

Child Survivors: The Bridge to the Future

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When I think back to my first time in the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, I remember the salient image of the boy, wearing a yellow star, with his hands raised. You did not have to see the Nazi pointing a gun at him; you knew. That image has stayed with me ever since. What I did not know that first time was that I had been a boy not unlike him, though I felt that I knew what he felt.

That had been the story of us child survivors of the Holocaust – reverberating with the Holocaust and its images, but not truly knowing that we had been its victims. Nor did we label ourselves as its survivors. We thought that our parents were the survivors, and they also thought that we were ‘only children’ who did not remember, or could not remember properly. We were discouraged from talking, asking, knowing.

We have overcome our silence. We celebrated our ‘bar-mitzvah’ in 2003, and how far we had come. We reminisced about our beginnings. Initially we met each month at the Jewish Crisis Centre, situated in a very comfortable suburban home in Caulfield that was donated temporarily to mental health workers to help Jewish people with problems. We were into our second

year when we were invited to transfer to the Holocaust Centre.

Some of us said that it was too uncomfortable there, too drab and cold. Others said what was truly on our minds – it was too reminiscent of the Holocaust. We feared to become immersed, overwhelmed by the images in the Museum. But then we realised that we carried the images in our minds anyway. Like the picture of the boy that expressed overtly something that I carried covertly, so the Holocaust Centre and we child survivors belonged to each other. The Holocaust Centre was our natural home. So we transferred to the Centre in 1992, and we have felt at home there ever since. Far from cold, we found warmth, and each other.

For a time we secluded ourselves there. We needed our own space to tell our stories to each other in our own way, without other survivors’ perceptions obscuring our own. We enjoyed the space that we were given. We used all the available physical space for our meetings, workshops and conferences. We used all the spiritual space to talk, listen, explore, learn, develop and grow.

We talked of our Holocaust experiences the same way they had happened to us: from children’s points of view. For instance, we talked about our difficulties in trusting our memories as true, and having sensations the source of which was unclear. We were able to share similar feelings with each other, and explain them to each other. As well, for the first time we were like children who had their own space to play, and we had fun in our own way, with our own brand of humour.

Having found our base, we soon started to reciprocate with the Centre. Because we did it on our terms, it came

from the heart. Many child survivors became guides, teachers and speakers at schools. They took part in curatorial activities, held conferences and intergenerational workshops, and created art works. These included anthologies, books, and a patchwork wall-hanging which is displayed on the wall opposite the entrance to the Museum. The group also gave birth to the second generation group (now called Descendants of the Shoah). Importantly, many took part in the testimonies project of the Museum, and the Head of the Testimonies department has been filming all our meetings. Both types of records are stored at the Holocaust Centre, as well as in Yad Vashem. So we became part of the framework of the Museum.

Naturally, we have been involved in the developing history of the Holocaust Centre. As others, we have also become concerned about how the Holocaust Centre will be able to convey its message to future generations.

The older survivor generation had the task of documenting the Holocaust in as detailed a fashion as possible. They provided the physical Museum and its artefacts. More than that, they provided themselves. As guides they reached heart to heart and made a tremendous impact on visitors. What can replace this when they depart? We know that we will be able to continue to be live memorials for some time, following their model, but what beyond us? Of course, for the first time recorded testimonies will be part of the Museum. However, it remains to be seen how these testimonies will be accessed, by whom, for what purposes and how genuinely they will speak to future generations. The live human contact with the survivors will be missing. No matter what, memory will become history.

We child survivors are the longest living bridge from the past to the future. We also have a unique generational position, being both survivors and children of survivors. If the older survivors' task was to document and testify, do we have anything special to contribute from our unique vantage point?

Perhaps our own experiences may have particular value in two ways. The first is our experience of having needed our own space in the Holocaust Centre before we could relate to its message and mission. If our experience has any relevance, then the Centre will need to understand and cater for the space from which our descendants and those from the general community will come in the future. It will need to be available for their benefit first, and reverberate with their needs – the needs that motivated them to come to the Centre in the first place. After addressing their own needs in their own space, they are more likely, the way we did, to subsequently engage with the Centre itself and its wider message. Visitors will then be better able to appreciate the magnitude of the Holocaust.

