
Holocaust Survivors, Experiences of

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GLOSSARY

holocaust The genocidal extermination of Jews in the Second World War.

stressors Noxious events that actually or potentially interfere with survival, or fulfillment of life's goals.

survivor A person who has lived through traumas, in this case of the Holocaust.

trauma A state of irretrievable loss of a life promoting equilibrium.

traumatic stressors Situations which lead to trauma.

The experiences of the Holocaust have become a kind of benchmark for severity of suffering in stress and trauma situations. This is because the vast Nazi machinery of the day directed all political, military, industrial, psychological, and bureaucratic resources to unrelenting persecution and extinguishment of the culture, dignity, spirituality, and physical lives of all Jewish people. The Holocaust is also a moral watershed which has not only tortured survivors but challenged our civilization.

The word *experiences* ambiguously subsumes events as well as subjective responses to them. This section concentrates on descriptions of stress and trauma inducing events (technically stressors or traumatic stressors) of the Holocaust. In what follows, first the cultural backdrop and the traumatic situations of the Holocaust are overviewed. Next, attacks on morality and spirituality of the victims, including

ultimate perversities and evil are examined. Finally, mitigating experiences are contrasted to the wounding ones.

I. CULTURAL BACKGROUND TO HOLOCAUST EXPERIENCES

The rise of Nazism ruptured an uneasy anti-Semitic equilibrium that had been present to varying degrees over the centuries in Europe. In the Holocaust the Nazis drew on this anti-Semitism as well as on primitive tribal, religious, and ideological myths, in the process of scapegoating and exterminating Jews. Thus Jews were variably portrayed as predator monsters, subhuman parasites sucking German blood, and superhuman demonic world conspirators.

From the Jews' points of view, many had fought for their countries and were at the forefront of local culture. The authorities' portrayals of them were an incredible betrayal, and shattered assumptions about a moral and just world. Though many experiences of the Holocaust were threats to survival, the persecution of deeper humanity and spiritual fiber made such experiences much harder to bear. The following two sections deal with events which threatened physical and spiritual survival.

II. OVERVIEW OF STRESS AND TRAUMA EXPERIENCES IN DIFFERENT TRAUMATIC SITUATIONS

A. Wartime Situations

Some traumatic events such as bombing and evacuation ahead of invading armies were shared with

the general population. Such events were felt to be much less noxious than the additional personal and intentional sufferings for which Jews were specially earmarked.

First in Germany Jews had to display yellow stars on their clothes. Their identification cards indicated their Jewishness. Laws forbade their entry into public areas, segregated them in ghettos, appropriated their means of livelihood and property. Children were not allowed to attend schools. *Krystallnacht* in November, 1938, broke the taboo on violence and killing. At government instigation, Jewish synagogues and property were smashed and burnt, and Jews were killed. According to the new model of justice, Jews were blamed and collectively fined for the events.

As genocidal plans were ever more intensely implemented, especially in occupied countries, segregation, robbery and killing were much accelerated. Within hours of entering villages and towns, Jews were rounded up and killed by firing squads, burnt in synagogues, or beaten to death. Alternately, they were slowly killed by starvation and disease in ghettos. Extermination camps with gas chambers and crematoria were established to increase the efficiency of killing great numbers of people. Entering such places was like entering hell. The only respite from being killed was temporary slavery, harsh conditions, and cruelty.

Some Jews escaped the Nazis to other countries in the early years. Others hid in forests, cellars, holes. Some pretended to be non-Jews, which was called open hiding. The tension of hiding either way could be worse than the consequences of being caught. Many indeed were caught.

1. *Totality of Attacks*

It should be emphasized that attacks on Jews were total, relentless, and without mercy. Because the criterion for punishment was owning 25% or more Jewish genes, conversion was no way out. As well, the elderly and children were spared nothing. Indeed, children were a prime target as potential carriers of future genes. One and a half million children (90%) died in Nazi occupied Europe.

Yet genetic extinction through death was not enough. Schools, culture (such as anything written

by Jews), even cemeteries, were destroyed. No evidence or memory of Jews was to survive.

B. Postwar

Not only wartime, but also many postwar experiences were extremely stressful. Survivors had to come to terms with having lost relatives, friends, communities, property, and ways of life. Dreams that sustained during the worst times were now shattered. Some local populations rejected returning Jews, withheld returning their property, remained anti-Semitic, and even killed survivors. In such circumstances survivors had to hide their wounds and cope with new survival challenges of oppression, political persecution, uprootings, and emigrations. The children who had survived had to cope with all adult stressor events, too, as well as with their changed and stressed parents.

III. STRESS AND TRAUMA EXPERIENCES ON THE MORAL AND SPIRITUAL LEVELS

In order to put the huge Nazi-inspired killing machine into action without guilt, it was essential to deprive Jews of human status. Then, principles of justice and law did not apply to Jews any more than they would to cattle or vermin. The Nazi machine therefore consciously used every psychosocial means to first kill its victims' humanity in preparation for their physical killing.

Propaganda was used to the full to portray the monster, parasite, and evil conspiracy pictures of Jews. Their religion, culture, and values were attacked through constant lies. Personal humiliation and stripping of dignity were important precedents and accompaniments to personal robbery, damage, and killing. Such acts included cutting off of old men's beards, public mocking, beating, and being made to perform menial tasks in public. Laws equated them with dogs. They were transported in cattle cars, indeed like cattle, making sure of degradation through lack of privacy and forced shared excretory functions. On arrival in concentration camps this dehumanization increased. They were herded by

dogs and whips, were branded with numbers, were cursed and beaten. Those not slaughtered immediately had all control taken away. They had to work like animals, obey trivial orders and routine on the pain of death, and the most intimate human functions such as of ingestion and excretion were governed by others. Even their deaths had to be undignified. Prisoners were stripped naked, beaten, and herded into communal, impersonal killing machines.

In other words, as well as threat to life, Jews had to contend with threats to their identities as humans, to everything they cherished, their values, their spiritual and existential meanings. Their souls, their human nature were attacked.

Some attacks on their humanity were particularly cruel and perverse. These included the forced separation of families. Where love was allowed to keep family members together, such as mothers choosing to stay with their babies, the love was punished by killing both mothers and children. Otherwise perverse "choices" had to be made, such as individuals or communities sacrificing the elderly or children in order to avoid all being killed.

Compounding the perversity, prisoners had to partake in the killing and body looting process. Compounding it again, they had to suppress their emotions in order to survive. Thus, as well as being prisoners of physical sadism and abuse of ultimate power, victims were prisoners of ultimate meaninglessness and purposelessness of their lives and what they had held dear. This was symbolized by Mengele, the Angel of Death, taking over the universe by motioning with his finger who was to live and who to die. But perhaps worse still, was the banality of the

industrialization and bureaucratization of the killing, which utilized and parodied all achievements of modern civilization. This included psychological knowledge that was applied to inure killers from qualms against killing.

IV. MITIGATING FACTORS AND THE TRUTH

Often Holocaust experiences can only be absorbed on the background of survival, courage, and victory of goodness, as in Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. In fact there was no lack of devotion and courage among Holocaust victims, who risked and helped each other to live and to die whenever it was possible. Sometimes kindness and bravery was shown by outsiders, and it could help survival. But these experiences were outweighed by suffering and pain, ineffectualness of bystanders, and moral and existential wounds.

See Also the Following Articles

CONCENTRATION CAMP SURVIVORS; HOLOCAUST, STRESS EFFECTS OF; SURVIVOR GUILT

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