experiences of Jewish Holocaust survivors offer lessons in the modes of adaptation and meaning-making in the aftermath of trauma. Ethnographic and autobiographical materials have thus become rich resources for research devoted to issues of survival and identity, providing an insider's view of the suffering endured by trauma victims as well as the processes by which these ordeals are experienced, incorporated, mediated, constructed, and transcended.

## The Transcending Trauma Project

This essay traces the communicative practices of individuals and families, utilizing deepened life histories to examine the experiences of groups in society who have had to cope with uncontrollable and unavoidable traumatic events. The Transcending Trauma Project of the Council for Relationships at Thomas Jefferson University centres on one particular community, Holocaust survivors, defined as Jewish individuals whose lives were threatened during the Second World War because they resided in countries controlled by Nazi Germany. By eliciting testimonies that are fluid rather than fixed, open to the expression of deeper personal meaning and self-exploration, our enquiry focuses on the negotiability of narrative and its systemic impact. As survivors' narratives are heard, particularly within the family, their stories about traumatic events teach the listeners more than just how to cope with trauma; more broadly, they teach about how to be in the world. The historical accuracy of autobiography is less the point than the ways in which the traumatic events and meaning of survival are remembered, reported, and assimilated as part of the core identity of the listener.

Through our effort to gather a deeper life history, meanings heretofore unarticulated because they are more personal and, therefore, relegated to the private domain of human experience which our society has preferred to leave unexplored, are generated in a context and environment that is co-created by the interviewee and the interviewer. Participants in this process have expressed appreciation for the questions that 'no one has ever asked before' and welcome the opportunity to share their meaning systems. Our study interprets the individual Jewish life stories we have collected as more than testimonies that convey information. Rather, we understand these Holocaust narratives as components in a process of identity formation and expression, with the power to transmit and transform cultural values through their influence on the second generation.

Although invaluable in their own right, the documentation of survivor oral histories to date has largely concentrated on the period preceding and during the Second World War. Typically, the testimonies stop with liberation or emigration. Rarely do they include extended descriptions of life before the war, nor do these testimonies purposefully investigate the broad range of reactions that were part of the survivor's inner life during and after the war. These oral histories allow for spontaneous expressions of emotion on the part of the survivor, but they do not explore the meaning system within which the narrative is embedded. Documentation and bearing witness are the overt goals, whereas the Transcending Trauma Project seeks self-revelation and self-explanation.

Based on a range of sources, especially in-depth interviews, the project we describe in this essay shifts the angle of vision from documenting external conditions to recording and analysing the internal realities of survivors' lives, especially the personal and emotional significance of events before, during, and

after the Holocaust. We ask, along with Hoffman (1994: 5), about the memory practices of survivors in order to probe 'not only what happened to them, but primarily what happened within themselves'. We are interested in how their memories tell us the story, and how their memory practices within the nuclear family convey to us the cultural impact of their stories.

In order to achieve the combined goal of eliciting self-explanation as a means of learning about the reconstruction of life after trauma and exploring the impact of memory practices on listeners, three methodological innovations are featured in the Transcending Trauma Project. First, whereas previous studies of survivors and children of survivors have worked with unrelated groups, our subjects, wherever possible, are families of survivors, their children, and in some cases even grandchildren. The opportunity to study ongoing, intergenerational dynamics within Holocaust survivor families is particularly promising for understanding the transmission of cultural values, meaning systems, survival mechanisms, and identity.

Second, our orientation recontextualizes these family groups into their past and present psychosocial and communal backgrounds to look at individual differences and why they exist. We adopt the imperative that the writer Aharon Appelfeld identified in his lectures collected in *Beyond Despair*, to 'make the events speak through the individual and his language, to rescue the suffering from huge numbers, from dreadful anonymity, and to restore the person's given and family name, to give the tortured person back his human form which was snatched away from him' (Appelfeld 1994: 39). We also give voice to the rebuilding process and how survivors put together the pieces of their shattered lives. These are the stories not recorded in the public archives.

Third, by asking survivors and their family members about their subjective responses, self-explanations, and meaning systems, our study explores factors and themes which mediate the impact of the trauma through processes of coping that serve to reconstruct disrupted lives and shattered identities. Sufficiently open-ended to allow interviewees to incorporate issues and descriptions significant to them, our interviews include discussions of family of origin, key life events, cultural affiliations, and religious and moral belief systems. These factors invariably influence the individual representations of memory, the construction of meaning, and the development of coping strategies.

Our questionnaires are geared not simply to accumulate facts, but to use questions that, in a social constructionist mode, 'provide the opportunity for participants to become observers of their own interactive patterns . . . Data gathered through this questioning method quickly become information about connections among people, ideas, relationships, and time. Thus information about patterns and process . . . emerges in this context' (McNamee 1992: 195). In resurrecting and vocalizing the memories of the past, personal testimonies may themselves contribute to the transformation of the trauma not, in this case, from the

vantage point of bearing witness, but from the vantage point of self-revelation. More than 'this is my story and the story of those destroyed', what surfaces is 'this is who I am' (see Agger and Jensen 1990; Kestenberg and Fogelman 1994; Langer 1991). The numerous excerpts from deepened life histories that we have studied, and the sample of these stories that we bring here, demonstrate the impact of traumatic memories on the identity formation of children of survivors. These findings, in turn, provide a more realistic picture of intergenerational cultural impact based on identification with survivorship.

