

RIPPLES OF THE HOLOCAUST

Jewish Museum, Melbourne, 3 July 2006

Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation.

Can you hear me?

International Forum on the Holocaust

I would like to tell you about the first major international meeting in this millennium, in Jan 2000, held in Stockholm. It was attended by 44 heads of state. It was not an economic forum, or a political one.

It was the International Forum on the Holocaust. Its purpose was to examine the Holocaust, designated by the attendees as the most awful event of the last millennium. The political heads met with scholars at the forum, in order to prevent its recurrence in the current millennium.

I had the privilege of being one of a delegation from Australia. Australia beginning with A, I was by chance the closest to the lectern where the heads of state of the countries that perpetrated the Holocaust and my own childhood suffering, one by one acknowledged their part in that suffering and said sorry.

I am mentioning this story, to indicate that the Holocaust is still rippling, in individuals and nations. It has given definition to hell and evil. Also to trauma, and its consequences, to survivorship, human resilience, and human compassion. If people want to examine these matters, they have the Holocaust as a standard.

Museums

Seeing that I am talking at a museum, I thought that I would share with you my experience prior to the forum. No doubt this is old hat to you.

Preceding this conference was a meeting of curators of the major Holocaust museums of the world, such as Yad Vashem, and the Washington Holocaust Museum.

They all agreed that the museums were at cross roads, it being a time when testimony by survivors was passing into history. That is, survivors who could supplement documentation through their direct experiences were dying out, and all museums had to offer was history. How to convey the reality of the happenings in a meaningful way to visitors in the current age?

All agreed that it was insufficient to only exhibit documents. Museums had to speak to emotions, evoke sensations, by being interactive – perhaps through architecture, or as in Washington, giving each visitor a card representing the history of a real person.

Where I might be of more service, is in suggesting that we are all museums of the Holocaust in different ways. It may be useful to discern in what ways, and if we visit that museum, what do we see, and how does it instruct us? Because, after all, we go to museums to learn things useful for the present and the future.

What I propose to do is to say a few words about some one might say, horizontal ripples of the experience of the Holocaust for adult survivors, child survivors, second generation, and third generation survivors. Then I want to address the depths of those ripples for these groups over time.

Ripples of the Holocaust for Adult Holocaust survivors

Adult Holocaust survivors are the repositories and the expressions of actual Holocaust experiences. Survivors carry their experiences in their bodies, guts, sensations, feelings, and memories.

In many ways they are the stamps, the still visible fingerprints, the records and carriers of the turmoils, pain and grief. Their experiences are still alive, sometimes tormenting as much as before. If not during the day, then at night, if not in everyday experiences, then when triggered by current events, or paradoxically when joyous events remind them of sorrows.

Survivors can talk and tell, though they may be reluctant. Still, many have given their testimonies, and for the first time in history a catastrophe is recorded digitally in thousands of personal stories, and can remain fresh for a long time.

Survivors tend to talk in a documentary style. They often avoid central traumas in their lives. These are most frequently deaths and separations from loved ones, and betrayals and humiliations. They often carry guilt and regret for relatives' deaths.

Ripples of the Holocaust for Child Survivors of the Holocaust

Child survivors of the Holocaust have recognized themselves only in the last decade or so, until then having been enveloped by their parents' experiences. As often happens in disasters, parents see children as appendages to their own experiences. It is adults who make decisions and live with them, it is they who try to protect children as much as possible. To worry about how children appraise and feel at the time, would hinder survival. That habit persists still, or persisted till recently.

Reciprocally, child survivors of the Holocaust suppressed their feelings, and did feel like appendages. So like me, when asked, they said, “No, I am not a survivor, my parents are.” They downplayed their experiences, “No I was not in a concentration camp,” as if being in hiding with strangers was nothing.

Children older than seven experienced and remembered the Holocaust similarly to their parents. Younger children had a few pictures as conscious memories. However, they did have bodily images, sensations, and behaviours relating to the time of the Holocaust. Sometimes they are not sure if their memories were valid. When they went back to the places of persecution, their memories were confirmed.

Ripples of the Holocaust for Second Generation Survivors

Children of survivors had no direct experience of the Holocaust, and therefore no memories. From their parents’ point of view, migration, self-sacrifice, and desire to give their children a better life, together with a benevolent, nurturing external environment in countries such as Australia, should have made their children’s lives opposite to their own. The children’s mission was thus on the one hand to be normal and happy, and expunge the Holocaust.

On the other hand, these children grew up enveloped in a parental cloak saturated by memories, rent by grief, scattered with black holes of silence. They were sometimes, unbeknownst to themselves, replacements for murdered families, memorial candles carrying killed relatives’ names, rekindled hopes of non-fractured life cycles.

From birth on, they absorbed feelings, images, sensations, behaviour that their parents carried in their beings. Thus, they said that they carried scars, but they did not know the original wounds. It was as if they should remember something, but they

could not. Sometimes parental wounds were so much part of them that they did not recognize the wounds or the scars.

