

INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

THE EXPERIENCE OF GRANDCHILDREN OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Past

This study should never have happened. There should never have been such a group of people as survivors of the Holocaust. There should never have been children of survivors, and their children who became grandchildren of survivors. I should never have grown up in the late 1940's observing tattoos on people's arms, such as Mr. Fine, the butcher in my neighborhood. I should never have wondered as a young child how people like him got those tattoos and what they meant. I should never have wondered about some of my parents' friends with strange accents and mannerisms. I sensed a difference about these people that set them apart from other friends of my parents. I should never have had to do that. I should never have seen those dreaded movies of skeletal like figures walking around in a daze with stars of David pinned on their dirty striped uniforms. As a young boy I should never have witnessed pictures and films of thousands of horrible corpses being bulldozed into giant graves. I should never have seen pictures of uniformed Nazi soldiers shooting innocent victims at point blank. I should never have begun to hear of the millions of people who were slaughtered.

Nor, should I have heard about the millions, who as refugees came to strange lands, often knowing no one, having no family, stripped of all their possessions, their culture, their home, their country.

But I did hear of these things. I have grown up knowing of the horrors of the Holocaust and at various points in my life have become friends with survivors and children of survivors. I have also at various times assumed some responsibility for learning more about the Holocaust through reading, going to lectures and taking a year long course at the Spertus College of Judaica taught by Dr. Byron Sherwin. His beginning words were 'after you complete the year of study of the Holocaust, your lives will never be the same. You will never look upon the world in the same manner that you do now. I cannot predict how your view of the world will be different. I only know it can never be the same.'

The Present: The Evolution of the Study

As an adult, having learned what I did about the Holocaust, knowing people who were survivors and children of survivors as friends, and working in a school setting with some children of survivors and grandchildren of survivors, my sensitivity to the Holocaust never wavered. In many ways, it became even more enhanced. It was particularly so when I began hearing comments from others that questioned why it was so important to 'keep rehashing the past.' I heard on many occasions people say 'why must the subject of the Holocaust always be brought up?' or 'so it happened, why can't we just move on?' Of course we are now

hearing 'It was all a giant deception.' I heard these questions and other responses and absorbed them as personal blows, personal assaults on my sense of self. I could only imagine how survivors and their families must feel when they hear these similar statements and reactions.

As I entered the Institute of Clinical Social Work, I began to think about what I could study for my dissertation. Early on in my studies, I heard advice from people like Tom Kenemore to 'find something you're very interested in because you will be spending a lot of time with it and your interest has to propel you.' I also heard others say 'find something that is doable'. I heard stories about others who began their dissertations and had trouble finding an adequate sample or finding a sufficient number of people that were the subject of their research. I had heard other horror stories about research problems that I had hoped to avoid. What I kept hearing repeatedly was 'do not be grandiose' and 'get it done.'

I also had a strong desire to research something that few if any other people have previously studied. In other words, I wanted to study something that would be informative, and have value. In a class with Patrick Curtis on 'Clinical Ethnography' I discovered the Grounded Theory method. I learned that this method sought to understand the subjective experiences of a particular group of people and sought to construct theory from data. I had already begun to formulate the question for this research, which was: 'What Is The Experience of Being A Grandchild of a Survivor(s) of the Holocaust?' This was all the criteria that I felt I needed for the research. I am

interested, and have been almost my entire life, in studying the Holocaust. The study involved a reachable population, since I knew so many people already associated with the Holocaust and I had available resources who provided me with names of potential subjects to be interviewed. I also found out that this was a subject that has yet to be studied, so I felt this would be of value. Finally, Grounded Theory provided a valuable and appropriate method with which to study the experiences of grandchildren of survivors.

Statement of the Problem

The scope of the event which is commonly referred to as the Holocaust is so enormous that it has been declared by many researchers and historians as impossible to understand. Elie Wiesel, a noted survivor, chronicler of the Holocaust, and self-described 'storyteller,' has often stated that we should not try to understand the event which we know as the Holocaust, but to remember it, to bear witness, and to understand it only in terms of understanding ourselves and who we are.

The 'Experience of Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors' is research that in many ways continues the process of studying the survivors and families of the Nazi Holocaust. There was never any coordinated plan on the part of researchers in the last forty years to study this group of people. Certainly in the early years after the war ended, few people even felt it necessary to talk to the survivors about their experiences. Few people wanted to hear, and very few survivors were able to talk about it. Some survivors even talked

about wanting to be heard, but they experienced a void when it came to people other than survivors being interested in what they had to say. Slowly, research began focusing on the survivors, particularly those that began to experience difficulties adjusting in their new environment, stripped of family, culture, belongings and country. Most research had to do with clinical issues.

Twenty years later, research began to focus on the second generation of survivors. The marriages of survivors, (survivors often married other survivors) and their desire to bear children were viewed by many studies as an attempt at restitution and the survivors own rebirth as human beings. These children often grew up in homes where their parents were overprotective, fearful, unable to tell their children of their experiences. At other times the children were flooded with so much information it often paralyzed them emotionally. In many cases the relationship of children to survivor parents was inverted, where the child imbued the parent with life, providing nurturance, and a source of identification. Here also, most of the research also focused on a clinical population. The goal of these studies often was to determine cause and effect: how did the parents' experiences in the Holocaust affect their children? In most instances, clinicians who worked with this population were not sensitized to the Holocaust past of the child. Some therapists had negative countertransferences as a result of the stories told to them about the children's experiences, or they participated themselves in what has been described a conspiracy of silence.

At the present time, there is very little research on the third generation of survivors. Much to the surprise of this researcher, the only study that could be unearthed was also focused on a clinical issues (Sigal & Weinfeld, 1989).

This study which follows, that of the Experience of Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors neither sought nor avoided a clinical population. The purpose was to look at the experiences of the third generation of survivors: the grandchildren. The meaning of being a grandchild of survivors based on their subjective experiences was examined as part of this study. This study explored the images and memories that each of the grandchildren had of their past experiences growing up as part of a survivor family. This study also explored the meaning of being a grandchild of survivors and what it has for them in the present and how they connect these experiences to their future.

Theoretical Orientation of the Study

The theoretical orientation for this study was Narrative Theory. In this theory, the self is viewed as a narrative or story, therefore bringing into the forefront human existence understood temporally and developmentally. Narrative Theory looks at the narrative as the cognitive process which gives meaning to temporal events in peoples lives. These are then identified as being part of a plot. Through narrative conceptualization people are able to produce out of events, such as listening to stories told to the grandchildren about their grandparents' experiences during the

Holocaust, the meaningful whole that they are. Polkinghorne (1991) addresses the issue of self-concept, which this study also addresses through the understanding of narrative. 'Self-concept is a storied concept, and our identity is the drama we are unfolding' (p. 149).