## Narratives of Survival, Themes of Identity

In asking survivors for their life histories, our query focuses on how they rebuilt their lives, the methods they used to cope, and the ways in which their beliefs, attitudes, and values affected their will to live and, later, to start over and rebuild. To elicit these accounts by Holocaust survivors and their families, our research team developed semi-structured, open-ended questionnaires covering the years before, during, and after the war. Facts have been collected not as an end, but rather for the sake of understanding the context of the survivor experience. Process questions tell us how survivors perceived their ordeals. The interviewer deepens the story and asks questions about coping and adaptation that others have not posed before. Answering the questions posed, for the first time, out loud in words, brings to light the guiding forces of survival. What is shared is not new to the survivor, but the sharing of it is new. Speaking from one's inner self for the first time is a powerful, often affirming, experience. Thereby, the interviewer and interviewee are both transformed by the interpersonal process.

The methodological guidelines employed in this study of how realities can be recalled, recorded, and received are based on the assumption that the researcher or hearer of extreme human suffering is a participant in a dialogic discovery of the inner experience of the trauma. Our premise is that stories in the direct voice of those who actually endured what they are describing can provide insights into the experiential quality of these ordeals, how they are remembered, and what the possibilities might be for transcending them. Laub (1992) has written eloquently of this innovative route to deciphering what is being told in the testimony, a mode of research that underscores the important role of the listener, not only as witness to the recording of events but as recipient of value-laden, affectively charged belief statements. As Van Langenhove and Harre (1993) point out, people develop an integration of their external and internal experiences as they answer the new and different questions that arise in their conversations with others. The rhetorical redescriptions that spontaneously emerge may for ever change the retelling of the memories incorporating the inner voice as the narrator of life events. In the case of Jewish Holocaust survivors, we witness the power of their testimonies to reveal the value systems of those who share the memories of survival, as well as the impact on the value systems of those who hear the stories of survival.

As researchers have attested, this consideration of the untapped reservoirs of information surrounding conceptualizations of past traumatic events and post-trauma developments expands our understanding of survivorship. From this perspective, speakers listen to themselves and watch others listen acceptingly to their narratives that incorporate, often for the first time, their inner private experiences. There is self-validation, a sense of connection instead of aloneness. Bearing witness, in and of itself, is a profound experience. How much more so when the testimony is a sharing of 'who I am', not just 'what happened to me'.

The enduring legacy of the Holocaust that surfaces in both the difficulties and the successes that survivors pass on to their children includes not merely the damaging and haunting effects of living in the shadow of the Holocaust but also the adaptive and auspicious outcomes of growing up in families where survivorship is a pervasive theme (Davidson 1980; Halik, Rosenthal, and Pattison 1990; Rosenman and Handelsman 1990). The shift in focus from observations about groups of survivors to a consideration of how individual survivors construct their past, from the pre-war years, through the war, to their post-war encounters, and from the recording of testimony to an examination of how others hear the themes and lessons of these survivor narratives, reveals a more realistic picture of the broad impact of trauma and recovery. The methodological commitment to studying family units (i.e. survivors and their own children and grandchildren) means that we have a way to illustrate the intergenerational impact of narratives about war and survival within the Jewish community. Ordinarily, listeners attend to the details of the Holocaust by confronting the poignant existential issues raised in the telling. Yet, at another level, the story becomes something the listeners can identify as a source of important messages about Jewish identity.

For the children or grandchildren of survivors, listening to the experience of their parents or grandparents has multiple consequences. The second and third generations listening to traumatic memories are hearing not only what their elders went through and incorporating the constructed meanings of these events; they are also hearing who the parent or grandparent is. The normative developmental process of identification yields the incorporation of how the parent or grandparent is portrayed in the shared memory. When a particular attribute of a survivor parent or grandparent is clear and emotionally compelling, this attribute can become an organizing value system in the developing identity of the child. The workings of this process emerged in the analysis of intergenerational interviews. We call this process the transmission of pivotal narratives.

## The Transformative Power of Pivotal Holocaust Narratives

In the cases that follow, we trace the metamorphosis of pivotal family memories recalled and now recounted by children of survivors in order to examine the cultural transmission of these narratives. In each example, the stories that filled

the household relayed messages about the specifics of the trauma experienced by the particular person in the past, but the stories also compel the listeners to erect guideposts for positive functioning within contemporary Jewish settings, be it within the family or in the community. We find a range of Jewish identities emerging from the interpretation of these narratives.

The first example is the story told in Iris's family, one of several narratives that have had a profound effect on how she describes herself. The memory begins with the long death march towards the end of the Second World War. Iris's grandmother, as the story has been passed on, put her shawl over her head and simply walked out of the line to separate from the group, and get back to her children:

And she takes her shawl and puts it over her head and walks away from the hundreds, perhaps, women, that are being marched at gunpoint. And she took an out, she took the choice, she took control of her destiny, and as I interpret it, very calmly decided how she's going to determine the rest of her life, whatever it is.

As the interviewer asks Iris to consider the meaning of this choice, she reflects:

And she has said and has written that you know, she consciously made this very logical decision. If she turns around and walks away she'll get shot in the back and it will be over. And if she makes it, she'll get to be with her kids. And there is some courage in that . . . that incident evokes for me courage, control, solitude, the self-reliance that I think informs a lot of what I do in my life.

Asked to probe further about her own life, Iris underlines her own intuitive sense of being separate, the imperative to not be part of a crowd.

I see that scene, and I imagine her as being, if there are four or three women across in a line, she was obviously on the edge. So I know that whenever I'm in a crowd, I am reluctant to get into the center. I always stay on the edge. I'm conscious of where the exits are all the time. All the time.

