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SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST AND THEIR CHILDREN

Despite the importance given in their narratives to the birth of their children and grandchildren, in most of the interviews I conducted with Holocaust survivors they do not discuss their children or family life in detail. Rather, for many of them, discussion is generally connected to how or what they have explained to their children about their experiences during the war. Survivors’ preoccupation with this issue could be understood as a response to the context in which they find themselves, in which a particular social discourse about survivors has developed. This discourse arguably engendered particular responses from survivors: it is a question that survivors expect to be asked, and it is seen as part of their prescribed role. Based on over 50 narrative interviews with survivors of the Holocaust, this article explores how survivors reflect and understand their parenting. It examines to what extent their behaviour has been influenced by their experiences during the war, or in reaction to a particular social discourse. Whilst literature on the second generation has been predominantly based on the responses of the children of survivors, this article provides important evidence of how survivors reflect on and understand their parenting.

During the war, many Jewish victims were driven to survive by the hope that they would be reunited with their families. Indeed, for many, it was the most important reason to survive. Hannah Starman writes,

When this hope proved to be false, which frequently happened, survivors often sought to start a new family. Recreating a family was seen as a concrete act to compensate for the losses, counter the massive disruption and undo the attempted dehumanisation and loneliness they had experienced. Many survivors whose families were murdered longed to renew their lives by bringing healthy children into the world.1

For survivors of the Holocaust, children have therefore assumed special significance. Judith Kestenberg explains, “Each child is a symbol of defeat for Hitler’s genocide. Child rearing is an obligation”.2 Based on a qualitative study of the life stories of over 50 Holocaust survivors conducted in both Israel and Australia, the focus of my research was to examine how these survivors have made sense of their pasts. The interviewees were asked to speak about their lives in an open-ended, unstructured interview. The unstructured interview is an effective way to elicit an individual’s life story, in which the interviewee is able to construct and present both their personal experiences and the meanings they have derived from their lives. An equal number of men and women were interviewed, in Israel between 1999 and 2001, and in Australia between
2005 and 2007. The length of the interviews varied from two to seven hours. Most of the interviewees were child survivors—the oldest to be interviewed was born in 1921, the youngest in 1942. However, the majority were born after 1925. The nature of their wartime experiences varied significantly. A large number survived the war in hiding, a significant number survived through protection papers in Budapest, and others were ghettoized and transported to death camps (predominantly Auschwitz–Birkenau). The survivors in Australia were mainly Hungarian, while those in Israel were born in different European countries. This study does not claim to be representative of the experience of all survivors of the Holocaust, but rather provides us with insights into a particular type of pattern of behaviour and responses, which enriches and contributes to our understanding of the experiences of Holocaust survivors in rebuilding their lives and their emotional worlds.

The connection between children and the loss of their loved ones is clearly seen in many of the interviews I have conducted with survivors of the Holocaust. Rivka’s testimony epitomizes these sentiments; as she explains,

Seventy members of my family perished in the Holocaust and when we were seventy again including my children and grandchildren I said to my children: I have done what I have needed to do…

Despite the importance given in their narratives to the birth of their children and grandchildren, in most of the interviews I conducted with child survivors of the Holocaust they do not discuss their children or family life in detail. Rather, for many of them, discussion is generally connected to how or what they have explained to their children about their experiences during the war. Reflections on their parenting may be understood in the context of the developmental stage in which ageing survivors find themselves, which according to Erik Erikson, encourages individuals to perform a life review. As they confront the issue of their approaching mortality, many of the survivors may feel the need to explain their behaviour, particularly to their children.

Survivors’ preoccupation with this issue could also be understood as a response to the context in which they find themselves, in which a particular social discourse about survivors has developed. Literature on the second generation, which focuses on the intergenerational transmission of trauma, has become increasingly widespread in all countries where survivors live. The proliferation of literature, conferences and social support groups on the part of the second generation has evolved into an increasingly public social discourse about Holocaust survivors and the second generation. A focus of this discourse is whether survivors verbally communicated their past with their children, as a central indicator in the intergenerational transmission of trauma. This discussion arguably engendered particular responses from survivors during their interviews: it is what Robert Kraft has called a “narrative expectation”—a question that survivors expect to be asked, and is understood as something that society wants to know about. As Shalom points out in his interview, “Your next question that I know you will ask will be; did you tell your children?”.

However, survivors’ concerns regarding their ability to parent children pre-date second-generation discourse. Writings from the war period, and memoirs and testimonies collected from survivors, reveal their deep anxieties over their ability to reproduce. They also expressed concern over their abilities to raise their children and provide them
with an emotionally and physically secure and supportive environment. Because of their traumatic pasts, survivors were anxious about their own children’s safety in the world, as during the Holocaust the victims’ (borrowing Ronnie Janoff Bulman’s expression) “assumptive world was shattered”\(^7\) and, for many survivors, belief in a benevolent and just world was crushed. Feelings of security were destroyed, and many became fearful that they and their children could become victims once again. They also questioned their ability to parent effectively after all that they had witnessed and endured. Survivors were also particularly concerned that memories of the past would be transmitted to their children, who might then inherit the burden of their traumatic pasts.