At other times, they said that they felt that they themselves survived the Holocaust, it was so vivid for them. Or that they drank it in, in their mother's milk.

One woman had panic attacks each time she drove past chimneys in an industrial part of Melbourne. It took her a long time to realise that they were connected to her mother's horror of the chimneys in Auschwitz where she lost her parents.

Another woman had a panic attack passing through an Australian spa town. She believed dogs would spring out from houses she was passing. She learned later that her father's family was herded on to a truck by dogs in a similar village.

Second generation children have a great need to know the sources of their scars, in order to know who they are, and who they are not.

Ripples of the Holocaust for Third Generation Survivors

Grandchildren of survivors may continue to carry the original fears, griefs, body sensations, sometimes knowing their origins even less than their parents.

On the other hand, they may have often fulfilled their grandparents' desires for normality and immortality, more than their parents.

Because they are less entangled with survivors than their parents are, they may approach their survivor grandparents more innocently, and ask questions that their parents dared not ask, or were prevented from asking. Survivors may tell stories of their experiences to their grandchildren more easily than to their children. Sometimes they learn their parents' stories through their children.

These then are a few aspects of the ripples of the Holocaust. They are like the skeleton without the flesh, the means without the content, the technology without the soul. How can I, also a museum piece of the Holocaust, convey to you something of what the Holocaust has come to mean for me?

I can only convey a few ideas in this interactive way. You will hear them according to your own reverberations and meanings. People find their own lessons from the Holocaust. They are deeply felt, almost sacred. I hope that what I say now will not offend anyone. I present the following ideas as simply one survivor's moulding of experience of how the Holocaust rippled and made sense for me to the present day.

Observations from the Ripples of the Holocaust

Primacy of Survival

Survivors usually maintain that luck was the major factor in their survival. Luck had to be a major factor, but without a strong drive to live, survival would not have occurred.

Survival was motivated by love. Sometimes just love of life, but usually woven into love for somebody – somebody with whom one would reunite and care for, somebody for whom they would be a testament so that their murder would not be forgotten. But love for a better imagined future was central, and this should not be forgotten, whatever else is said.

With so much grief and loss after the war, survival and love could only become fulfilled in future families. Early marriages and children after the Holocaust, and drive for early marriages and children in the next generation resulted.

Concurrently, survival meant safe country, hard work to make money, safe profession for the children.

Children and grandchildren overcame the genocide. Survival and love triumphed.

Transmission and Conflict between Generations

For second generation survivors to understand and resolve their hidden wounds, they have three conflicting tasks. First, they have to resolve their parents' ambivalence of remembering and talking or pushing away and getting on with it.

Next, they have to resolve their conflicting missions of being normal untainted children, yet the carriers of the memory of the Holocaust.

Lastly, they have to resolve their own needs of their parents, yet sensing that their demands may be too burdensome to preoccupied parents, and that their normal strivings may show too little reverence for the Holocaust.

The context of families varies. Some survivors maintain a silence over the Holocaust in their families, and it is transmitted nonverbally. Others talk about it all the time, even compulsively, but leave out the most traumatic details, which are still transmitted nonverbally. Others still are shattered, and their children may take over parental roles. Others still lead apparently normal lives.

At the very least, parents are usually overprotective, which can result in the children mistrusting their own, and their children's safety.

A common conflict lies in the children choosing to fulfil their lives, to the parents with apparent disregard for the primacy of security. For instance, when children choose work and devote themselves to hobbies that are not secure, their survivor parents may see the children as frivolous, indulging in luxuries, leaving themselves vulnerable.

Ripples that are more complex can result. For instance, some children of survivors assimilated, or married out in order to be safe for the future, or to have their Jewish children camouflaged as Christian.

Other children tried to return to their parents what they lost, by becoming religious like their parents' parents, or by attempting to retrieve their culture. Parents may not be always happy with such gifts.

Communication across Generations

We have considered non-verbal communication across the generations. Ruth Wajnryb in her book *The Silence*, maintains that effective verbal communication requires a clarity of the subject in the communicator, what is meant to be conveyed and why, and an empathic view of the recipient, who should benefit in their own way from the communication.

Communication cannot be clear if one party, say the survivor, has to blank out, to survive, what may be most traumatic and significant for him or her, yet wants to convey the message as testimony, or to release pent up emotion. Similarly, if the survivor's mind is preoccupied by the past, he or she may not see the child and its needs and desires, fears, and strivings. Then the communications are such that the child cannot do anything with the communication, not for the parent, nor for him- or herself.

Intergenerational workshops such as run by Tania Nahum, have shown that survivors can tell their secrets, and thereby they give words to their children's till then unexplained experiences. They in turn understand their parents better, and communication and love are freed up.

Deeper Meanings of the Holocaust Over Time

Meanings of the Holocaust must change with time, as it does for all catastrophes. The destruction of the second temple, the Inquisition, meant different things at the time, fifty years after the event, and five hundred, and two thousand years later.