Throughout her life, Iris has been cast as an oppositional rebel for her refusal to adhere to the rules. She shares her awareness of this judgement of her behaviour with resentment and pain, as revealed by tears welling up in her eyes. But, in the context of the pivotal memory of the grandmother who had had enough and left, Iris's behaviour needs to be understood as a strong and suitable reaction. Her apartness is less defiance than it is her inherited mode of survival. Making this connection, spontaneously, in the course of the interview provided an inner sense of self-recognition. For Iris, the recognition provided a much-needed salve for private doubts about her inner motivations. She knew she was not an oppositional rebel but could not explain the compelling drive within her. She continues later in the interview:

There's a defiance in general about rules and especially in crowds. But it sort of filters in all parts of my life. That following what everyone is supposed to be doing somewhere in my consciousness means sure and certain death. That it's up to me, if I want to survive,

I have to be on my own as a solo player, away from the crowd. I think that plays out a lot in my life. It's not, I have not consciously done this, but if I were to outline the path my life has taken, in terms of career, for instance, I manage to do things in a roundabout way, not from start to finish. I'm not assigning this experience of my grandmother's as the reasons I live the way I do. But it is interesting to note—and I think there's a connection that . . . that nothing in my life has been start to finish . . . And there's something that I still hold, that if you keep running, you're safe.

Establishing her own path and finding the routes of her choosing are pieces of Iris's legacy. In fact, when asked by the interviewer to connect this most profound and resonant memory to 'a trait of yours, an aspect of yours, a defining quality of you. Not just you reacting to war stories, but a war story that became, as you say, a self-defining aspect of your identity', she states:

That would be it. And as I mature and understand myself more with each passing month and year, and as I fine-tune my truths, it becomes more and more clear. [*crying*] And I feel like I'm on that . . . I'm behind her in those footsteps. In a way, the path has been paved. I'm not rebelling; I'm following a path.

In the telling of that story, in the context of the research interview, a critical clarification of self in relation to story occurred. The memories became messages about how one's core values, while rooted in a past that is painful, move forward to a more valid interpretation and a purpose rooted in moral and personal choices.

In a second example, Beth reviews a story she has always known about her mother's war experience:

It is at that first selection . . . that the drama of what happened between my mother and her mother and her baby took place . . . There were . . . three groups. One was the people sent to the trains into the death camp. Another group was the young people who could work, and then another group were those family members of the people in the work camp . . . So anyone connected to the people in the work camp were still being allowed to re-enter the work camp. And they had children, that group. So my grandmother, in I think the chaos of that moment, I can't imagine it feeling anything other than terribly frightening, my mother was holding my brother . . . in her arms. He was eight months or nine months at the time. Her mother . . . was trying to take the baby away from my mother, saying to her, 'I'll take care of the baby, you can go work.' Well . . . the unstated reality was, my grandmother knew she was going to her death, and that the baby would go with her, but at least my mother would have a chance to live.

Hearing her mother recapture the moment yet again on a recent occasion, Beth is reminded of her mother's choice to refuse to relinquish her infant child. She describes this latest retelling: 'But what she said poignantly, clearly, in words this summer which I knew was always part of the story whether she said it or not, [*pause, crying*] was the unwillingness on my mother's part to have any role in her mother's death.' For Beth, the daughter of the woman who could not tolerate any

role in another's suffering, the message is clear. It is clear even without the explication of a larger meaning system by the parent about how the decision was made. The interview process defined what she sees as a 'very deeply embedded part of me'. She continues: 'It was like looking in the mirror when she told me that. And again, it's like I always knew it, and I always knew the message, but there's something when you take the time to really focus on it and pay attention and put all the words on it.' The pivotal memory assumes its place as a guiding principle for her own standard of behaviour. In the unfolding of her own narrative, Beth is drawn to the abiding power of the unspoken but ever-enacted value statement acquired from her mother's testimony: 'But I think I was very . . . [pause, crying] I'm not sure why this is so emotional. [pause] But I think I was even more exquisitely attuned to and avoidant of and unwilling to cause anybody pain. [pause] At all. In any way.' Her essential identification with the central principle of empathy for people, what her interviewer terms 'a universal, governing, dominant law in your very core being', is enunciated in numerous examples throughout her interview. With the interviewer as guide, Beth contemplates her own choices as lifelong continuities emergent from the pivotal telling of trauma.

The impact of telling the trauma is contrasted, in the next case, with the powerful legacy of not telling, where silence about deeply held painful secrets pervades the family. Lisa, a daughter of Holocaust survivors, claims not to have 'a memory of a story told to me by either of them that I would say was a pivotal one'. Only in adulthood did Lisa learn that her mother had a husband and a child who died of starvation in Siberia during the war, and with that knowledge came a clearer understanding of her mother's withdrawal and her distance. Lisa confirms the sentiment of other children of survivors, that the most important event in her life happened before she was born, yet in this instance 'the way [these] memories and stories were transmitted . . . was through silence'. The interviewer offers the possibility that 'the impact was not what she told you, it's who she was because she didn't tell you'. 'Right', Lisa responds. 'I could not make sense of her inability to connect emotionally, physically, and so I internalized bad feelings about myself.' Had the stories been made available earlier, she admits, 'it would have generated quite a bit of sadness . . . perhaps even overwhelming sadness, but I think it would have helped me be more compassionate of her and of myself'. Pivotal narratives, verbally communicated or non-verbally conveyed, play a role in identity formation.

In the transmission of traditions and beliefs about self and society from generation to generation, we can also trace how the historical memory of victimization is shaped and preserved as a life-affirming model for survival. Broadening the lens from a pivotal memory to a family theme, the focus shifts from the process of identification which can operate on an unconscious level, to survival strategies consciously chosen by the survivor parent and imparted to the next generation. We have also traced these legacies in the third generation, where possible, and

interviews with grandchildren of survivors so far indicate a compelling continuity in how family narratives of trauma and resilience are listened to and recalled with great sensitivity. Moreover, the individual cases we have illustrated so far fall in a continuum of behaviours that also reflects the spectrum of communal responses to the legacy of the Holocaust found in the Jewish cultural tapestry overall. Iris is the differentiated community activist prone to political progressiveness and intergroup outreach, while Beth maintains a social service orientation aimed at personal growth, family connection, and communal responsibility. Lisa, whose pivotal narrative was absent, remains an outsider looking in. Further examples elucidate this link between distinctive life stories and the corollary patterned responses found in the communal domain.

