

BAT/BAR MITZVAH OF CHILD SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST IN MELBOURNE

by Paul Valent

Dr Paul Valent founded the child survivor of the Holocaust group in Melbourne. We asked him to write some of his thoughts on the occasion of his resignation from the committee of the group, of which he has been a member since its inception.

A common saying used to be that children should be seen and not heard. Why? When seen they are reassuring in the sense that adults see themselves being reflected and perpetuated into future generations. However, to be heard means that children have something to say. This may require attention to them, and adults may well sense this as a burden.

Child survivors of the Holocaust were not heard for a long time. They continued their wartime silence, not endangering, not burdening, just trying to survive and help their parents to survive. They were usually not even seen as survivors, nor did they see themselves as such. To this very day, they are frequently forgotten in the sandwich between the older Holocaust survivors (whose stories are becoming ever more precious), and the survivors' descendants, often called second (and lately third) generation survivors, whose numbers are much greater. Child survivors are indeed the minority survivors. After the war, they were the 10% remnants of the one and a half million Jewish children in Nazi occupied Europe, and there are probably fewer than 100,000 of them now around the globe. It may be said that most of them are still silent about their Holocaust pasts. But in Melbourne, over 200 of us belonging to the Child Survivor Group have spoken out and many identified ourselves. Many of us have given our testimonies within the group and many others to the Shoah Foundation.

Thirteen years ago, I was very lucky that Sarah Moskovitz, one of the original discoverers of child survivors discovered me too to be a child survivor, at a conference in the United States. Judith Kestenberg, the other discoverer of child survivors, also helped to nurture my emergent identity as a child survivor. Because I wanted child survivors in Melbourne to have the same opportunity to discover themselves if they wanted to, I co-founded the child survivor group here. It is currently one of about twenty such groups around the world.

What happened when we 'children', around our fifties, belatedly began to speak? First, we were amazed that we had something, well actually a lot, to say. We were excited that we could speak at last, and we listened to each other's stories avidly, seeing similarities, validating up to then our lonely Martian-like existence. Until then, only our parents spoke. Now we saw that we were survivors of the Holocaust, too, with our own stories.

There was so much to catch up, so many words to discover in order to label the grey troughs and

shadows of existence and loss, and the occasional peaks. We needed to integrate so many experiences to confirm that we were ordinary human beings who had been robbed of our childhoods, but now alive adults who still had fruitful lives to live!

Our group has been meeting regularly on the first Sunday of the month. Looking back at our 'bat/bar mitzvah', many of us have 'found' ourselves. Others are still traversing the journey (it never ends), while some are just starting to discover their child survivor of the Holocaust identity, and what it means. We hope that many others in the community will take their receding opportunities to join us.

Apart from talking to each other, telling our stories, and discussing issues arising from them, many of us have returned to the places of our persecutions to flesh out and confirm our memories and their meanings. We have had conferences and retreats, social occasions, heard talks, and contacted, visited, and helped other persecuted child groups.

We have had close contact with the Holocaust centre, the older and second generation, as well as our Sydney sister group, and groups internationally.

There is an opposite saying to the one that children should be seen but not heard. It says that children, without the guile of adults, tell the truth. The implication is that one should listen to the wisdom of children, for there is much to learn from them.

Yet child survivors when they were children, had to be cunning and to be able to hide the truth about themselves in order to survive. Even so, they could not avoid a multiplicity of traumas. Now, given voice and space to tell the truth in safety, child survivors have been able to describe the terrible costs of having to endure these traumas, and being forced to forego their natures as children. The consequences included mental, emotional, physical, and social anguish.

As with older survivors' stories, the first response to child survivor stories is one of admiration for having been able to survive so much. Now that child Holocaust stories can be told without guile, they provide much source of wisdom regarding childhood traumas, resilience, and the human soul. This treasure trove of information of child survivor stories has helped to give voice to many children who have had to bear their traumas silently. It also gives information to those who want to help other children and child survivor groups.

Our own little group has produced helpers in the Holocaust museum, speakers to schools, church and professional groups, and visitors to imprisoned refugee children. A number of us have written books, and the group itself has produced an anthology of their own stories.

The older generation were told by the victims by those lead away to their deaths, "Remember us. Tell the world what happened to us." The memory of their deaths was meant to be a reminder of what human evil can do to people, and a warning against allowing it to happen again. Perhaps child survivors have incumbent on them to tell what happens to persecuted and abused children, in order to stop persecution and abuse of children in the future. Our group takes this implied injunction seriously.

Children should be seen before ourselves heard. They should be able to speak of hurts, so adults salve children's wounds, rather than hurt them. Children should be able to speak their guileless wisdom, including what it means to be silenced.

Since the beginning of our group, there was a dialectic between looking back, (caricatured as

being paralysed by staring at our navels), or moving on. But we can only move on properly by remembering, seeing, speaking, and understanding our pasts, that is, ourselves. Otherwise, we may move on blindly not hearing others or ourselves.

A bar/bat mitzvah symbolises a moving on in life. Many of us, including myself, have been lucky to have had the opportunity to reintegrate our childhoods in a new way. As we catch up with ourselves and move on, our child survivor group will nevertheless always remain our family of siblings, where the child parts of us are seen and heard, accepted and nurtured.

*An international edition of Paul Valent's **Child Survivors of the Holocaust** was recently published in the US. Copies can be ordered from bookshops.*