For Holocaust survivors, meanings revolved around means of survival. For instance, to survive you had to have money, you had to be self-sufficient, and so on. Meaning had to be made of the experience for the future. This included documentation, making sure the next generation did not forget, having a next generation carrying the names of the deceased.

As survivors join their dead relatives, the next generation memorialises survivors and those who were murdered. One trend is to make of them martyrs and heroes, something most of the original survivors certainly would not have considered.

For the next generations the Holocaust is both a part of identity, but also history.

Identity

What is a Jew? There is nothing like persecution to define a group, and the Holocaust defined Jews like no other event. The Holocaust placed Jews at the bottom rung of humanity. To this day, Diaspora Jews are sensitive to expose their identities as Jews, to variable degrees. The sense of shame emanating from denigration and humiliation has changed over the years and generations since the Holocaust.

From reluctance to expose Jewishness, a pride, or naturalness about being Jewish has become more commonplace. Nevertheless, waves of fear reverberating

with Holocaust imagery is not difficult to evoke, especially when triggered by real anti-Semitism, especially in Europe.

Israel

Perhaps the most meaningful event that arose for Jews out of the Holocaust has been Israel. “Never again, Victim no more”, it has given Jews pride, and neutralized the Jewish identity as victims.

Yet the meaning of Israel has changed over the years too, even for its inhabitants. No longer is it motivated by zeal of the working commune on the land. It is seen more and more as an ordinary nation with a great variety of ordinary people, with a variety of world views.

Religion

Some survivors have explained their survival as a divine miracle. For most survivors, however, the Holocaust proved that there was no God. It was inconceivable that a Jewish god, or any benevolent God, should allow the perpetration of the murder of so many innocents, irrespective of whether they were religious or not. The usual cries of prophets that this is retribution for not keeping the laws, or that one could not know the purposes of God, made no sense this time.

However, as the Holocaust receded over the generations, some younger people retrieved it as a way to retrieve the Jewish people, and its history. As mentioned, some did it to return to their parents what was taken from them, while others did it *davke* their parents.

Jewish fundamentalism overlooks the Holocaust, concentrating instead on retrieving a vision of the distant, past glories.

A Universal Story

The Holocaust ripples beyond Jews. Sometimes I am surprised to what extent non-Jews are fascinated and influenced by the Holocaust. For instance, it has caused as much trouble for Christian theologians as Jewish ones.

As I mentioned, the International Forum on the Holocaust drew wide political interest at the highest level. To become member of the European Union, it has to be taught in schools. Countries like the Czech Republic and Lithuania have had special packages taught to their education departments, in order to teach teachers how to teach the Holocaust.

The Holocaust has come to represent evil in common parlance. It and similar words such as concentration camps, Nazi, have become absorbed into everyday language. They are synonyms for genocide, catastrophe, evil, and human perversity. Some survivors are upset at these generalizations. I think Holocaust with small h will become something like inquisition with a small I, absorbed into the language. The actual Holocaust should be unique, with a capital H.

I said that the Holocaust is like a standard against which all other catastrophes and their components can be measured, and compared. For instance, questions of memory, of transgenerational transmission of trauma are best documented in Holocaust survivors, and can be applied to other traumas.

Similarly, the experiences of child survivors of the Holocaust are pertinent and instructive to victims of childhood physical and sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, genocides have not ceased with the Holocaust. But the Holocaust also points the way to the study of perpetrators, both individually and on a wider scale.

Conclusion

While the original survivors knew the Holocaust in their bodies and as imprints in their minds, paradoxically, knowledge about the Holocaust is widening and deepening in different ways even as the original witnesses are dying out. Its paradigm and its lessons are examined and applied to current times. In our general press, rarely a week goes by without a Holocaust article, and a number of references to it.

People want to know, and they can be informed now better than ever before, what happens to people in worst possible situations, how one can survive them, with what consequences, over what period of time, and how resilience people are.

People have always wanted to know what such disasters mean in the scheme of things.

Among very many things, for me the Holocaust shows the greatest human vulnerabilities and strengths and everything in between.

It warns and explains how people's minds can become distorted, and how they can apply themselves to wiping out what they see as enemies, even though they are but reflections of themselves. When bureaucracy and modern weaponry are applied to this wiping out, the costs are immense.

I see ripples of the Holocaust in myself, in others, across generations, and across nations. It is not the same but there is a ripple of it among Arab nations today. In bigger and smaller ways, ripples are evident in many places, as are parallel precursors that do not reach Holocaust levels. And we should not think that Australians or Jews are exempt from some such thinking.

Let me finish by saying that out of the Holocaust came not only Israel, but also the International Convention on the Rights of Refugees, International Convention on

the

Rights of the Child, and many lessons pertaining to human rights generally. Many Holocaust survivors and their children have been at the forefront of drafting these Conventions and otherwise helping persecuted minorities.

The talk today may reflect another feature of the Holocaust – a drive to think, to ask questions, the drive being felt deeply under our skins. Perhaps such questioning and thinking takes many decades to arrive at definitive answers. Perhaps the answers to the questions at the International Forum on the Holocaust are still being shaped.