Whilst literature on the second generation has been predominantly based on the responses of the children of survivors, this article reveals how survivors understand the impact the Holocaust has had on their parenting; if and how has it affected their own behaviour as parents and feelings of competence. This work also attempts to understand the extent to which conversation regarding the second generation and the intergenerational transmission of trauma affected the way they understand and interpret their parenting. It also provides a rare glimpse of how survivors have responded to ritualized discussions about themselves and their behaviour.

**Historical anxiety over parenthood**

Victims during the war and survivors in the early post-war years contemplated their ability to “do the work of mothering”\(^8\) after all they had witnessed and experienced. During the war, women particularly were fearful that, because of the difficult physical conditions endured in ghettos and camps, they would not be able to reproduce after the war. Michal Unger notes that in the Lodz ghetto, “Hunger and disease caused most of the women to stop menstruating and rendered many men impotent”.\(^9\) Thus, the rapid deterioration of their bodies often became a source of anxiety regarding their ability to live productive and “normal” lives after the war. In the early post-war years, there was also considerable concern amongst survivors about parenthood. Shammai Davidson writes that during pregnancy, survivors “often suffered from depression and fears that they were abnormal and damaged, and therefore were not qualified to marry and bear children. Their negative self-image also made them fear that the child born to them would be abnormal”.\(^10\) Furthermore, “[t]hese anxieties occasionally resulted in miscarriage, amenorrhea, or periods of sterility”.\(^11\) The marriages made in the early post-war years were often fraught with difficulties. Davidson writes, “On release from the camps, the ability of many of the survivors to make satisfactory human relations was seriously impaired”.\(^12\) Lacking warmth and meaning in their lives, “they concentrated all their hopes of finding these by bearing children”.\(^13\) Survivors’ impulse and desire to continue life was overwhelming. However, child-rearing was not a simple task. As Judith Kestenberg explains, they were often

...burdened with the continual fear that a holocaust would recur as their nightmares did. They were plagued by questions of what was safest for the children; living in a Jewish or gentile neighborhood; becoming famous and well known or hidden in a crowd; talking about one’s cruel fate or burying the past in silence; seeking revenge or forgiving; creating many children to defy genocide or having none as a precaution against further child killings...\(^14\)
Parenting and child survivors

Issues relating to parenting are somewhat different for child survivors of the Holocaust from those of adult survivors. Whilst many adult survivors were parents during the war, child survivors were children, and in their narratives they recollect how their parents responded and behaved. For the most part, adult survivors had the experience of a “normal” childhood and upbringing. They also have valuable memories of their parents as independent and productive people who, for the most part, fulfilled their roles as caretaker and provider. Usually adult survivors have conventional parenting role models. However, for most child survivors, childhood was usually experienced in the context of trauma in which their parents’ ability to function as parents was severely and ultimately denied. Their memories of their parents include images of their hunger, emotional distress and impotence. Some children witnessed their parents being tortured and killed. Most of the children who survived the war did so without parents, separated from them as they went into hiding, unsure if they were ever see one another again. In many cases children were not reunited with their parents and were orphaned from a very young age. Others were lucky to find each other. Occasionally the relationship between them had radically altered, as children often found their parents “unrecognizable” after their harrowing experiences. Often parents found it difficult to parent their survivor children after all they had experienced. Child survivors’ recollections of parenthood are of one in extremis. The Holocaust constructed a reality in which parents were essentially powerless to provide for and protect their children. As Debórah Dwork writes, during the war “[i]t was a paradox: to save ones child [through hiding] one had to accept that one was unable to protect and defend the child”.15 Furthermore, many child survivors grew up without any parenting role models. This is reflected in Shalom’s interview, in which he explains:

I do not have a role model as to how to parent our children—how our parents parented us. You don’t have precedents how to behave in certain situations. How did father behave, how did mother behave? You go according to your instincts… sometimes it’s not right… normal people, has a reference…

The issue of children’s memories of their parents’ behaviour or parenting styles during the war is complex. Psychologists have examined adults’ memories of the parenting styles of their parents, and have argued that these memories are complicated and cannot reflect the historical reality. Halverson questions the accuracy and reliability of early memories. Specifically, he argues that people, and children in particular, do not remember the details of complex events, especially the parenting process, as the schema for children regarding parenting may not be available for children during their childhood. Children lack the experience to categorize parenting, and many children do not track or encode parenting practices particularly well. Halverson asks how they can, therefore, recall what their parents were like when they were younger. He suggests, “when remembering the past, adults tend to interpret and reconstruct events in terms of their present personalities”.16 This suggests that memories of parenting are constructed around the survivors’ contemporary issues and concerns. Furthermore, he argues that the children probably base their ideas on current knowledge of their parents, and are also influenced by the particular folklore or mythology that parents determine
about their parenting, which “is used as a basis for reconstructing what the family must have been like at an earlier period”. 17

