

The Nature of Memory Across the Generations

Talk at Holocaust Centre for Child survivors of the Holocaust and guests
16th April 2023

Time: 2.00pm for a 2.30pm start - 4.30pm, includes Q&A session.

INTRODUCTION

We know not the future and the present is fleeting. We exist only in our memories. We are our memories.

In this Holocaust museum, we are in a world of objective memories. The past is gathered as historical evidence, so that the future is informed truthfully about the past.

But today we are concerned about subjective memories, and we need to understand them too, because they are at least as important as objective memories in fashioning the future.

The Purpose of Human Memory; How Reliable are Memories?

***Everyday memories* are not carbon copies of reality. We don't recall every school day. We fashion a template of average school days. Some memories,**

like our weddings stand out, but even there we remember only highlights that we want to preserve as foundational blocs. Most memories we coalesce as a kind of average to help us explain the world and us to ourselves.

Traumatic memories are different. They are burnt into our memories so that should cues of their repetition arise, we can act immediately to forestall destruction.

In the jungle this worked well. With regard to, say, memories of the Holocaust, there are problems. If we react to cues that evoke the Holocaust, but there is no Holocaust, our actions appear as irrational.

Another problem with Holocaust memories is that to recall them could evoke despair, and we would want to die. But obliterating the past means not having a self. We would be just shells of human beings.

These are the eternal conflicts of Holocaust survivors, encapsulated by

Child survivor Itta Benhaiem-Keller, who wrote:

I want to remember my past

To see before my eyes

The image of my parents

The house in which I grew up

The village in which my family lived for generations.

I don't want to remember my past

I fear for what my memory

Might bring before my eyes

I wonder whether I can continue my life

If I'll rescue from oblivion

What I want to recall.

To remember or to not remember. On the one hand, child survivor Robert Krell wrote about the fear of memory, which “..might unleash the demons of remembrance to haunt the already haunted.

On the other hand, Judith Kestenberg, one of the two discoverers of child survivors of the Holocaust, wrote that there was a hunger for memories, as if life depended on them. ‘Memories make us feel alive..and we triumph over death.’

So remembering is a balance between craving and terror, pain and numbness. How much memory we allow into awareness depends on how

much pain we are prepared to tolerate, and that depends on how much hope we have of achieving meaning and purpose through remembering.

So remembering or not is not an all or nothing affair. Child survivor Dori Laub pointed out that there were

Degrees of remembering and forgetting. **At an extreme, we may seem to not remember at all. But then we may relive events in dreams, fugue states, and body symptoms; we may enact memories in behaviour, and especially in children in play and drawing; memories may reach awareness in undigested physical, psychological or behavioural fragments; and finally there may be revelations and integrations of memory into ever-more coherent mental pictures, words, and narratives.**

So memories may be overwhelming or absent, or be various mixtures of words and silence, awareness and unawareness, the thinkable and unthinkable. Memories range differentially across our bodies, minds, and social networks, and spiritually from survival needs to existential meanings. Which specific type of memory is remembered where, how, when and to what degree, depends on what we judge to serve maximum survival and fulfilment at the time.

Let me give you an example from the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires. Our Mt Macedon team observed that after a few days the local residents inundated their GPs with a huge variety of symptoms such as palpitations, nausea, stomach cramps, and so on. Unawares, these symptoms symbolized untenable conflicts. Why did we not help our deceased neighbours? How could we have wet themselves like infants? Reinterpreting these existential dilemmas in realistic terms helped to resolve the symptoms.

The question often arises as to whether memories represent true reality. Traumatic memories do to the extent that they allowed to remembered. Divergent memories among those who had undergone the same traumatic situation are due to different individuals having experienced different survival issues, even in the same situation. I will show later how my parents and I had true but very different memories of the same situation.

