

The next chapter

Paul Valent

When we wrote our last child survivor group anthology, amazingly, our open child survivor hearts and minds converted our salient Holocaust experiences into written words of great power. This time we have been asked to write about the next phase, what became of us after the Holocaust, how did we deal with it, how did we, if we did, overcome it? In some ways this is harder for me, for I am required to look over the whole span of my life.

I will say more about writing. Writing has been important to me for as long as I can remember. The first time that I remember trying to write seriously was when I was nine, two years after the Holocaust ended. I asked my father to buy me a book of empty pages, into which I would write about the war. He was an astute businessman, and he gave me a few pages to write on at the back of one of his old accounting books, full of lines and columns. He said, 'If you need more paper, I will get you more.' I ran out of what to write after two pages. I was full of things I wanted to write, but I had little information, or capacity.

Years later, I said that I wanted to be a writer. My father said, 'Be a doctor first. Then when you are secure, you can write.' So I became a doctor. He did not live to see this, because he passed away prematurely. I am sure that it was because of the grief for his parents and his eight siblings, all of whom were killed.

I am glad to have been a doctor. Especially as a psychotherapist and traumatologist, I learned so much that I was able to fill textbooks on the Holocaust and trauma. But the nine-year-old's desires were not satisfied. I was not the sort of writer I had wanted to be deep down. So I remembered my father's words, 'Be a doctor first. Then when you are secure, you can

write.' With difficulty, I decided that I was secure. I stopped being a doctor, and now I write. Maybe not well, but I connect with the boy who was full of things he wanted to write, but could not. Now I give him a voice.

I love my father. Not only because he devoted his life to my survival during the Holocaust, and not only for setting me up to have a secure life. But also because he loved me. I mean, me. Not just a bundle of life to preserve, but a person whose life and what he made of it was important too. My father had a strong physical love, loyalty, broad vision, and a strong sense of justice. He could not stand hypocrisy. He read widely and was delighted with what he learned. He appreciated good writing.

He gave me the opportunity to rebel against him, probably in the way that he rebelled against his own father. I nearly did not become a doctor. And I found a specialty as removed from mainstream medicine as possible. I think he would have been proud of me, my achievements. He would have loved my family and been proud of them all.

I think he would be nodding as he read this piece. I think he would have understood that our love beat the Holocaust. If only he had been alive to see it.