## Contending with Coping: Converging Past and Present

In the following narratives focused on coping styles, collected from a mother and her three daughters, powerful and far-reaching messages are revealed when the family unit is examined. The survivor mother sets the stage for a multiplicity of reactions as she recounts:

I calmed myself down a little bit. I always tried all my life to get a hold of myself. I have always had this strong will to survive. Being that what I went through I had to live, always had the will to live . . . I wanted to live for now and I wanted to bring up my children, they should not have the sadness and the pain that I went through. I didn't want to fill their hearts with pain.

In the same interview, we hear:

I wanted to protect them. But you know what? No matter how much you try to protect your children they see through you, they feel they are different than other children. Holocaust children are different than other kids. I don't think my children had as many good times maybe as the other kids did. They did not grow up in a home where it was all happy and vacations and everything else. But, you know, this is what life is. You've got to accept whatever it is. Can't change it.

In their own revelations, each of the three daughters interweaves her own stance with the parental legacy about survival. The eldest daughter speaks of her approach to life in relation to her mother's concerns: 'I feel like because of the miracles that happened to my mother, because of her faith and her giving me the feeling that I could accomplish whatever I needed to, I am pretty, pretty positive.' A middle daughter responds to the message about continuity:

Well, you know I somehow, my mother and her sisters just gave me a sense that I can do anything. They are such strong willed, powerful, believing people. I just think if you are someone who makes up your mind that I will overcome this or anything that gets in my way that's half the battle. It's a sense of survival that they all have and nothing is going to knock me down. They are just extremely strong and courageous.

Further on:

Yeah, oh my mother always just picked up her chin and said, 'It's going to be alright "mamale", don't worry and you'll do it.' You'll make it. She provided that outlook. Thank G—d she did. Yeah, I think that's where it comes from although now things are different. But as a child, she certainly gave us the encouragement.

The youngest daughter affirms her mother's resilience and resolve:

I think it forced me to give all I could to a situation. I work hard at pretty much everything I do. I'm committed to, I mean if I say that I am going to be somewhere at a certain time I am always there on time and it bothers me that someone, my husband, is always late and we argue constantly about it because what is ten minutes? To me it's a lot that I am expecting you at a certain time and if I have to work to be there at that time so should you, you know, you are disappointing me. So I mean even in terms of things like that, my work, parenting, I give things pretty much everything.

These vignettes of interview material demonstrate congruence in the transmission of coping strategies from one generation to the next. And here, the function of repeating Holocaust testimony in contemporary Jewish culture is to express the power of resilience, affirmation, and courage not just in the past, but also in the future.

In another interview conducted with a child survivor who was with her parents in a Russian POW camp, we hear about a mechanism that enabled her to keep the pain of the war at a distance and to focus on the present. Only later in her life did she realize the price. The same mechanism which minimized pain could also minimize joy, and it was her children who alerted her to this potentiality.

I am an expert at viewing events and feelings through the wrong end of a telescope, a trick in manipulating perspective that I learned as a child in World War II. For a long time, I assumed the Holocaust had no effect on me because I am luckier than most Jewish survivors of World War II and I've always known it. We were in a Russian prisoner of war camp, but never in a concentration camp; I was not separated from my mother, my parents and sister also survived the war and even some aunts and uncles did. I thought of myself as fortunate.

She continues:

When the Diary of Anne Frank was published, I read it in one night without stopping, absorbed but not overwhelmed by it. When a group of my friends wanted to see the play on Broadway, I joined them eagerly. It was in the last few minutes of the play, when they read her lines about believing people are basically good, that's when I lost it. It's acceptable to shed tears in a theater, but I had to cross my arms and concentrate on breathing slowly in and out to keep from sobbing. With my telescope trick, I can shrink troubles and pain making them smaller, more distant and less important by comparing them with the worst things I can think of. At the lowest point of a migraine, with nothing left to retch, my head still pounding, when I am too restless to lie down for the sleep which is necessary to end the pain, I hear myself saying, 'You know you'll survive this. The

Nazis couldn't kill you, a migraine won't. This is your own bed; you have a home, nobody is chasing you.' I am not stoic, I complain, but I compare my pain to what I know my relatives suffered before they perished and it becomes almost insignificant.

Later, she adds:

It may be a good thing to have perspective, even to this extreme degree. Being able to shrink your problems is useful and gives you a certain pride in having overcome. I've heard about survivor guilt, which I'm not aware of having, maybe because I was a child. I've never heard of survival pride, which I am aware of feeling, though I know it's irrational. I did not survive because of my own skill or virtue, though I know of several actions each of my parents took which were crucial in saving my life.

And, finally:

Because I assumed the Holocaust had no effect on me, I had no concern about its impact on my children. Only recently, as they approach adulthood, they have shown me that my 'survivor's pride' and the toughness it demands, exacted a price from me and from them. Life is easier when pain is not measured against the yardstick of the Holocaust. I first glimpsed this when Anne Frank's story tampered with my telescope, returning to full size what I had made smaller. Even when it works, the telescope has a way of going into automatic mode. Sometimes, but only sometimes, it slips from my grasp and points at happy events and joyful feelings, making them small and far away, and so I cheat myself.

