

heirloom

second anthology of the Melbourne Child Survivors of
the Holocaust

edited by

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Not a phoenix

Paul Valent



I resent people who admire the resilience of child survivors of the Holocaust, and emphasise how normal they are. I resent the way they selectively point to how well such children have done in their marriages, occupations and professions. I do not deny that many have done well by certain conventional standards, but the admirers ignore the costs. They use their admiration to avoid the need to empathise with child survivors' suffering.

I look like one of the successes. Some even say that I have used my Holocaust experiences in my profession as psychotherapist. It is true that my child survivor background has helped me to acknowledge others who suffered exorbitant wounds in their childhood, and that the Holocaust and its consequences for child survivors have served for me as a guide to understanding and validating the suffering of others.

I believed in the widespread abuse of children, without this arousing concern or even being given credence among the general community, when these survivor children themselves were quiet about their abuse for decades, even forever. I could believe the extent of the abuse and the claims of innocence on the part of the perpetrators. Their revisionist blaming of victims and their supporters has brought to mind parallels with Holocaust denial. The lack of justice with respect to Holocaust perpetrators has been a reminder of the difficulty in extracting a conviction from the courts for child abusers.

The doubts raised relating to abused children's memory and their own lack of conviction about what they knew were also issues raised in our child survivor group. From my experience with this group I was able to

encourage other survivor children to follow up their hunches and their symptoms, until the truth of their trauma was exposed.

Yes, the success of child survivors in establishing worthwhile lives gave me hope in the treatment of despairing people, who had been through what no child should have to endure. Seeing the courage of child survivors, I drew on the courage of other survivors to face their fears and overcome them in their current lives. Perhaps, most of all, the discovery, within child survivors of normal, loving children, even if engraved with their experiences, gave me faith to seek out the indestructible innocence and goodness in the core of others who had been maltreated, and felt that they could never retrieve a benign world.

But resilience, as if unaffected, even benefited? Sure, if the Holocaust can be a learning ground for other traumas and genocides, that is a consolation. If I have been able to transfer such learning to others' benefit, it is a bonus. And it is true that the experience of others, both my fellow child survivors and my patients, has helped me to retrieve parts of myself beyond the Holocaust.

Don't make me a successful statistic. Don't get me wrong: I have been lucky in many ways, and I am not complaining. But who can see my night time panics? Who plotted the uneven journey of my life? If I had a choice, would I have chosen my traumas in order to spend a career reverberating with those of others?

What parent would have chosen our experiences for their children? Who would believe that no matter how resilient, they would not be adversely affected by them? My strongest desire is for children not to have to experience the limits of their endurance, not to have to use their courage to retrieve their humanity years later, and not to need people to admire them for having survived.