Memories and their interpretations vary between children of different ages and adults. Holocaust memories are especially valuable because as in no other situation, they include every possible traumatic situation, and memories are extensively recorded across the generations. So let us look at

Different Generational Memories

Adults

Immediately after the war, survivors exchanged information about who survived and who did not. They told each other of their own experiences. A few wrote books, more wrote letter-type memoirs of a few pages.

But soon new survival issues took over. Many married other survivors and quickly had children, many to replace dead ones. Survivors immersed themselves in work and building up security.

In the 1960s the Germans offered compensation for certain Holocaust related sufferings. Survivors now had to plumb their memories and tell them to psychiatrists. It was only during this process that some psychiatrists recognized for the first time the extent of physical, psychological, and social consequences of the Holocaust.

Two types of doubt arose with respect to survivors' memories. The first was doubt as to their veracities. Criteria for restitution were stringent and had to be corroborated by witnesses, which was impossible. So survivors got together and made up stories that corroborated each other. It's not that

they exaggerated their sufferings; they may have even diminished them.

But many German judges saw it their duty to expose inevitable inconsistencies and to discredit the claimants.

The other doubt that arose about survivors' memories was that survivors, because they blanked out their most traumatic memories, often could not relate a coherent story.

Even to their children, over years, survivors often conveyed their stories non-sequentially and non-verbally, evoking emotions and behaviour consistent with survivors' experiences, fuelled with sacred innuendoes such as "Never again!", but experiences were enveloped in black holes where memory was obscured to significant degrees.

Memory is not just remembering and suppressing sensual traumatic events- sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. It extends to interpretations of these events according to moral judgements – guilt, shame, injustice, and meanings. For instance, a mother who could not save her child suffered more from her guilt, shame, and being a moral failure not fit to live than from her actual experience.

Though outwardly survivors worked hard to re-establish families and security, they were plagued inwardly by different type, and different degrees of remembering, such as in nightmares and wordless memory fragments in survivors' bodies, mental attitudes, and social interactions.

Reliving and suppression of memories carried costs. Holocaust survivors suffered higher rates of morbidity and mortality from a great variety of physical, mental and social illnesses in relation to the rest of the population, including World War Two soldiers.

Nevertheless, after around 40 years since their experiences, survivors had a surge of remembering. They were stimulated not only by the requirements of compensation, but also by the facts that they had occupational success, they had children and grandchildren, and a country – Israel. They had defeated Hitler. Their lives had meaning once more.

Around this time too, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and in a time of optimism, the world was willing to listen to survivors. Here was a chance at last to speak. Hundreds of books and tens of thousands of testimonies materialised.

There was hope that victims' stories would be engraved forever, and they would prevent the world from ever again experiencing the likes of the Holocaust.

And yet, even to this day, Holocaust memories plague many survivors. For some the threat of the pandemic with its forced isolation and police patrolling the streets, evoked past terrors. Holocaust memories have also resurfaced among survivors in residential care as they re-experienced helplessness and little diversion from their thoughts.

Some needed to tell their memories for the first time before they died. This led to potential confusion in and even rejection by children so far protected from such memories.

To this day, the dilemma of remembering or forgetting continues.

Child survivors

Child survivors of the Holocaust were the 10% of children under the age of 15 who survived the war. These children were the most vulnerable and traumatized group of the Holocaust, yet they were the last group to be recognised in the 1980s, that is, 40 years after the Holocaust.

Not only were they not recognised by others; they did not recognise themselves.

There were three special problems with child survivor memories.

***First*, memories from early childhood occur only in flashbacks, bodily sensations, and emotions, often without context and capacity to understand their sources.**

Litzi, head of the Sydney child survivors group, tells the story of how she had recurrent images of falling backward into a sea of shit. She believed that these images indicated an innate mental aberration, until a visit to Teresienstadt where she had been interned as a young child revealed latrines exactly like her images.

***Second*, after seven when children remember like adults, children, like adults, suppressed their memories for fear of being overwhelmed by them.**

***Third*, child survivors' parents often invalidated their children's memories. They said, 'You can't remember!' 'You know nothing.' 'You were too**

young to remember.’ Parents could not conceive, nor did they want to believe, that their children suffered as much, or even more than they had.