Here, the common thread linking this narrative with the earlier one is the focus on coping through acceptance and appreciation of what is. The survivors' narrative strategies lead the listeners, their children, to adopt a stance that shapes their intrapersonal reality, their interpersonal relations, and their relationship with the Jewish world. The three sisters quoted above recently celebrated their mother's birthday publicly at a local Conservative synagogue with a special dedication ceremony in her honour. Their bond with their mother, based on positive attachment, not guilt, enables them to celebrate both her survival and their shared communal sensitivities.

## Choosing Leadership, Choosing Life

The analyses of the intergenerational interviews conducted by the Transcending Trauma Project reveal over and over again that when the second generation listened to their parents' traumatic memories they were not only hearing the story of what their parents went through, they were also hearing who their parents were as people. In Aron's story, which follows below, we witness his wrestling to understand the forces that brought about his mother's survival, as if they contained the secrets to how to be in this world. Aron recounts how his mother, in several incidents, actively chose to change her fate. For example, she took the risk of placing herself in the line requiring identification though she did not have any authentic documents. She explains:

So I thought I'll try. I'll just gamble, and I went there and just mixed with the crowd and just—and we had to stand in fives and I wore a shawl just to pretend that it covered the thing, the identification, and then the Germans came in and I looked them straight in the eye. They looked everybody straight in the eye and they started counting the people, and they counted me along with them.

Eventually she found out that everyone from the first group was executed by the SS men. On another occasion, after the SS didn't select her, Helen decided to place herself in the 'select' line. The SS men caught her in the manoeuvre and put her in her designated place. As it turned out, she was chosen for the easiest line of work at the camp. In her own words: 'What seemed to be a misfortune was really a great fortune. . . . We don't know what we want, what's good for us.'

Aron clearly internalized the lessons of these pivotal moments in his mother's life. He lauds his parent's assertiveness and risk-taking, emphasizing the overall importance of actively choosing and shaping one's destiny. At the same time, he realizes that there are forces beyond one's control that affect life:

She [mother] couldn't sit there and let things happen, that she had nothing to lose by taking a chance. She figured—she realized that she was going to be dead anyway and so she had nothing to lose by taking these chances to try to survive. And yet I also learned that there were incredible elements of luck or fate or whatever, because one of the stories where she tried to do something and someone wouldn't let her and if that person had let her do what she wanted to do, she would have died.

His beliefs are predicated on his mother's pivotal memories and his own perception of their intrinsic messages and prescriptions for survival. From his point of view, both his mother's assertiveness and sheer luck colluded to secure her survival. Transposing these values onto his own life, he emulates his mother's intrepid nature:

It's a story of courage. It's a story of not being passive, and I guess it's something that shaped me, a determination to shape events rather than let them shape you, to—I mean, in groups that I'm involved with, I just need to get into a leadership role, whether it's charring committees, being the head of an organization or club, a department head of whatever it is, in business and having sixteen employees at one time, and the main part is because I don't like to just sit back and let other people make decisions that are going to affect me. I get involved in it, and maybe that's one of the strongest things that I've taken from her, from those experiences, because if she had been passive she never would have survived.

Aron also draws a parallel between his parents' risk-taking during the Holocaust and his own choice to leave a secure job and start his own business. Here, as well as in other examples, the repeated rhetoric of 'a story' underscores how the experiences of his parents have been encapsulated and transformed by Aron into a narrative that is remembered and repeated with lessons for his own life. Later in

the interview when Aron expounds upon his life philosophy, he invokes his mother's survival as well as his readings of Victor Frankl to affirm his belief in individual responsibility in life:

I really believe that we have a great deal of control over our destinies, over who we are, how we respond, and I'm a real believer in—from my mother and from what Frankl thought, that the ultimate freedom we have is how we choose to respond to situations and that we give meaning to events, that we find meaning, we give meaning, by what we do with it and so, you know, maybe if anything, if I've tried to give meaning to my mother's experiences, maybe that's reflected in that part of my personality, the way I try to bring up my daughters. To be assertive, to take control of situations, to know that they can make choices . . . that they don't have to be victims, that we take responsibility for ourselves.

Aron identifies not with the trauma in his mother's memory of life or death choices, but with the assertiveness that led to her survival. He uses examples from his life to prove his own self-reliance and causative approach to life. Additionally, he weaves several memories together to fashion a personal meaning system and philosophy regarding the roles of choice and fate in life. He is able to further develop his meaning systems through reading Victor Frankl's work and through testing his understanding against the demands of his reality. We conclude that what was transmitted to Aron was not an identification with victimization, but rather an identification with survivorship. His activist approach, gleaned from the parent generation, shapes his familial commitments as well as his penchant for organizational responsibility and leadership, including within the Jewish community.

In the interviews with brothers Isaac and Sidney, they interpret their parents' endurance and fortitude as a great triumph and success. Isaac believes that his father's ability to seize the opportunity to run away from the Germans was directly responsible for his survival:

My father was very close with one [brother] in particular, who he told stories about. How he and his brother were captured by the Germans, and I remember him telling me that people were going into this house but nobody was coming out. And they were taken in, and he said that they were taking everybody up to the second floor or something for interrogation of some sort or whatever. So he said to his brother, he said, 'Either we run away now, and take a shot at, a chance of getting out of here, or we're not getting out of here.' And my uncle, or his brother, was . . . didn't want to move, and he says, 'I'm going for it.' And he leaped through a window, my father, and ran with the Germans shooting after him. And was able to run into a forest and get away. And because of that he survived.

He shows great respect, almost awe, for his father's strength, saying 'he was always the rock', admiring the survivor's shrewdness that he purports to have inherited:

If they were going to survive, if there's a way that they were going to be able to survive, they were going to find a way to do it. As opposed to just saying, 'I can't do this' and giving up. And that is going to transcend itself into other functions of their life, other times of their life. And . . . at least for me, I think that has given me a . . . you know, I try to learn from their experiences without having to experience the whole thing, and say that, you know, not to let myself be rolled over type thing. Maybe that's why I said I'm a little militant in some way.