Following Halverson’s theories, survivors’ memories of their parents’ parenting patterns during the war are constructed around their own experiences and concerns as parents: their fear of vulnerability and powerlessness, which is projected onto memories of their parents’ behaviour. However, based on the narratives I have examined, I would argue that the opposite dynamic holds true in situations of acute trauma. The experience of witnessing the emotional and physical breakdown of one’s parents, and their inability to fulfil their parenting role, became a defining memory of their parents’ struggle to be parents—or perhaps one of the most lasting images of their parents, which was internalized, and became a spectre of dread in their own lives as parents. In a sense, these memories become “traumatic grafts” and are often incorrectly transplanted onto real-life situations . 18 Consequently, as Shammai Davidson notes, “the children live out their parents’ styles. The children repeat their parents’ attempted solutions of danger; flight or fight reactions are unconsciously transmitted from one generation to another”. 19 This behaviour extends beyond a learned behaviour, but relates to what Dori Laub and Nannette Auerhahn define as a “life theme”: a “unique personality configuration, deriving from the particular way that the individual perceived and distilled his or her traumatic legacy.” 20

From a close reading of these interviews, it became increasingly clear that survivors’ conception of parenting and their behaviour as parents was closely linked to their experiences and their witnessing of their own parents’ behaviour during the war. Insofar as parenting skills are (to a certain degree) learned, many survivors acquired parenting skills in an environment such as this, in which the ability to parent was fundamentally challenged. 21 These patterns of behaviour often became “an unconscious organizing principle passed on by parents and internalized by their children”. 22 Throughout their parenting lives, many of the interviewees understood their role, function and accomplishments as parents in reference to an extreme situation, and as providing for their children what they were denied. This dynamic was not always conscious to the interviewee, but emerged through the thematic analysis of the texts.

Yafe: “Because I want to continue to function”

Yafe’s narrative provides us with a moving example of a survivor’s experiences during the war affecting her understanding of parenthood, and determining, to some degree, the way she parented her own children. Yafe’s interview articulates her own insecurities regarding her ability to parent, which stem from her wartime experiences, and her struggle to prevent herself from modelling her mother’s behaviour. Yafe is a bright, engaging woman who has a remarkable memory. Our interview was a journey into the past, and also one in which she was a witness to her own self-understanding and self-discovery. Yafe was born in Paris in 1931. Soon after the invasion of France, her father was conscripted into the army. Yafe and her brother were sent to live with a non-Jewish woman in Paris, and then to an orphanage. Her mother and baby sister were sent to a concentration camp. At a certain point Yafe and her brother were separated, and Yafe went to live with an elderly French woman who was hiding other Jewish children. After the war, she was reunited with her brother, sister and mother.
Her mother had survived the war in a mental institution, and when Yafe found her, she was a broken woman. Seeing her mother in the asylum for the first time after the war, Yafe explains, “I couldn’t believe that this was my mother… she had no teeth and no nails”.

Central to Yafe’s story is her relationship with her mother, and how it has affected her own mothering. According to Yafe’s story, her mother did not “fulfill her idealized role as provider”. Her mother’s emotional collapse during and after the war has dominated Yafe’s own thoughts on mothering, and as she reveals in her interview, “I am battling, and that’s why I am in therapy. Because I want to continue to function. I am very scared that I will become like my mother”.

In the early days following the occupation of France, the family mistakenly got word that Yafe’s father had been killed. Yafe remembers her mother breaking down after hearing this news:

My sister was six months old and was only breastfed. The baby screamed, my brother cried. My brother did not want me to comb his hair. I was a big girl and I wanted him to be nicely combed and dressed like a sailor. Mother only cried. When she lay down she lost consciousness. The baby cried and I heard I saw the baby on mother but she did not feed her. It was terrible. So I found a bit of smelly camembert cheese and I mixed it with water and sugar and I forced my sister to eat it… until today she thanks me because she so loves that cheese… maybe because of that I saved her. It was terrible.

According to her narrative, Yafe also managed to save her mother. Realizing the family had no food, she collected some old towels and socks and went to the German garrison to sell her wares. She recalls that they did not see her as the young Jewish girl she was, but as a young child whom they were pleased to help. Yafe came home with money and black bread, which reminded her mother of the bread from Poland. So that’s how she recovered slightly and began to look after the baby. When father came back she began to function again and began to feed my sister and somehow we had a relatively normal life despite the restrictions…

When reflecting on these experiences, Yafe remarks how she lost her childhood at eight-and-a-half when she was forced to take care of her entire family in the face of impossible circumstances. Yet, Yafe does recall one incident in which her mother decided that she needed to survive, despite her suffering, for the sake of her children. She remembers her mother telling her that in one of the camps in which she was interned, she was experimented on without an anaesthetic. Yafe remembers her mother telling her how she shouted

“Shema yisrael, let me live… I must live so that I can educate my children in the yiddisher way.” She didn’t know where we were. People died like flies… those who didn’t know what had happened to their children were scared that they no longer had something to live for. Natasha once said, if you have something to live for, you can endure almost anything. So mother hoped that she still had something…
However, after the war, she reflects, “she was sorry she survived. But during that time, she wanted to live for her children. She realized she still had another job to do in life”. Yafe, like her mother, had been suffering emotionally as a result of her wartime experiences. However, she sought help so that she would be able to fulfil her role as provider and caretaker. Interestingly, she uses the same rationale as her mother. During the interview, Yafe explains,

I survived because I have a mission. G-d did not keep me alive for nothing. It seems that I needed to establish a family. It seems that I needed to educate them according to the way I know.