My mother related numerous times to her friends in front of me how when she and my father were led away by the Hungarian police leaving me alone in the street, she, freed of tension had the best sleep of her life. She would add, laughing, how in prison she cohorted with thieves and prostitutes. My parents’ escape from the train bound for Auschwitz, re-finding me, and our subsequent survival completed what became a heroic story.

My mother had no concept of what it was like for me, at the age of four, to be abandoned to my fate in the street and to hear what a good night’s sleep she had having done so.

So we see again that in spite of sharing the same outward experience, parents and children might have totally different internal experiences and make quite different meanings of their memories.

For me, being abandoned at the age of four, had all three ingredients that erased memory: it was too traumatic to recall, I was too young to put it into context and significance, and my parents implied that only they had a memory of the event.

And so in a lift at a trauma conference, a grey-haired lady, who turned out to be Sarah Moskovitz, one of two women who discovered child survivors asked me, ‘Are you coming to my seminar on child survivors of the Holocaust?’ ‘No, I’m going to..’ ‘Are you a child survivor of the Holocaust?’ ‘No. My parents are Holocaust survivors. ‘When and where were you during the war?’ Budapest 1942-5.’ ‘You are a child survivor. Come to my seminar.’ I did and I discovered child survivors of the Holocaust like myself.

Two years later I met 1300 child survivors of the Holocaust at a New York conference. I had the privilege to deliver a keynote address. But the most important part of that conference for me was to be recognized, to share a deep common language with so many others, and to belong to a community where we all belonged.

It’s not that prior to this I did not know intellectually that I had been through the Holocaust, or that I gravitated toward other children who had been through it too. But I could not give these experiences emotional weight.

To recognise one's traumatised self, to put one's memories and black holes into context, may be a long journey. For instance, it took me years to just formulate the question why, when led away by the local Gestapo, did my parents not look around and wave to me? The answer came only more years later: had they done so, I might have run after them. Simple words that answered years of unconscious anguish.

Over the years our child survivors group, in this very building, heard, explored, supported, and made sense of each other's memories.

Many of us embarked on personal journeys to our wartime environments. At different times I visited Slovakia and Budapest, including with my older children, Dani and Ariel. The last time, just before COVID, was with my wife Julie, our youngest child Amy, her husband and their two children. We all stood in front of the door to the flat where my parents and I had hidden during the war. Look! We have survived, and thrived!

On the same trip, in Berlin this time, I estimated where Hitler's last bunker had been. I stamped on it triumphantly.

But my real victory has been to use my experience of trauma to help other traumatised people, and to attempt to systematise trauma's complexities. In my writings I described an octave of survival strategies which radiated three-dimensionally across time, society and morality.

2nd Generation

Children of survivors were discovered in the 1970s. They had no direct experience of the Holocaust, and therefore no memories of it. From their parents' perspective their children, growing up in peaceful prosperous Australia, endowed with results of their parents' hard work, should have been happy.

Such parental expectations were bound up with opposite silent expectations. For instance, for survivor parents' children to marry early and have children, like they had done, to make up for losses of family.

Another silent expectation was for the children to maintain full knowledge of the Holocaust and carry its memories into the future. Otherwise all the deaths would be in vain, with no meaning. And then of course the parents were not models for happiness. They oozed of the Holocaust.

To remember or not had a specific deep resonance in 2nd generation Holocaust survivors. Though they were expected to be happy, from birth on they absorbed feelings, images, sensations, behaviour that their parents carried in their beings.

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. At other times parental wounds were so much part of them that they did not recognize them as unusual. Sometimes they felt that they themselves survived the Holocaust, or that they had drunk 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.

Often children were named after the dead, and were given roles of the dead, such as to care for their parents as their dead parents would have.

Roles might include a range of lost family members as well as a range of perpetrators. In the latter cases, parents have said, ‘You are worse than Hitler. You are finishing what Hitler could not.’

