

# Children Surviving Persecution

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An International Study of  
Trauma and Healing

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## History of the Australian Child Survivor Groups: Melbourne and Sydney

*Paul Valent and Litzi Hart*

MELBOURNE

*Paul Valent*

The Melbourne Child Survivor group came into being in February 1990.

At the 1989 International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies, Sarah Moskowitz casually asked me whether I was a child survivor and whether I would attend her workshop. "No." I replied, "My parents were survivors." "Where were you during the war?" she wanted to know. "In Hungary." "How old were you at the end of the war?" she pressed on. "Seven." "So you are a child survivor," she concluded. Still objecting, I explained that "I was not in a concentration camp."

"You are a child survivor." As such I attended her workshop.

At the end of the workshop I met Ervin Staub who is my age and also had been in Budapest during the war. We talked for days like two Martians discovering each other. I sought out other Martians in Melbourne. The release from my world of strange grayness into one of solid recognition had begun. I felt that others should have the opportunity for this to happen to them, too.

With that in mind, I contacted Litzi Hart, who had already formed a Sydney group. Helen Gardner, from the Jewish Crisis Center, and I advertised, and we gathered thirty people to our first meeting. We went around the room, many introducing their true identities for the first time. Litzi, who had come down to us by bus from Sydney, set the tone with her simplicity. We heard a child survivor telling her story for the first time. Then we talked. For some, this was their first-ever group where they felt at home. They wanted to join. We decided to meet on the same Sunday of the next

month and subsequent months. We have been meeting on the first Sunday of each month regularly for nearly eight years.<sup>1</sup>

What should we do once we were together was the big question. Oh, we must not look at our navels and be self-absorbed in the past—but what is the point of being just like any other Jewish group having film nights and collecting money for Israel? What distinguishes us? Well, Litzi had inspired us with her story, and many started to tell parts of their own. Shall some of us tell our stories? And let us record them? It was decided: We would tell our stories. And videotape them? And we did.

But two a night was too much. It would not leave time to go into details. So after two attempts, only one person has been scheduled to present at each meeting. We have lived through and recorded almost thirty stories now, and they are in our library and in the Yad Vashem archives. One person tells his or her story, but it is always *our* stories that are told, too—from different angles. We have continued to have twenty to thirty at each meeting, though our membership list has grown to 200.

All child survivors are welcome to our meeting from wherever in the world they may come. We meet at the Holocaust Center at 7:30 on the first Sunday of the month. Well, we start a little late. Then we make our announcements. New attendees introduce themselves. Then, for a little over an hour, one member of our group tells his or her story. The stories are from the heart, not from paper; and they include the whole life, not only the war years. Family members have attended also, and at times they contribute to the person's story. How much to tell? This is not therapy, and some things are difficult to tell a group, but we are honest and we expose ourselves, for we trust each other. The video? Yes, we want the world to truly know what happened to us children.

We break for coffee for half an hour. New people, who had not seen other child survivors since adolescence and had not realized they were child survivors, catch up with each other. People who had similar experiences compare notes. Then we go back and ask questions. How did you feel when the machine gun was pointed at you? Why was there more anger with the Jews in charge than the Germans? Forbidden feelings are explored for the first time. Why did your mother not want to listen to how you were affected, and how did this feel for you?

And then we move on to issues. What happened to our memories? What happened to traumatic memories altogether? With all you experienced, why did you not cry? Why do we not cry? What happened to our emotions in those times—and since? And love? Yes, what happens to emotions altogether? Oh, the anguish that we were brave enough to explore recently—not to be able to love our children as we would wish! We are very kind and nonjudgmental with each other, for we always see the persecuted child. And we also remember all we have survived: Such awful things happened to us.

And in spite of that, we have achieved. But no, we are not unscathed by any means. Yet we do love as best we can, and we are nice children beneath it all. At the end of the meetings, we sort of hug each other mentally, and we feel just a little wiser.

At times we had experiential workshops instead of stories. In them we explored specific feelings such as abandonment and shame. And then again, we ask ourselves: Do we need this? Shouldn't we rather look to the future, help other children, help the Holocaust Center, educate the world? People oscillate in their explorations and sharing. Similarly, some come and go, and may return after a long time. But we persevere in our different ways. I have learned that this is exactly what people like us must do: remember, then have a break—the same way as quite a few of us have now been back to the places of persecution and then returned to Australia. There and back and there again, often—both geographically and in the mind.

In the group schedule as well, we have taken breaks to do things other than looking into our pasts. Each December we have a social occasion at a member's place. Occasionally we get together with the other generations of survivors to hear a visitor or to commemorate special events.

On the Tuesdays following our meetings, the committee meets at one of our homes to review the last event and prepare future ones, keeping the desires of the members in mind. We have developed a solid core of committee members and have become such friends—we can say anything to each other—like a group of friends we could not have in our youth.