This extract reveals how Yafe has internalized her mother’s *raison d’être*: she is pushed to survive her emotional ordeal in order to be a parent and raise her children and educate them according to particular ideals, in which they both strongly believed. As far as Yafe is concerned, she managed to prevent her own emotional distress from affecting her children, and fulfilled her role as a mother. She explains:

I was sure that my children did not suffer from the *Shoah*. I raised my children. My children went to B’nei Akiva, they went to B’nei Akiva camps. They went on yearly *tiyulim*. I was not a mother who was too overprotective.

Yafe’s use of the example of *tiyulim* and the concept of being “overprotective” is meaningful. The source of this idea is revealed later in her interview when she recalls that in one of her talks, a young woman, a child of survivors, asked her if she had allowed her children to go on *tiyulim*, because her own mother had not allowed her to do so. Consequently, Yafe uses the example of *tiyulim* to prove that her parenting, in contrast to that of the other survivors, has not been marked by her wartime experiences. She has been able to allow her children the independence they needed. Yafe does not recognize or identify with the young woman’s experience and remains resolute that she has successfully raised her children and prevented the past from affecting them or her parenting. Therefore, she is surprised to find out that her children felt that her behaviour had been somewhat dysfunctional while they were growing up.

**David: a repair strategy**

David’s narrative provides us with an insight into how his own parenting is constructed—in particular, as a reaction to his own father’s wartime decisions. David was born in 1927 in Nekomy, Southern Hungary. In 1938, the family moved to Budapest and after the Nazi invasion in 1944 life became very difficult; according to David, a “struggle to survive”. David survived the war in Budapest by procuring false identity papers for himself and his mother. His father, who had been deported to Auschwitz, survived and returned after the war. David’s brother was conscripted into a forced labour battalion and was sent to Russia. Fortunately, he also survived.

Interestingly, David’s narrative is the only one in my collection that directly criticizes his father’s strategy for survival and response to the war. In raising his own children, David made a radical decision which he believes will protect them—something
which he thinks his own father did not do. David and his father shared very different views with regard to how to respond to the antisemitic legislation and the Nazi’s anti-Jewish policies. David’s father believed that Jews would be protected by the Hungarians as long as they continued to be loyal, law-abiding citizens. David, a youth growing up in an era of anti-Jewish legislation and increasing antisemitism, had developed an alternate worldview. He reflects on their differing outlook:

Possibly Hungarian Jews were fairly law-abiding. [They were] brought [up to believe] that the law was on your side, which was ridiculous because the law blatantly was out to kill you.

Their first disagreement was over whether David could flee Hungary and join the partisans in Yugoslavia. He remembers that his father was:

terribly disappointed that I even thought of such a thing. And “good Jewish boys don’t do things like this and let’s play their game and everything will be okay.” […] But you see I wasn’t alone there were other kids who were not going on with their father’s values. Most of us did… most did… Look, I respected my father, I got no problems with him and yet I knew he was wrong. I knew he was wrong.

David also remembers arguing with his father over joining the forced labour battalions, and also whether he should procure forged identity papers. David’s father did not agree to this. In this instance, David decided not to listen to his father, and managed to secure papers for both himself and his mother. David recalls,

I do remember now that I came up with other bright ideas to my father and of course he rubbished all of them. He didn’t want me to do any of it… [silence] …I am not sure I ever told him that I had false papers, you know… I have to think about that too.

David’s decision to procure forged identity papers, and thereby disobey his father, is what saved both his and his mother’s life during the war. Interestingly, this survival strategy seems to have guided his parenting. During his interview, one of the few references he makes about his children concerns their Jewish identity. He explains that he did not want his sons to have a bar mitzvah, as “I didn’t want them to carry the same baggage that I had, if there is a way out of it”. Perhaps with these words David is telling us that unlike his father, he felt that it was important to provide his children with some “way out” if needed in order to survive.

Another image of parenting that emerges from some of these interviews is an idealized view of parents who were either active in their rescue, or had been killed during the war.²⁴ Some of the interviewees tell stories of their parents heroically engineering their survival. Anne explains how her mother was

…the driving force of my survival too. In every situation she was… she just didn’t follow the rules and that was her character… and without her I probably would [not] be here… she must have had this optimism and strength and big determination to survive at any cost…
However, nowhere in her interview does she reflect on her own parenting, or use the model of her mother to guide her. Rather, her mother’s behaviour is seen as exceptional. Anne presents her mother as a heroine, a figure that is perhaps impossible for Anne to emulate.

Postwar parenting

These interviews also demonstrated how some child survivors internalized their parents’ postwar behaviour, especially in relation to how to manage and transmit the past. In Ivan’s interview, he observes that his silence was instigated and directed by his father’s. During the war, Ivan and his mother had been deported to Auschwitz, where she was selected to die. He knew she had died after seeing her corpse a few days later in the area of the crematorium. After the war, Ivan returned home to find his father, who had survived. After his return, he explains:

[F]or about 3–4 weeks my father didn’t ask, and I did not start to talk to him about what’s happened to mum. It was a subject we did not discuss until, a few weeks later he finally sat down and said, “What about mum?” And then I told him what happened. Apart from that I have not really spoken about that part of my life, for oh... 45 years; not even to my own grown-up children, family or wife.