In Isaac's estimation, his father's survival as well as his business acumen emanated from the same intrinsic source of strength and stamina. He tries to be like his father by taking over the business and going on the business trips that his father took in the past. He has even adopted his father's political views, presenting himself as very right-wing: 'I'm my father's child. He was the same way. That . . . militant to the point where, I don't believe in . . . there are certain times that you stand up for what you believe in to a fault.' Echoing his own father's idealism and deep convictions, Isaac takes his child to work with him to instil in him the work ethic and appreciation for money that his father transmitted. He takes pride in his successes and in the fact that he can easily overcome obstacles, just as his father did. 'I think that's a great success'—he comments on his ability to revive his business after it burned down—'the fact that I was able to come through that and establish myself.' He lauds himself for the same traits that he associates with his father.

His brother, Sidney, also admires his father and replicates his courageous zeal. Inspired by his father's involvement with the Betar Zionist movement and his generally proactive and adventurous nature, Sidney decided to spend six months working on a kibbutz around the time of the Yom Kippur war.

I was sitting at the dinner table, and my father, as I said, spoke as being a hero. He was in Betar, he was a Zionist even before the war etc. And I had these feelings about should I get up, leave school, leave my cozy house and go volunteer to be on a kibbutz at least, because the able-bodied men, most of them, were on the front, and it was something that obviously was a scary feeling, because obviously there was a war going on, and it wasn't the kind of thing where my peers were getting up in droves and going to do it. And I think that my father's influence of him being the hero and doing the right thing had some influence on me.

These two cases are examples of identification with a hero mentality and with leadership. The sons see the father as an active agent in his survival and try to emulate his astute self-reliance. Their stories do not reverberate with the pain or angst of the past. Instead, they inherit a perhaps somewhat idealized notion of their father's prowess during the war, and boast of their resemblance to him. The family's pivotal narrative becomes itself a coping strategy, analysed by these two sons of survivors as an enactment towards an instrumental purpose that values heroism, success, and leadership. These brothers are leaders and supporters of many Jewish organizations in their local and metropolitan community. They

have an impact on many lives in their various communal roles. It is interesting to note that they lead in different ways. The younger brother, who was the father's favourite, has a low profile and a generally easy personality as a leader. The older brother, who was often out of favour with his father, likes to have a very public persona and sometimes clashes with authority figures. One cannot avoid the ultimate drama of family-of-origin issues that are played out in adulthood.

From these examples, we see how the experience of trauma, and its memory and telling, must ultimately take us to the intersection of survival and identity. An integration of both the positive adaptation and the negative consequences of surviving extreme trauma is needed, and is made possible by looking at the survivor in the past and the survivor's family in the present. Individual differences emerge, while significant familial and group themes are illuminated. Without undermining or underestimating the tragedies and trials that individuals and communities experience, a legacy of resilience and resourcefulness becomes apparent when family units can be investigated, and when the social context is examined as well. As poignant narratives are shared on a deeper level, with oneself and with significant others, life themes emerge as representations of belief systems that are guided by human connection. The capacity for transforming trauma may depend on the capacity, ultimately, to negotiate memory, to recognize the personal teachings that are embedded in the process of sharing stories, whether or not the speaker or listener is consciously aware of the messages imparted, and to integrate these narratives through life-affirming belief systems.

## New Perspectives, New Possibilities

If past and current literature has not garnered these kinds of transformative narratives, it may well be because of the circumstances under which the data were collected. A portion of existing Holocaust research is based on reparation interviews where, in order to receive payments, survivors had to prove damages to their physical and psychological well-being. Therefore, the emphasis was more on the recounting of details rather than the cultural transmission of narratives. Other writings are based on interviews conducted by mental health professionals treating survivors diagnosed with psychiatric symptomatology. Much of this previous scholarship categorizes Holocaust survivors on the basis of a constellation of psychiatric symptoms most often identified as 'survivor syndrome' (Chodoff 1963; Cohen 1953; Eitinger 1961, 1980; Krystal and Niederland 1971; Lifton 1980; Niederland 1961), and talks about standardized responses with little room for variability and diversity.

Distortion in the perception of the survivor population also derived from the unprecedented nature of the survivors' experiences. Mental health workers had little in their background or training to prepare them for understanding the enormity of the cultural transformations wrought by the Holocaust. The result was

what Danieli has termed 'the long-term conspiracy of silence between Holocaust survivors and society' (Danieli 1988: 236). Neither survivor nor society could bear to directly confront the horrifying details of loss, dehumanization, torture, and murder. What followed were generalizations from a group of survivor psychiatric patients to the entire population of survivors, and subsequent generalizations from a group of children of survivors in treatment for personal and familial issues to the entire cohort of sons and daughters of survivors. Individual differences were ignored and models of coping, adaptation, and resilience had not yet established credibility. These generalized narratives themselves created an expectation that survivors and the children of survivors would manifest uniform responses of either devastation or superhuman strength in relation to the Holocaust and to life after the Holocaust. In fact, though, there is not only a variegated post-Holocaust experience for survivors, but also an integration into Jewish culture of a wide range of Holocaust narratives where both trauma and resilience play a role in the Jewish world-view.

