

Confronting despair: the Holocaust survivor's struggle with ordinary life and ordinary death

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I have a peculiar relationship with death. Although I did not lose anyone close to me until my father died at the age of 82 my life has been filled with death. This is one of the ironies of being a Holocaust survivor.

Because my grandparents were murdered I had neither the privilege of sharing their lives nor the experience of their natural deaths. My aunts and uncles, who were all under 30 years of age, were also murdered. By the war's end there was no one left who was older than my parents.

I was born in 1940, a Dutch Jewish baby in Nazi-occupied Holland. We received our deportation papers to report for "resettlement" on August 19, 1942. My parents found me a place to hide. We made several moves, and then Albert and Violette Munnik took me in. Mrs. Munnik appeared miraculously on a social visit to my first rescuers and, realizing that I was a Jewish child in danger, brought me to her home. There I remained for nearly 3 years. My parents survived separately in hiding, my father in a friend's attic, my mother in terrible circumstances on her own, on false papers.

We were reunited in May 1945. For the first time I cried, complained and screamed: one did not do that while in hiding. My grief was over being forced to leave my Christian parents. Luckily, I had a loving home to return to. Both sets of parents stayed good friends, and all went well. Or did it?

My natural parents were each virtually the only survivors of large orthodox Jewish families. Only my father's nephew survived, and he stayed with his Christian rescuers. We played together every second weekend.

Death began to exert its lingering presence when the few survivors we knew returned and sought us out in our home in The Hague. I was 5 years old. A young man named Simon took off his shirt in our living room. He had just returned from a concentration camp, and the lashes on his back were still fresh. I will never forget him.

A friend of my father's from Amsterdam had fled to Spain at the outbreak of war and enlisted in British Intelligence. He returned and in our living room mourned the death of his wife in Auschwitz. One day there was a knock on our door. There stood his wife. She was insane. With time, she recovered from her experiences.

The stories I heard no child should hear, and so the survivors spoke Yiddish. At first my second cousin translated; she was 3 years older and had fled with her family to Switzerland during the war. After 2 weeks we simply listened in silence, understanding the words but not quite everything of the horrors.

My conclusion at the time? I remember walking to school with an Indonesian friend, engaged in the philosophic speculation of which 6-year-olds are somehow capable. "Where do you think we will die?" I asked. His answer: "In Indonesia." Mine: "In a concentration camp."

Of Holland's prewar Jewish community of 140 000 people, 108 000 were deported, primarily to Sobibor and Auschwitz. Only 3500 returned. Of the 30 000 who went into hiding, roughly half were betrayed or discovered. The final death toll was 85% of Dutch Jewry. In The Hague, 1300 of 20 000 Jews survived. Almost all of our friends and family were gone. Where in fact did they go? And to what kind of death?



Experience

Expérience

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Written memoirs tell us the fate of some. We learn from these how harrowing was the experience of those taken to concentration camps. We learn from such accounts something of what it was like to confront cruel and unnatural death, and the effort of will that it has cost every survivor in the years after the war — even to this day — to resist despair.

Stanislawa Leszynska¹ describes her experience as a midwife when she was prisoner #41355 at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The “so-called maternity ward,” she writes, “was full of rats, which bit off noses, ears, fingers and heels of those patients who could not move or of the seriously ill women.” As a midwife she was forced to preside over death, not life:

Until May 1943 all the newborn babies in the Auschwitz camp were murdered in a cruel manner: they were drowned in a small barrel. This job was performed by Schwester Klara and Schwester Pfani. . . . [They] took turns to watch Jewish mothers giving birth, making it impossible to conceal the fact of the birth of a Jewish infant, which was at once tattooed with the mother’s number and drowned in a barrel, after which the corpse was thrown out of the block. The fate of the remaining infants was the worst: they died a slow hunger death. Their skin turned thin, like parchment, transparent, so that one could see the ten-



Robert Krell with his mother in 1940

dons, veins and bones through it. The Soviet infants stayed alive the longest, about 50% of the women were from the Soviet Union.

Many survivors who bear such a burden of memory are compelled to bear witness to the terrible things they have seen. A survivor once said to me with some urgency, “I have to tell you something. I must tell you this.”

For new revelations of horror I am always prepared yet unprepared. The evil of the Holocaust — confirmed by testimony after testimony — always defies imagination.

“I was there,” he told me. “The SS took 50 pregnant women, and in front of their husbands and fathers slit them open one by one with bayonets.”

I have never been able to dislodge this testimony from my mind. I have imagined what it would be like to be the second woman, the 10th, the 50th, or that woman’s husband. This one account fills my mind with death, abnormal death.

I heard such things at age 6 and age 56; they will reverberate until my death — which sometimes seems to me not a very serious event, one for which I occasionally feel a deep yearning. Even in childhood my dreams were filled with death. The most common involved suffocation, being buried alive or being burned. I suspect all of these themes reflected the accounts I heard from survivors.

Because I was always in touch with my Christian parents and their daughter, Nora, memories of my hiding were confirmed and elaborated, and close calls recollected. The Holocaust did not recede from memory. However, in medical school there was precious little time for matters other than medicine, and I enjoyed a reprieve from my preoccupations. Or perhaps not.

During second year I pounced on a patient who had suffered a cardiac arrest and revived him. Afterwards, everyone said that I looked worse than he did. During my internship in the Philadelphia General Hospital, where the Emergency Department resembled a war zone, I went for the worst of the injured. During a neurology rotation, where in 1 month roughly 25% of patients died, I lost no one. I produced a cocktail of steroids and antibiotics so potent that when given intravenously it made it nearly impossible for the patient to die. Unknowingly, perhaps inappropriately, I fought death. I would not, could not, let my patients die. There is even a picture of me on the front page of the Philadelphia newspaper in 1967, talking a suicidal man down from a bridge railing.