Child survivors often kept their past to themselves because they were told to do so by parents, adults and teachers. Adults often believed that “sanity, healing and reconstruction were not served by memory but by forgetfulness”. Yael Danieli, in her work with Holocaust survivors, identified a “conspiracy of silence”, which dictates the regime of their lives. Danieli writes that during the war and after liberation, “survivors of the Holocaust encountered a pervasive societal reaction consisting of indifference, avoidance, repression, and denial of their Holocaust experiences”, which engendered their silence: “like other victims, they were also told to ‘let bygones be bygones’ and get on with their lives”. Some elected silence to protect them from the pain of remembering.

When deciding how to raise their children, many survivors, including child survivors, believed that by keeping their past silent, they would prevent their children from growing up with images of the Holocaust. This is clearly seen from my interview with Thomas, during which he explains that his “family knows more or less what happened. But we haven’t been talking a great deal in details”, as he finds it “something difficult to talk about”. Indeed, it was clear from our interview that his retelling was particularly painful for him. As he struggled to tell his story, he was overwhelmed by emotion. However, in his interview he contemplates when the most appropriate time is to “sit down with the family and talk about it”. He surmises that the most opportune time would be after his son, Anton, gets married. Anton’s marriage presents Thomas with the appropriate “autobiographical occasion”. The connection between Anton’s marriage and retelling arguably reflects the connection between silence/retelling and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Marriage may signify for Thomas his son’s independence and emotional stability. It demonstrates Thomas’s achievements in having brought up a “normal” child who is self-sufficient and emotionally stable: Anton has not
been affected by the trauma of the past, and therefore Thomas feels more at ease about sharing his past.

Silence would also help them maintain an image of themselves as “normal” people. For some, it was particularly important to keep what they felt was “their degradation and humiliation secret” in order to parent effectively. Eliezer, who survived the war in hiding in the French countryside, explains that he did not tell his children about his past during the war because:

I don’t think that as parents... I always did it instinctively... and now it does not bother them... a father needs to be a person who is strong and initiates. So to begin to tell them those shmattes... it is demeaning... it does not add anything and it also will not help anything. They need to judge me according to what they see in me...

**Confronting parenthood: the second-generation discourse**

Since the late 1970s, the children of Holocaust survivors have begun to reflect on their childhood and their parent’s behaviour and how their parents’ past impacted on their own psychological development. Their concerns grew into a wider social discourse, which made the claim that extreme traumatization had a detrimental effect on survivors’ capacity for parenting. It questioned survivors’ ability to provide what Natan Kellerman has described as “an adequate maturational environment for their children”. According to a number of researchers, this discourse has for the most part pathologized the survivors’ behaviour. One question that has been central to this discussion is whether survivors have spoken about their past to their children. The literature interprets survivors’ decision to remain silent as being an unhealthy, maladaptive response. Carol Kidron argues that a particular discourse has emerged that has “pathologized silent responses to trauma”. She writes, “The field of psychology has framed silence as the failure of speech, as dysfunctional absence in need of therapeutic redemption”. While Kidron notes a move towards the pathologization of silence in the psychological discourse of trauma, second-generation literature also claims that while some survivors choose to silence their past, others are committed to telling it—and in some cases have “flooded” their children with their stories, resulting in problematic relationships.

It is clear from these interviews that the second-generation discourse has made a significant impact on the way these survivors interpret their parenting. This discourse functions as a language through which survivors articulate and communicate these anxieties. This dynamic is reflected in Aaron’s interview, in which he explains that he did not tell his children about his wartime experiences because he did not want them to be affected like “the second generation”. For survivors like Aaron, this discourse has been functional: it provides survivors with a way of communicating and conceptualizing their anxieties and fears.

The social discourse is also used by some of the interviewees to assess and to support their parenting. This is most clearly seen in Sara’s interview. Sara was born in 1931, in Carpathian Ruthenia. When the Nazis took over Hungary in 1944, Sara and her family were forced to live in a ghetto for a brief period before their deportation to Auschwitz. In the ghetto, Sara remembers how she became the one who sought food for the family,
becoming (in her words) “the main provider”. Because she was small, she managed to escape the ghetto at night, unnoticed, risking her life, to find food from the non-Jewish Hungarian population. After a brief time in the ghetto, Sara and her family were deported to Auschwitz. The children were separated from their parents on the ramp, and Sara and her sister were forced to survive alone for the duration of the war. Sara describes how she assumed the role of protector as she helped her sister to survive. This experience became a “life theme” in relation to her parenting. In her interview she explains that becoming a mother triggered feelings of vulnerability—particularly her own fears concerning her ability to protect her children. Her anxiety is reflected in her re-telling of a recurring dream:

when my younger son was born… One night I dreamed… and he was a tiny baby… he was just born… I was walking with him and holding his hand… like I was carrying him through the air and the Nazis were running after us and shooting. I escaped and I got to an abyss and could not go further and he was pulled like he was in the abyss and I was holding his hand but could not pull him out. I woke up and that dream has been chasing me my whole life. Today when I remember it, I see it before my eyes, it’s a terrible thing.