In the 1980s the focus of Holocaust literature broadened to include more realistic assessments of survivors and their families. For example, Podietz et al. (1984) researched the role of closeness among family members. What had been clinically observed and referred to as 'enmeshment', with all its negative connotations, was empirically demonstrated to be 'engagement' with both positive and negative realities for Holocaust survivor families. Danieli (1985) contributed to the understanding of survivors and their families by formulating a typology of four characteristic family styles. These described the predominant coping strategies of survivor parents and the impact on the second generation. While Danieli's work helped to shift the emphasis away from individual pathology and towards intergenerational transmission and familial styles, the macroscopic focus that describes survivor families by means of four adaptational styles does not address the complexity of family systems. We have observed, for example, that a survivor with an adaptational style labelled 'hero' by Danieli could be married to a survivor with an adaptational style labelled 'victim'. While Danieli's typology allows for the discussion of a 'dominant' style, it does not address the impact of the 'secondary' style. Or, phrased somewhat differently, what, from a systemic perspective, is the impact of growing up in a family with two divergent adaptational styles?

The research of investigators engaging in a broader, integrated framework of enquiry (Halik, Rosenthal, and Pattison 1990; Helmreich 1992; Sigal and Weinfeld 1989) has shown that, despite the existence of a 'survivor syndrome', great variability characterizes the extent to which individuals manifest these post-traumatic characteristics. Some of these studies have involved large-scale, empirically based research with representative samples of survivors and comparable control groups (Kahana, Kahana, and Segal 1985; Kahana, Harel, et al. 1987). Others who concentrate on smaller samples also caution against defective research assump-

tions that ignore the complex dynamics of survivor adjustment (Hass 1990; Prince 1985). It is the consensus of every review of the trauma field that future research should focus on individual differences, the varying impact of specific traumas, and the role of contextual variables such as culture, belief system, family-of-origin dynamics, and current life events (Aldwin and Revenson 1987; Kahana, Kahana, Harel, and Rosner 1988; Kleber and Brom 1992; Krystal and Danieli 1994; Yehuda and Geller 1994).

There is no debate about whether trauma leaves long-lasting effects on its victims. It does. The questions that remain are the extent, nature, and intensity of the aftermath. Little effort has been made to incorporate what has elsewhere been called the 'salutogenic' orientation (see Antonovsky and Bernstein 1986), namely, investigating the positive adaptation that takes place after trauma has occurred where strength or renewal is derived from the experience. Individuals and communities who live through highly stressful, traumatic events continue to carry their pasts, as they change and adapt, coping with day to day life and anticipating the future. By analysing communication about trauma and adaptation in the private domains of family rituals and repertoires, the findings from this study will be of interest to those who can extrapolate patterns from this Jewish context for a broad range of trauma-ridden settings and situations.

## The Transcending Trauma Project Research Methodology

### Collecting the Data

Using a carefully designed questionnaire as a base, 275 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with survivors and, where possible, their spouses, children, and grandchildren. We taped and transcribed the interviews and developed a demographic profile of project participants and their family backgrounds, as well as other pre-war, wartime, and post-liberation experiences. In addition, we asked respondents to consider their views on Jewish identity, on Israel, and on the non-Jewish world. We also looked at the survivor parents' choices about conveying their past to their children, and at the ways in which the children learned about their parents' pre-war and war experiences, even when verbal communication was minimal.<sup>1</sup>

Each interview itself took up to an average of eight hours during approximately four visits to the respondent's home. Although there was an extensive schedule of questions, one set for survivors and one for children of survivors, plus a complementary set of questions for survivor and non-survivor spouses, the approach was to elicit data, encourage spontaneous associations, and deepen the level of personal sharing. All interviews attempted to track the information chronologically to whatever extent possible while flexibly responding to the interviewee's manner of answering the questions. Topics included: the current personal situation, the status of the nuclear family, the family of origin, the years

before the war, wartime experiences, liberation, and post-war rebuilding. Attitude, belief, coping, and adaptation questions were crucial throughout the interviews. We encouraged the explication of what Bar-On and Gilad (1994) have distinguished as 'narrative truths', and not merely 'historical truths' in searching for ways in which memory is constructed, organized, and invoked.

The evaluation of the interviews addressed several possible entry points into the empirical data that were of concern to the Transcending Trauma Project, including: (a) the articulation of models of coping and adaptation; (b) the transmission of identity; (c) the deepened life history as a method by which (a) and (b) can be elicited; and (d) the analysis process as an evolution of understanding individual and cultural responses to trauma. We looked at the co-construction of narrative and meaning between interviewee and interviewer. This was part of our larger interest in the impact on interviewees and their interviewers of this different mode of summoning up and summarizing the 'facts', with its emphasis on internal experience as the mediating factor in understanding the impact of life events—and thereby the basis for personal belief systems, coping strategies, and life repertoires. Moreover, we were studying what it means to decode the text in order to understand the individual, and then recontextualize the text in order to understand the family. One way in which we accomplished this was by going beyond the limitations of a purely individual focus to see the influence of pivotal memories on the narratives of personal and group identity (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Our conclusion is that consequences and influences need to be identified and interpreted in terms of the specifics of the trauma experienced by the particular person, the personality of the individual and the personal resources available to them, and the social context of the event in the culture (Helmreich 1992; Kahana, Kahana, Harel, and Rosner 1988; Kleber and Brom 1992; Whiteman 1993). The development of a conceptual framework that facilitates an understanding of the heterogeneity of individual responses to trauma and stress comes with the challenge of finding a viable research methodology that accesses the scope and depth of human differences, as well as a viable theoretical framework that integrates diverse viewpoints. It is from the study of individual differences that we are better able to comprehend the mechanisms by which different coping strategies develop, as described in Lazarus (1993). An integrated systemic model views coping strategies as flexible processes that change with environmental demands and fluctuate over time as victims shift to the status of survivors.<sup>2</sup>

The methodological paradigms we employed in this study are rooted in the view that a trained interviewer and researcher can be a guide and facilitator of the articulation of a deepened life history. From this perspective, the self becomes part of the audience that hears the stories, and is in turn affected by them. 'Human communication', as Shotter summarizes, '. . . must be seen as ontologically formative, as a process by which people can . . . help to make each other

persons of this or that kind' (1989: 145). During our interviews, the survivors/speakers and the researchers/listeners engaged in the emergence of deeper levels of autobiographical accounts about the various modes of survivorship, conjuring up the 'doorways to . . . [their] identities' (O'Hanlon 1994: 21).