There is something strange about survivors of the Holocaust, something different. Elie Wiesel² describes how, when he emerged from Buchenwald, everyone was trying to help the released prisoners adjust to life. But, according to him, that was not the problem. The problem was to adjust to death. As Wiesel stated, and I paraphrase,



Robert Krell with his father at war's end

“Our problem was to adjust to death. Death was routine, death had become an everyday event. We were surrounded by corpses. How would those of us doomed to die for being born Jews, how would those of us who saw death daily, our deaths, ever view death in its normal course? We had to learn to regain respect for death.”

I think of my father in light of these words. He brought me to synagogue but never opened a book of prayer. Nor would he set foot in a Jewish cemetery, or go to funerals. I believe that, like my father, I have a contempt for death. But what is the implication of that contempt? Do I fear death, or welcome it? My family is so precious to me that I cannot bear the thought of leaving them even for short periods; yet, paradoxically, I have taken great risks with my own health and safety.

The Holocaust was the ultimate perversion of death. The survivors struggle with it to this day. Do the persecutors? I doubt it.

This evil that was done, this causeless hatred, this transformation of malignant words into malignant acts, this ultimate affront to death demonstrates that even though freedom of speech is precious, words of hate can kill. Worst of all is the fact that the mass murder of Jews had no *meaning*. It did not improve Germany's economy, purify its peoples, advance its science or improve its systems of law and medicine. It is this meaninglessness that still affects me.

In 1975 I and some friends and colleagues started a Holocaust symposium for high school students. In 1985 I founded the Vancouver Holocaust Centre Society for Education and Remembrance, and in 1994 we opened a Holocaust Education Centre. I now see that we — although worlds apart from each other, and with different

backgrounds, temperaments and experience — were responding to what Wiesel has described as the meaninglessness of the Holocaust. For, as he states, “if ultimately it is without meaning we must confer meaning upon it.”

The only alternative to this response is total despair, and Jews are forbidden to despair. In David Ben Gurion's words, “A Jew who does not believe in miracles is not a realist.”

And so, resisting despair, Holocaust survivors who came to North America with nothing built the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at enormous financial cost. Penniless, tuberculous immigrants from displaced persons camps who were not deemed acceptable for immigration into Canada participated in rebuilding the State of Israel. Children who survived the Holocaust after years of hiding and torment rose to positions of great responsibility in many countries.

Many physicians and health care workers — those who work with people with AIDS, in hospices or on pediatric oncology wards, for example — do not work with ordinary death. And when one encounters death out of sequence, despair can easily set in. In working with very elderly people, one is faced with a more ordinary confrontation with death. Not that this makes the encounter any easier for family, friends or healers.

We must respect death, and through our respect for it respect the dying. Irrational attempts to prolong life do not dignify death. In the Jewish tradition it is not death that is remembered and sanctified, but life. At the time of death it is the soul that separates and soars. Any person's departure leaves us enriched only if their soul on earth touched ours.

The problem for the survivors is to carry in their hearts and minds so many good souls, so many millions, so many children, so much abnormal death. Gisella Perl,³ a doctor, arrived at Auschwitz in 1948 after 8 days in a sealed boxcar with her parents, husband and son. Imagine it.

There was one latrine for 30 000 to 32 000 women and we were permitted to use it only at certain hours of the day. We stood in line to get into this tiny building, knee deep in human excrement. As we all suffered from dysentery we could rarely wait until our turn came, and soiled our ragged clothes, which never came off our bodies, thus adding to the horror of our existence by the terrible smell which surrounded us like a cloud.

While comforting a patient, Perl placed a small girl's coat under her head. Written on a white label sewn into the lining was a message “I am Julika Farkas, age 5. My father is Desider Farkas from Maramaros Sziget.” Perl writes:

The white label of this fine, light blue coat had a long story to tell. It told me of a blond, blue-eyed little girl, the pride and happiness of her parents, who was one day picked up by cruel Nazi



hands and thrown into a cattle car with her father and mother. During the long trip to Auschwitz little Julika was hungry and thirsty, she cried bitterly in her mother's arms asking for her soft bed, for her warm milk, for a tender word of comfort and love. But mother had lost her power to comfort her child. She could do nothing but hold her close to her heart, stroke the soft blond hair and kiss the tear-filled eyes and even that not for long.

After 8 days the journey ended at the gates of Auschwitz. Julika was torn from her mother's arms, undressed and thrown into a ditch to be burned alive with hundreds and hundreds of little boys and girls. Her mother was spared the torture of remembering her child's fate. She went straight to the gas chambers and found forgetfulness at the merciful hands of death. . . . And now this little blue coat waited to be sent to Germany to clothe another blue-eyed child — perhaps the daughter of her Nazi murderer.

Finally liberated from Bergen-Belsen, Perl wandered from camp to camp, searching for her husband and her son. She soon learned that both had been murdered.

She did not want to live. A suicide attempt failed. A Catholic priest rescued her and asked a French dentist to

look after this woman "whose soul is still very ill after all the horror of many prison camps." Eventually Perl resumed her work, in a hospital in Jerusalem. There she delivered babies — her personal revenge — until she died, well into her 80s. Each time she prepared to deliver a child, she uttered a silent demand: "God, you owe me a life."

How do we confer meaning upon meaninglessness? How can we dignify indignity? How can we value the confrontation with death when loved ones die? What can we do for those left behind? What can we do for the dying, other than promise to remember them?

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