Sara’s feelings are arguably connected to her wartime experiences and her memories of her parents during that period in which they were unable to protect their children. While she acknowledges that the war has affected her emotional world, she does not believe that it has affected her parenting: her children are alive and have built successful lives for themselves. She relates,

I think I changed when I became a mother. I think that I am the only one in the world that has children. What I have, no one in the world has. I was very scared for them. Even today I am a nervous mother, worry a lot. I have two sons in the army [as a profession]. The oldest one he is a s’gan aluf, he has been wounded but is still in the army… I have a son who is a pilot and he is in the army and sometimes we don’t sleep at night. […] It’s not simple, but OK… have to continue, need a lot of strength.

It is clear that Sara is an anxious mother and is constantly concerned for her children’s safety. While parents’ concern for their children in the army is arguably universal, Sara’s anxiety is also fed by the legacy of her past: her fear of powerlessness in guaranteeing their safety. In a sense, her recurring nightmare is real. Despite these difficult feelings, Sara is confident that she had not transmitted her anxiety to her children. She attributes this to the way she communicated her past with them. Her feelings were validated by her own sons on a trip she made with her family to Auschwitz. She recalls,

The madrich asked my sons, “What type of house did you grow up in? When did you know about the Shoah?”. My sons told wonderful things, things that I did not even know were like that… I was very happy to hear. They didn’t grow up in the Shoah, they did not hear terrible stories, and yet they still know the truth. But it was told to them in the right amount and not in order to frighten them.
Thus, while she relates her difficult feelings as a mother, Sara is comforted by her sons’ response. This extract also demonstrates how Sara absorbed the message that the transmission of trauma occurs through verbal re-telling, and it serves to counter her anxiety. Arguably, this what Henry Greenspan refers to as “ritualized” discourse, which functions as a way to communicate the unspeakable, may also have filtered, obstructed or shielded her from knowing, acknowledging and articulating other means through which transmission might have occurred. Inherent in the question, “Did you tell your children about your past?” is the supposition that transmission is verbal. This discourse does not recognize the powerful effect of other means of transmission, as identified by Kidron, which include corporeal and non-verbal means of transmission.

However, for some survivors the judgment implicit in this discourse is difficult and sometimes painful. Some of the survivors in this study believe that this discourse misrepresents them and misunderstands their parenting and the decisions they made in this regard. For example, in my interview with Alex, he raises the issue voluntarily in order to defend his behaviour.

Alex was born in Hungary in 1929 and at an early age moved with his family to Budapest. After the Nazi takeover of Budapest, Alex’s classics teacher, a man he greatly admired, persuaded him to work as a courier and run errands for the Judenrat. Alex’s father was conscripted for forced labour and he did not survive. Alex’s mother and grandmother were sent on a death march to Austria; they did not survive, either. Alex and his sister survived the war by hiding in various locations while working for the Red Cross. Alex’s interview lasted for seven hours, over three days. He has a remarkable memory and had retained most of the details of his story. The only spontaneous reference he made to his children was in relation to how he communicated his experiences to them. Alex relates:

My children are more interested now than before in what happened in my lifetime. They are much more interested now. When they were young, were teenagers, they were not interested at all… I never tried to ram the Holocaust down their throats… but of course there are a lot of things that I do that keep on reminding me of the Holocaust.

Alex’s words aptly demonstrate Kraft’s notion of “narrative expectation”. These few lines demonstrate how the second-generation discourse shapes what survivors say. It indicates how some survivors anticipate that their behaviour is being judged. It is clear to Alex why he thinks it has been important to share his past with his children. He is committed to telling his story not only to commit it to history, but also as a way of explaining who he is. I would argue that his need to share his past is also connected to his experiences during the war which required him to act as a witness to, and chronicler of, events. Alex’s words also reflect how his behaviour might have been judged as damaging to his children, and he is quick to defend himself against this claim.

Confronting survivor parenting

Second-generation literature suggests that various patterns of behaviour facilitated the transmission of trauma between survivors and their offspring. Often, survivors are
unaware of how some of their behaviour is perceived and interpreted. Yafe was shocked by her daughter-in-law’s revelation that the past had been acutely felt by her son growing up, particularly regarding issues relating to food. This is revealed in the following extract:

One day my daughter-in-law... called me and asked me “How was your talk today at school?” and I said, “It was interesting; there was a teacher who asked me what kind of a mother I was to my children”. So I told her that Thank-G-d my children never felt like that their mother was a Holocaust survivor. So my daughter-in-law said, “Good, I have news for you. Ask your son if he does not know that you are a survivor...”. My son told her how she kept food... you made things out of old bread... you never threw a piece of bread away... You forced us to finish the food on our plate until the last crumb, we had to finish. There was never any food that you were prepared to throw away. You made food out of food that was not so fresh... and we had to eat everything. Food was never thrown away.

How did you feel when he said that?

I was shocked. I was sure that I was totally fine as a mother.

Yafe’s definition of the role of a mother is that she must be able to function physically and emotionally and provide for her children’s needs, something that her mother had failed to do at times during the war. This was the way she understands the role of mothering. According to her, she has succeeded as a parent; she has not broken down, but has functioned way beyond her own expectations. She has also not contemplated other ways in which her trauma might have been transmitted, and when confronted with a counter claim, she feels misunderstood and hurt. She explains,

Now it’s difficult for me. Now I feel that I really do not have any more energy. I want them to love me, to spoil me, that they will be good to me. I did everything I could. My whole life I was very active. Now I feel that I am really tired. I am a wonderful grandmother to my grandchildren. I go on trips with my children and everything...