For the survivors, their spouses, and their children, we examined and compared the early socialization of each individual, enquiring about the home environment, childrearing practices, the beliefs and values taught and internalized, and the general communication of expectations. We asked interviewees about their own personality traits, styles, and dispositions as well as descriptions of their loved ones. Finally, we investigated the survivors' sense of Jewish affiliation, or its absence, along with their religious faith before, during, and after the war.

The families we interviewed were introduced to the project through networking with other survivors and their families, and through organizational contacts. The areas of enquiry had a systemic framework that took into account not only the individual subject but also the context and circumstances of the experiences being reported. While the interviews covered the war years, the areas of enquiry focused most heavily on pre- and post-liberation memories. We collected reminiscences about family of origin, descriptions of family relationships and friendships, and details of how the family of origin dealt with problem-solving and conflict management, memories, dreams, loss, affection, discipline, religious identity, life philosophy, and significant experiences before the war.

During the last meeting with each interviewee, when their deepened life history had been completed, each subject was given the COPE Scale, a multi-dimensional coping inventory designed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) to assess the different ways in which people respond to stress. This scale provides a forum for comparing coping strategies as measured by psychometric testing and coping strategies determined by qualitative ethnographic methods. Each subject was also given the Transmission of Jewish Identity Survey, which covers basic background information related to the subject's Jewish identity. This survey was specifically developed for this study in order to track the impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish identity of survivors and to track the process of transmission across generations.<sup>3</sup>

## Analysing the Data

The analysis took place in two stages. Stage I had two steps, the accumulation of data involving seventy variables outlined on the analysis protocol guide for each subject, and a thematic analysis that established consensus among the researchers about the role and relationship of the specific variables to each other in the processes of coping and adaptation for each interviewee.

During Stage II of the analysis procedure, the interpretations of the data relevant to each variable and the interrelationships among variables for each subject were compared to those for the other subjects in the sample. The aggregate out-

come of Stage I, which organized and interpreted the data for each individual subject and family, and Stage II, which compared the observations across subjects, constituted the validation of group trends and individual differences.

The methodology described above has been developed borrowing from the ethnographic tradition in qualitative research, whereby the understanding reached about people and their context develops by means of a collaborative effort, involving the investigator and the group members (Fabian 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Tedlock 1983). In order to understand the multideterminism of post-trauma coping and adaptation, we employ a methodology that merges the traumatic event within the context of a life history that probes life pre-trauma as a root of life paths after tragedy.

## Conclusions

There have been a number of studies of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. What is distinctive about this study? In addition to the unique elements discussed above, we feel allied with the viewpoint expressed by one of the interviewees in the study of survivor testimonies by Langer (1991: 205): 'I think there are as many ways of surviving survival as there have been to survive.' This comment underlines what LaCapra (1994: 197) has suggested about 'the danger of homogenizing or overgeneralizing about the experience of victims or survivors'. By gathering the narratives of all generations, this study speaks to the complex process of surviving, as well as to the cultural integration of survivor experiences in the form of narratives transmitted through several generations.

The struggle to unravel the dilemma of having endured inhumanity in the past continues to preoccupy trauma victims as they seek to re-evaluate their survival, including Jews whose collective memory of trauma is ritualized with cultural narratives that link past and present. Every memory, Janet wrote over a century ago, is an act of creation, a fluid process that evolves continuously all the time as people adjust their internal schemes to external reality (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth 1996). The lessons of the Holocaust are many, among them the capacity of individuals to use their memories to weave a narrative of survival that forms the foundation of meaning, and the foundation of self and of one's role in family and community.

## Notes

- 1 The research project can be traced back to 1986, when the University of Pennsylvania's Marriage Council of Philadelphia, one of the country's leading centres for the study of the family and human relationships, now known as the Council for Relationships, sponsored a conference entitled 'Holocaust and Genocide', organized and chaired by one of the Marriage Council's senior staff members, Dr Bea Hollander-Goldfein. After the conference, a group of mental health practitioners and social scientists began to meet several

- times a year as a study group to review the available scholarship on this issue. Out of their discussion of research and methodological concerns grew the Transcending Trauma Project and its unique interview and evaluation instruments. From 1991 until the formal onset of the project in August 1993, the original study group evolved into the nucleus of the project's research team, engaged primarily in conducting pilot interviews with selected survivors and their children. During this period, the team continued to refine the semi-structured questionnaire guides, the data-collection reports, and the consent forms. Currently, 275 transcripts are on file, and comprehensive protocols for analysing the data have been established. The research is conducted in accordance with the United States code of ethics mandatory for all studies involving human subjects.
- 2 Researching transformational processes is difficult. Longitudinal investigation would be the preferred method, but since this is often impossible it is critically important that trauma research incorporates a time frame that approaches the study of survival as a process. There are numerous constructs in the literature to describe, explain, and study the coping strategies of trauma victims. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989), Horowitz (1971), Horowitz, Wilner, and Alveraz (1979), Janoff-Bulman (1989), Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and Taylor (1983) are among those who have tried to move the field beyond the simplistic categorization and pathologization of trauma victims.
  - 3 Items for this survey were derived from the Jewish Population Study conducted in 1990 by the Council of Jewish Federations, from the work of Cohen (1989), who assesses trends in the American Jewish community, and from the researchers' conceptualization of the transmission process.

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