Inadvertently perhaps, our meetings may have provided a second clue as well, which may be of value in the future. Because as child survivors we had to fill in our documentary narratives with feelings, we

'You told us not to hate anything, anybody. It is a heinous crime, this is what you realised as the most important thing from World War II. As a survivor from the war, you don't hate Germans; you never hate anybody, because you know the tragedies during the war were all made by human's hatred. So, you will never hate, and you told us not to hate. I will remember it. Enjoy every new day, new happy day. Thank you so much.'

Chinese student Siying, an international student from China studying at Ivanhoe Grammar (writing to a guide after a Centre visit)

1941

Dec 21-31 54,000 Jews killed in Bogdanovka Camp.

1942

Jan 16 Deportations from Lodz to Chelmo begin.

1942

Jan 20 Wannsee Conference in Berlin suburb, discusses Nazi 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question'.

1942

Feb 8 First transport of Jews from Salonika sent to Auschwitz.

1942

Mar 1 Construction begins of Sobibor Extermination Camp.

'Thank you for allowing us to visit your Centre and share your experiences. Many of our students had never heard of the Holocaust until this year, but I am sure they will never forget it now.'

**Eileen Hosking,
Wellington Secondary
College, Mulgrave**



did not only tell our stories, but we spent just as long discussing the feelings we had such as fear, abandonment, grief, anger, guilt and humiliation, and memories that stayed and disappeared. We also discussed the issues arising from these feelings, the meanings we made of them, the multiple consequences affecting us short and long term, and how we absorbed our parents' as well as our own experiences. Not least, we also discussed our resilience, and how we did make our lives meaningful. The point is, we spoke a universal language of people who had experienced or inherited catastrophes, personal or political, but who could not make sense of them, be it because they could not remember the events, or because they were not there to experience them. Future visitors to the Centre, whether our descendants or from the general community, will be able to learn about their own memory distortions, feelings, sufferings and resilience, against the documented standard of Holocaust suffering and resilience. And they will be able to trace these consequences back to the documented origins across generations. This will help them to learn what kinds of end experiences relate to what kinds of original turmoils. This is a unique gift that the Holocaust, and the Holocaust Centre as one of its vehicles, can provide.

I can only speculate about the special contributions of post-Holocaust generations, and how they may be incorporated into the mission

of the Centre. Those born after the Holocaust may document how they felt themselves to be full of scars, without knowing what the wounds had been. They may contribute to understanding the mechanics of what types of wounds transfer across generations, and how. Subsequent generations still may document later reverberations of the Holocaust. They may tackle the difficult subject of perpetrators, so that visitors will be able to obtain understanding of violence and cruelty, from genocides to neighbourhood atrocities.

The Centre will be able to inform on universal questions, and visitors will be able to say: 'So that is how evil occurs'. The visitors will then be better able to do something to pre-empt such evil, small or big – for themselves or on a large scale. The Holocaust will be their spiritual guide. Perhaps it has to take generations to absorb the lessons of the Holocaust. I see the Holocaust Centre as one of the important centres in the world that will impart such lessons.

The Holocaust Centre has been a fundamental facilitator for child survivors on our path of discovery and healing. I anticipate that it will do the same for each generation in the future. We ourselves are glad that the generation that preceded us had the vision and energy to establish the Holocaust Centre, to give it momentum, and to absorb us in their task. We look forward to partaking in the challenging phase of the Centre as it looks to its next 20 years and beyond. ■

1942

Mar 17 Killings begin at Belzec Extermination Camp.

1942

Mar 26 Start of deportation of Slovak Jews.

1942

Mar 28 First French Jews sent to Auschwitz.

1942

Apr 29 Jews in Netherlands ordered to wear Yellow Star.

1942

June 1 Jews in France, Romania, Belgium, Croatia and Slovakia ordered to wear Yellow Star.