These words reflect Yafe’s hurt and frustration: she feels that she has done her best, and yet has been judged by her son as unsuccessful. Yafe feels unappreciated for the effort she has made raising her children and rebuilding her life after all she has experienced.

Survivors’ sense of shock or amazement can be explained on a number of levels. Research suggests that survivors’ inability to recognize their children’s difficulties may be connected to the legacy of trauma. Appelyard and Osofsky write that parental anxiety is one of the effects of trauma, and “may result in an inability to listen to or hear their children’s distress”. Starman notes, “survivor parents were often unable to have conversations about feelings, which is at the core of emotional parental accessibility”. Children did not have sufficient confidence in their parents to approach them with problems. They felt that they could not share feelings with their parents, and also described their parents as unable to communicate their emotions. Hass suggests that most survivors have “an exaggerated need to perceive their children as happy and problem-free”.

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Furthermore, some survivors may not have the ability to observe their own behaviour. Richard Freedman’s work on Australian Jewish autobiography has drawn attention to the cultural generation gap that exists between survivors and their parents. He observes that Australian Jewish immigrants usually write their autobiographies in a “relatively unselfconscious way… Their narratives focus almost entirely on external events and developments with only the most cursory references to how things felt at a given time”. He explains that “elaborate self-awareness of the kind now so familiar in the Western world is by no means a universal cultural phenomenon”. Rather, he points out, “Eastern European cultural worlds did not encourage psychological—as opposed to moral—introspection”. By contrast, the second generation has been brought up in a culture of introspection and self-evaluation. Freedman’s work sensitizes us to the cultural generation gap between survivors and their children who have different ways of relating to life and experience, which creates the possibility of misunderstanding and hurt.

Often, opinions regarding survivors’ behaviour do not take into account the supreme efforts that survivors have made in rebuilding their lives. Dan Bar-On and Julia Chaitan point out that “most of the literature that looks at parenthood after the Holocaust has tended to paint a rather unhappy picture of the survivors’ ability to provide their own children with a ‘normal’ family life”. Narrative psychologist Ruthellen Josselson notes that parents’ need to be “perfect parents” is not unique to Holocaust survivors. The difficulties parents have when children criticize their behaviour are common concerns. However, I would argue that survivors’ drive to be “perfect parents” is exacerbated, or taken to the extreme, in light of what they experienced during the war when they witnessed parenting in extremis which involved issues of life and death. Survivors’ sense of shock can also be read as a reflection of their deep emotional pain as their original anxieties concerning parenthood after trauma are confirmed: despite their efforts, the past has affected their children. Yael Danieli explains,

Accepting psychological problems threatened the parents’ need to deny the Holocaust’s long-term emotional effects, which they also viewed as evidence of Hitler’s posthumous victory. Worse, openly acknowledging their own psychological problems or those of their children diminished their self-image as perfect parents and their view of their offspring as “perfectly normal”. Some experienced anything that may imply loss of control over, or mastery of, any situation as a total, retraumatizing threat.

Second-generation literature and criticism of the behaviour of the second generation by their own children engenders a feeling of double victimization: not only are they condemned to their hideous memories, but so too are their children. Greenspan remarks, “Indeed, within this rhetoric, the nightmarish past was not only resurrected but had gained virtual possession of the intergenerational future”. This extends their feelings of victimization. As Shalom puts it, “So you begin to think that maybe you are tagged… it’s not a nice feeling”.

I would argue that, on a certain level, survivors’ feelings of shock represent a fundamental misunderstanding about what they considered to be effective parenting. In the minds of some survivors, successful parenting is evaluated or measured against
parenting in extremis—according to their ability to feed and physically protect their children—representing the antithesis of their parents’ experiences during the Holocaust. As Judith Hassan writes, “they did not want their children to starve, either literally or metaphorically as they had done. Food, education and comfort were meant to counteract the deprivation they experienced.” In all of my interviews, the survivors have been successful in providing food, shelter and opportunity for their children. Therefore, by their standards, they have indeed succeeded in providing for, and protecting, their children.

However, there are others for whom the literature it has provided insight into their own lives and behaviour despite their initial surprise when they were exposed to it. I asked Shalom:

*Do you feel upset by the research done on the second generation?*

I have almost not read the research. I know Dina Wardi’s book, Memorial Candles, and I think it’s a bit… contrived… I remember at the time I was amazed to hear… there was a researcher called Wang, in Israel, who was the first to speak about the fact that survivors had something “not normal”… more and more I am shocked why I was surprised then…

Today, after confronting his past and thinking about its effects on the second generation, he seems convinced that the intergenerational transmission of trauma is inevitable. The destruction of entire family structures and networks of support during the Holocaust, he believes, “creates a type of person who is not ‘quiet’… who is tense in one way or another… without him even knowing that that’s the way he experiences the world. It is transmitted to the children”. However, after saying this, he has a dialogical moment and he adds, “But also while I talk to you I also think about some of my friends’ children, who are totally fine… their grandchildren are OK… but naturally we pay attention to the difficult cases… you always get the message that the group is slightly different”.