We see that children could be given concurrently opposite roles. Sometimes Holocaust children’s tasks were divided. One child carried the Holocaust, while the other carried the untainted future. The children could grow up with opposite memories of their parents. Sometimes the siblings split their own relationships as a result.

Reciprocally to parental needs of their children, children had needs of their parents. But to find their parents and be attuned to them, children needed to ferret out their parents’ feelings, images, emotions, as well as censorships. Paradoxically, it was in this confused Holocaust package that they felt most ‘at home’.

The trouble was that children could not assimilate or understand what was transferred into them, nor to what they had attuned themselves. For instance, that they were a memorial candle for a dead child after whom they were named.

For second generation survivors to understand and resolve their hidden wounds, they had to understand and disentangle themselves from their parents' contradictory wishes for them. Sometimes parents helped, for instance by taking their children to the sites of their persecution and grief.

Reconciliation could occur to the last moment. For instance, on his deathbed Juliette's father confessed his guilt for making a decision that led to Juliette's mother's death. He felt eternal guilt toward Juliette. This explained father's distance that Juliette had felt over the years. 'You did not kill mother. You were not God, you couldn't have known,' Juliette cried. Father looked at her with the warmth he had not been able to provide till then.

On the other hand, unresolved conflicts could last till the grave. For instance, a man refused to have a COVID vaccine to spite his anxious overprotective Holocaust survivor parents.

In conclusion, ripples from the Holocaust are manifold, complex, intense, and variable. For instance, some children hid their Jewishness and married out in order for their own children to be safe. On the other hand, children have tried to return to their parents what they had lost, for instance by becoming religious, like their parents' parents had been.

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 survival and normality more than their parents.

Because they are less entangled with survivors than their parents, they may approach their survivor grandparents more innocently, and ask questions that their parents dared not ask, or were prevented from asking. Similarly, survivors may tell their stories to their grandchildren more easily than to their children, because survival was now assured.

QUESTIONS

We could stop at this point having learned how different generations have remembered the Holocaust.

But it may be worthwhile to pursue some mysteries that we have uncovered on the way.

First, regarding memories, where are the memories that we don't remember? The black holes, the wounds, the deep knowledge somewhere, exerting major even if silent influence? Freud would have said that these memories are in the unconscious. But what is the unconscious? Where is the unconscious? You may push away memories of murdered relatives, but you can't forget them either. Where is knowledge of them while knowledge of them is pushed out of awareness?

There is some basic mystery about us humans that the ancient Greeks already divined. 'Know thyself' was inscribed in the temple of Apollo, to which Pythagoras added, 'then thou shalt know the Universe and God.' But how shall we know ourselves when we are hidden somewhere from ourselves?

A long time ago, as a medical student dissecting a human body, I was confronted by the two hemispheres of the brain, almost totally separated from each other. The function of the left half was clear. It was the site of language, time, logic, analytical thinking, and reason. When I asked my teachers about the slightly larger right hemisphere, I was told that it was the silent hemisphere.

We've come a long way since. Yes, *the right hemisphere* is silent in the sense that it is wordless, thoughtless, timeless, and self-unaware, so it doesn't declare itself to us, and, like my teachers, we have not known about it.

However, we now know that this hemisphere communicates non-verbally through emotions, postures, and behaviour, and formulates intuitive and holistic views of the world, ranging from immediate survival needs such as fight and flight, to existential beliefs including ideologies and religions.

In normal situations division of the hemispheres is a clever evolutionary ploy, because it allows appreciation of opposites at the same time, such as thought and emotion, logic and intuition, and analytic and holistic thinking.

But relevant to our discussion, the hemispheres have engaged in an opposite evolutionary ploy- the hiding in the right hemisphere, of untenable traumatic knowledge.