The Melbourne group has participated in some conferences and, goodness, have we hosted a couple! But first, in January 1991, some of us went to a conference in Sydney and again Sarah (Moskovitz) was there. We were surprised to find that we child survivors in the two cities were so similar! Not only the Melbourne and Sydney group members were similar. Those of us who attended The Hidden Child Conference in New York, in May 1991, realized that we child survivors are like siblings, no matter from where in the wide world we came.

In preparation for The Hidden Child Conference we had started to inform the local communities of Australia about who we were. But now we came out in front of the whole world! Richard Rozen came out of the cupboard, as it were, where he had hidden for thirteen months as a child; he was all over the newspapers in the United States, and his story came to be printed in two books. I also came out of hiding in very good company indeed, when I presented a paper while on a panel with Sarah Moskovitz, Judith S. Kestenberg, and Robert Krell. I have given papers in Amsterdam at an international Traumatic Stress Society meeting, and I was proud to represent the Australian Child Survivors in Jerusalem. I have written and presented a number of papers, and have written a book, *Child Survivors: Adults Living with Childhood Trauma*. I mention these activities because they are part and product of our group as a whole. Through my experience,

I have realized that we child survivors not only have a unique historical significance, but also a unique psychological significance for victims and survivors of all kinds. In our group, we feel that our experiences must be shared to help many others in the world.

We hosted an International Child Survivor conference in January 1993. The theme was "Last Witnesses to the Holocaust," because by then we understood our special historical significance. The program included Sarah Moskovitz as our keynote speaker, plenaries with rescuers, a three-generation survivor family, and workshops ranging from "I Never Said Goodbye," "Loss of Childhood and Impact on Parenting," "Learning to Trust; Feeling Safe," to "Physical and Sexual Abuse of Children." It was a marvelous conference, with a persistent glow.

In July 1994, Dr. Judith S. Kestenberg visited the child survivor groups in Melbourne and Sydney, and Melbourne organized a conference around her visit. In addition to her lecture, we scheduled three-generational workshops: child survivors, adult survivors, and children of survivors—we talked with each other, our parents, and our children. In many instances we spoke and listened properly for the first time. This conference, too, was very successful.

Dr. Kestenberg not only interviewed many of our group members, but also gave our fledgling interview group a fillip: The group is now part of the intervening group of the International Study of Organized Persecution of Children. And so we have played host to our mothers, Sarah and Judith, and are pleased to be able to carry on their work. We are so grateful that we had a chance to say "thank you" to them, *en famille*.

Slowly we are beginning to look outside our Melbourne Child Survivor Group and to become involved in a number of areas. We are close to our Sydney group and feel close (albeit for many of us in a vague way) to other child survivor groups around the world. We moved from the Jewish Crisis Center to the Holocaust Museum in 1991 and, since then, have had close links with the adult survivor group. Some of us work for the museum and are guides there. We are proud of the Second Generation Group, which hived off from us and is now a very viable group with close links to our own. We partake in many transgenerational functions, for instance in the Fiftieth Year of Liberation celebrations and the annual commemorations. At the same time, we are pleased that we are not beholden to any other group, nor are we split between hidden and non-hidden children. We are child survivors. That is who we are.

As participating members of the Child Survivor Group, we have become more confident and proud of who we are. We reach out to other groups, remembering the many child survivors who may still be in hiding. We send our newsletter regularly to all who have been to our group, even to those who attended only once, and to those who have expressed interest in the group but have not yet made it to a meeting. Sometimes such people come

after a year or two, when they are ready. We want them to know they belong to us all the time. Some are ambivalent about exposing who they are, others have too much pain, and others still maintain they are far from pain. They are the same as the child survivors attending meetings, only a little more scared.

When we look back over the last eight years, we see how greatly things have changed. We are a viable group. We know ourselves and people know us. Our voices are heard; even in the community at large, they know who we are. We have an identity, a very respectable one. We have a voice. We have a history, from the past to the future. Our individual members have come a long way, too, in their quest to know themselves, and we have a better idea of the meaning of what happened to us. Of course, things are not rosy. What happened to us was horrible, and knowing it better is not a delight. But, as a result of our group experience, we are a little more in control and can help others a little more. We have triumphed through our survival—unfortunately not all of us, and not completely, so we grieve as we celebrate, too.

What of the future? We know that soon we will be the last survivors. Like all children, we need to grow into our roles, and we feel that these should not be prescribed for us. We have deep respect for our parents, the adult survivors, and for their memories as well as for our own. For the moment, we still need to define ourselves further and to find deeper meanings and purposes in the way we have been shaped. In the meantime, we are pleased that we can do so together, and together appreciate our lives as survivors. We are pleased to join hands with you and to share with you.

SYDNEY

*Litzi Hart*

The Sydney Child Survivors Group began in 1986. The seeds were sown in 1985, at the Forty-Fifth Anniversary of the Holocaust, during a week-long gathering of Holocaust survivors with guest speakers from other countries.<sup>2</sup> I was in the audience listening to Sarah Moskowitz tell my story. Telling Sarah had been the first time I had told anyone everything I remember. Eighteen months later, Sarah came back to Australia. We then had a gathering of survivors (mostly child survivors, some older) and spouses. As a result, we agreed to meet and just to talk together over a cup of coffee in a private home. There were twenty of us, and we each told our story.