**Conclusions**

Historians and social science researchers have found how, in their post-war environment, survivors of the Holocaust have faced various charges concerning their behaviour both during and after the war. While the intergenerational transmission of trauma has become a “ritualized” social discourse about survivors, these anxieties originate in survivors’ own concerns over their ability to parent after all they have endured, lost and witnessed. Throughout the parenting years, these interviewees tried to find ways to best protect their children from inheriting the burden of their difficult past. In the post-war context, these concerns are echoed in discussions about survivors and have become part of a “checklist of symptoms”. The question, “Did you tell your children about your past?” has, as Greenspan points out, become one of the “habitual ways we orient ourselves when we know we will be listening to survivors”. This in turn has affected survivors’ expectations of how to respond when interviewed, and has also become a marker by which survivors measure or defend their emotional recovery or “success” as
parents. However, while this paper reveals how powerful context is in shaping what survivors say, it also reveals how survivors use this “ritualized discourse” as a way to communicate their experiences and defend their decisions and behaviour. This discourse also functions as a way of obstructing or shielding survivors from recognizing other ways that transmission occurred.

Nevertheless, second-generation literature, or revelations made by sons and daughters about the ways the past has been conveyed to them, has provided some survivors with an important way to understand both themselves and their children. Yet it can also be a source of pain. I would argue that the parents’ sense of shock and hurt is predictable in that these charges reinforce their internal anxieties regarding their ability to parent effectively and transcend their trauma, and they are forced into a defensive position. Furthermore, for the most part, this literature does little to validate survivors’ post-war achievements, and especially does not do enough to acknowledge and praise their resilience and efforts in rebuilding a life for themselves and their children.

Shalom’s last words are crucial for our own discussion, in that they reflect the notion that while this discourse has provided some important insights for survivors and their children, the intergenerational transmission of trauma has become the causal explanation for maladaptive second-generation emotional patterns that may not be connected to the survivor status of their parents. Shalom’s words caution us against the powerful drive that has pathologized survivors and their children.

The resilience of this image of psychopathology may be part of the larger process of stigmatizing Holocaust survivors as “damaged people”, which (as Greenspan comments) began in the early post-war years and has become “more clinical, but no less persistent”. Carol Kidron’s work claims that although some survivors did carry over particular behaviour and practices from the “death-world”, this did not necessarily mean that the transmission was pathological. Rather, it may be considered as “familial memory work”, embedded in tacit forms of parent–child relations. Therefore, while survivors in their narratives respond to a particular discourse about their behaviour that does reflect their own internal anxieties, they also show signs of resistance against identifying with a literature that for the most part does little to validate their struggles and achievements in “their self-rehabilitation from a point of an entirely devastated life”. Future research is needed to explore other ways in which survivors exhibit their resilience to their children in order to balance what has become an increasingly pathological discourse.

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**Notes**


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4. Comment made in conversation with Dr. Carol Kidron.
5. Davidson acknowledges that issues relating to the second generation became more apparent in the 1960s. Works such as Helen Epstein’s “Children of the Holocaust” (1979) pushed the issue of the second generation to the fore.
12. Davidson, “Holding onto Humanity”, 92
13. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 438.
21. Interestingly, there also exists a parallel process of idealization of a parent, usually the one who perished during the war.
24. For more on this issue, see Bar-On and Chaitan’s work.
26. Silence was internally and externally motivated: they did not appear to be weak, they wanted to pour their energies into rebuilding their lives, and it was possibly because the world was not ready to hear their stories.
28. Ibid.
29. It must be noted that not all survivors chose to keep the past silent; Bar-On and Chaitan comment that “some survivor-parents either excessively exposed their children to their horror stories, or alternatively, were uncannily silent about their experiences, while using guilt-inducing, non-verbal and indirect styles of communication with their children”.
33. For further discussion on this matter see Kellerman, “Perceived Parental Rearing Behavior”.
35. Ibid.
36. Hassan, The House Next Door to Trauma, 57.
37. For a rich discussion of how transmission can take place through non-verbal means, see Kidron, “Toward an Ethnography of Silence”.
39. During the war, Alex was a young boy who was recruited by the Judenrat in Budapest to work as a courier, ferrying information to various Jewish organizations around the city. Alex’s mission was to witness the events and report what had transpired. I would
argue that this mission continued after the war, and is most apparent in his tireless efforts to get the war crimes unit to investigate the presence of former Nazis and their collaborators who managed to reach Australia and were not brought to justice. Some research suggests that there is a relationship between the survivors’ wartime experiences and the manner in which they communicate Holocaust-related experiences to their offspring. For more on this issue, see Venaki, Nadler and Gershoni, Family Processes, vol. 24. 1985.

40. Appelyard and Osofsky, “Parenting after Trauma”, 114.
43. Freadman, This Crazy Thing a Life, 45.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 45–6.
49. Hassan, The House Next Door to Trauma, 57.
50. Greenspan, On Listening to Holocaust Survivors, 52.
51. Ibid., 34.
52. Ibid., 48.

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