Indeed, Roger Sperry, Nobel laureate for his work on the hemispheres said, 'Information about traumas .. is lodged in the right hemisphere where it seems to lie entirely outside the realm of awareness of the left self-aware hemisphere. Nevertheless, although seemingly lost, these memories and attached feelings can continue to influence whole-brain functioning, in

subtle as well as profound ways.’ And recent MRI studies have confirmed that when reliving traumas, the right hemisphere is activated and the left hemisphere is suppressed.

The black hole of memory often started with the horror itself. Prisoners denied the significance of the chimneys in Auschwitz even when only meters away from them. A concentration camp survivor said, “I saw children carried by Nazi soldiers to the Pit and dropping them into the Pit.... At the time I didn’t want to believe that was what I was seeing. I hid that in my memory.

And when recalling unforgettable traumas, paradoxically, they are remembered as they were perceived at the time, with emotion and its suppression, eternal inscription and eternal unreality of the event. Not remembering unforgettable events contributed to survivors’ confusion about their most traumatic experiences.

Though survivors worked hard to re-establish families and security, their suppression of trauma carried costs. Remember that trauma was usually not totally suppressed; that survivors were plagued by different leaks of remembering through their bodies, mental attitudes, and social

interactions, which unfortunately led to high survivor morbidity and mortality rates.

Holocaust victims said, ‘Remember us. Tell the world what happened to us.’ The implication was that telling the world, the world would take note and learn something; mainly not to repeat its mistakes. Has remembering the Holocaust prevented similar traumas?

Sure, the Holocaust has drawn attention to human rights and rights of the child, enshrined in UN declarations. Importantly, the Holocaust was an important template for recognition and understanding trauma in other fields, such as disasters, combat, and sexual abuse of children.

But so far the Holocaust has not been able to answer the ‘Never again!’ plea. There have been further genocides, wars, and we are possibly on the brink of an unnecessary, irrational cataclysm.

Have we learned nothing from the Holocaust? Perhaps not enough from logical exposition of its history. Perhaps right brain type exposition may help to learn ‘under the skin’, existentially from history in order to not repeat it.

Knowledge of right brain transmission of trauma could help explain how Holocaust traumas can be passed right brain to right brain down the generations. But they can be passed similarly, right brain to right brain, across societies. In societies undergoing traumas, traumatised leaders may arise and offer irrational right brain solutions to their traumatised peoples.

So an irrational Hitler who was traumatised in his youth could take over when Germany's traumas could not be solved by other leaders. Hitler's irrational right brain view of the world led to World War Two. Similar dynamics played out in Stalin's Russia and Mao's China.

What about the dynamics today, when for instance the U.S. may be progressing like lemmings toward civil or external war with a potential irrational president at the helm.

Again, irrational forces may hide the traumatic situations of many Americans. While much American wealth is being funnelled upward to a burgeoning number of billionaires, poverty, which includes hunger, is increasing.

Millions especially in poorer states, who previously as born-again Christians waited for religious salvation, now believe in a Messianic right hemisphere Trump as their saviour.

Our right brains have inherited old ways of dealing with problems, such as dividing ‘us’ and ‘them’, and conquest and annihilation of enemies. In our current world where social problems have solutions, cycles of trauma and violence are unnecessary and irrational.

Instead, we need to remember and understand traumas, our own as well as others’. For instance, while confronting China over Taiwan we should remember the century-long trauma, exploitation, and humiliation of Chinese by European powers including the US, with Taiwan the symbol of this past.

I don’t want to appear simplistic, partial, or idealistic. But it is conceivable that the irrationality of the Holocaust is manifested in similar irrationalities with similar reasons in our current world. If that irrationality could be understood in right brain as well as left brain fashion, we may enhance rationality, even a little.

It may then be conceivable that American poverty will be solved, that a solution will be reached over Taiwan, that food can be distributed to the hungry, and that peace can be achieved.

To maintain peace, we were told to love thy enemies as thyself. I think it would be more useful to say, 'Understand traumas; your enemies' as well as your own'.

Finally, we and our memories can stay in the darkness of the past, or we can use these memories to be the light to our future.