All this had been instigated by Sarah Moskowitz through Eva Engel, who is not a survivor, but feels like one. She talked, nudged us, cajoled, helped, and supported us. "Do it," she said. "We need it," she said. We were hesitant. It was so new, facing our past and other survivors for the first time. Then we did it! We were adults who had once been children in hiding, or

in concentration camps, or traveling around on false papers. Our first meeting was at the Bnai Brith Lodge. There were twenty-five of us, all born after 1928. We had come to share experiences, to discuss a lot we had in common, to feel comfortable with each other, and to be acknowledged. A growing membership created a newsletter to keep in contact with one another and with those who didn't come to meetings—except now and again.

During our first year, six child survivors lit the six memorial candles at the Holocaust Commemoration Service. I gave my first speech in public. I told of meeting with old friends from youth-group days through the survivor group. We hadn't known about our common past. Nobody had talked before then. Not like now.

The group continued to meet in each other's homes, always with food and drinks. It was a stressful time for some; liberating for most. We wanted to be autonomous, though under the umbrella of the Association of Holocaust Survivors. Conflict! We tried to do things together, but they were not pleased. We needed to grow on our own, to develop by ourselves. Perhaps we would join later when we "grew up." We were not ready to get involved or to be organized, official, or to take responsibility; and some of us didn't want to "carry the burden of the Holocaust." We just wanted to be together and talk. And so we "separated" from the association and stopped trying to please them.

During the group meetings we told our stories. Some stopped coming, new people came, and we continued to grow. We were ready to do something other than talk. In 1989 we organized an International Jewish Cabaret. An evening of Hebrew, Russian, Yiddish, and English singing and dancing and music played to a full house. The community supported us, and close to \$6,000 were presented to Kibbutz L'Ochamei Hageataot for Project Yad Le Yeled (a memorial museum in Israel) in remembrance of the 150,000 children who died in the Holocaust—close to our hearts.

With the help of Sarah Moskowitz we made contact with the Los Angeles Child Survivors. They sent us their newsletter, we sent them our more modest one. Some of us went to the International Child Survivor Conference in California in 1990. Two hundred child survivors from all over the world gathered—all talking together, attending workshops, sharing meals, and socializing between. Fourteen people who had been interviewed by Sarah for her book, *Love Despite Hate*, were there. Meeting them again, I met my childhood past. Later, we made connections with New York, Canadian, French, and British child survivors.

Then came a phone call out of the blue: "My name is Paul Valent. Sarah Moskowitz gave me your name, and I'd like to start a child survivor group in Melbourne." I told him about our group, and in February 1990, the Melbourne group was formed.

We continued to meet every six weeks or so in Sydney. The questions "What is our aim? Where are we going?" popped up every so often. Mean-

while, we wanted Sarah Moskowitz to meet our expanding group. Why not have a conference? Sarah would be the guest speaker. How to pay for this? Once again we had help from the community, though mainly we helped ourselves by organizing a fundraising dinner. In January 1991, the conference had become a reality. Five Melbourne child survivors came to our workshops, with lunch, dinner, music, and fun included. We gathered more survivors, and it brought us closer together.

In January 1992, twenty Sydney child survivors went to the Melbourne Child Survivor Conference. It was marvelous, exciting, stimulating, and well organized. New friends were talking, listening, and revealing themselves in an atmosphere of safety. We were maturing and becoming "doers" as well as "talkers."

Our meetings continue, but we are now too large a group to meet in members' homes, and go instead to the Folk Centre, a communal center for the aged. We still have questions: Should we be structured? Should we have a constitution? Should we join the Board of Deputies? We have a committee and more people want to be involved. Although we now have energy enough driving us, we want to remain informal and apolitical.

We have become more involved with the community as individuals. Sydney now has a wonderful Jewish Museum where many of us are "historians." We feel the need to give visitors who come to learn about the Holocaust a first-hand account, to tell our own stories. We collaborate with the older survivors in this. They approached us, presenting their need to have us continue their work. We will be the last survivors. We know that.

Next year (1995) is the fiftieth anniversary of liberation. "Would we join the planning committee," the adult survivors wanted to know, "to plan the dinner together with the descendants and the older survivors?" Perhaps we are ready to take responsibility. We are being acknowledged. Meanwhile, we continue meeting with each other, and we remain unstructured, though we have a committee and disseminate information through our newsletter. At the Jewish Museum we guide, help launch books, and generally involve ourselves more with the community, while continuing to be part of the growing emergence of child survivors all over the world.

## NOTES

1. 1989 to 1994 and continuing.
2. People like Yaffa Eliach and Sarah Moskowitz who spoke about the children from Terezin who went to Winkfield House, Surrey, England.