

# **SURVIVING SURVIVAL**

***Holocaust Survivors: myths and facts***

**By Diana Wang**

**Dedication:**



*For Zenus-Wang (Poland, 1939 - ? )  
my older brother  
wherever he is, whatever his name may be*

## **To the reader:**

The Second World War was a great laboratory for human and social studies. We have yet to finish reviewing each and every fragment involved. It is not an easy topic to approach. It touches upon one of our most prized possessions, one which we are not very prepared to do without: the idea that we are good, noble, generous and unified beings. No one likes to see himself on the dark side, behind all of the rest. The Shoah – the Holocaust – or the experience of the Jews in the occupied Nazi territories, also confronts us with that side of human beings that, under normal conditions, is found on the pages of police blotters. The survivors of the Shoah demonstrate human complexity from both perspectives: on one hand, humiliation and shame, together with pain, inequity and abjection, and on the other hand, strength, dignity, the supreme decision to live and the incredible capacity for recovery. We are presented with a more complete framework of human nature, albeit difficult to digest owing to its complex and contradictory nature.

I would like to explain to you how I wrote this book and why. I would also like to give you a warning and, finally, to make a request.

**How?** I wrote on a portable computer. The software I used was Word Perfect 6.1 but the energy was my own blood. I wrote with my fingers and my guts. I tell you this without euphemisms. Words no longer frighten me. Certain human behaviors do. And that is what this book, which you might be about to read, is concerned with.

**Why?** I wrote this book because I could not do otherwise. It was burning within me. I could contain it no longer. It was hurting me. Once I discovered that I am, among other things, a daughter of survivors/appeared persons of the Shoah, I set out on a path of search and discovery, as many of us have done. First, a personal search of my parents' past, the history of their survival, of how and why. My father had already died. I only had my mother, who did not wish to speak about it. In fact, she spoke about it, but in fragments, sometimes without making sense, a narration plagued by silences and abrupt changes of subject. Mama was already tired of living and of keeping silent. Today, she's no longer here anymore. At that time, I did not wish to disturb her. I found out a great deal, but not enough. Which led me to search for other sources. First, the other survivors that had been my family in this new life. Then, I turned to books. Later, a trip with my brother to our roots, Poland, Ukraine... Even later, the Holocaust Memorial Foundation in Buenos Aires and our Second Generation Group. And then Spielberg's Foundation with its project for recording testimonies, and the group of child survivors. What began as a personal search, ended up confronting me with what would determine my need to write. I found that victim-survivors did not have a clear and recognized place in society. I discovered that, given the possibility that someone wished to listen – someone with a friendly, non-critical ear – they were ready to speak. I wondered why no one had wanted to listen before. What had determined this fifty-year silence? What was it they had to say that was better kept in silence? If they were the privileged witnesses of the horror to which human beings can descend, why not learn from that difficult experience in order to extract lessons that might make us better persons, to help us live in a better world? These are the questions that would not let me rest. I do not believe that I have been able to answer them. I have only been able to draw close to some of the issues and to begin to think about them.

I sat down to write in order to organize my ideas, so overwhelming were the things I had been discovering, so troubling, so familiarly unfamiliar. I transcribed quotes from authors who referred to those aspects that interested me, the most painfully shattering

aspects in our collective memory, which, though happened in the past are still alive today and exercising a tremendously powerful and toxic effect. When I shared some of these writings with other children of victim-survivors, I was surprised by their reactions. I discovered that, for many of them, these were valid questions, that they too had been assailed by them, that the ideas being suggested relieved their burdens somewhat and offered them new interpretations and meanings for many of their family vicissitudes.

I never thought that what I was writing would become a book. I am indebted to Raquel Hodara who, when she read something of what I had written, warmly encouraged me to publish.

**Warning.** I do not address pleasant things in this book. Although I have made a special effort not to get carried away with unnecessary scatologies, with a dangerous fascination for evil and death, I have not held back on the true life experiences of the survivors. There are some things here that are not pleasant to read (and, much less, to live).

If you prefer to remain with a mystified version of the Shoah and of human nature, do not read this book.

If you prefer to go on seeing reality as a simplified binary system of good and evil, of black and white, of north and south, take heed, do not read this book.

If you prefer to glorify death, to raise monuments and pronounce discourses loaded with declarative “never mores,” full of statistics and vast numbers, but removed from crude human experience, do not read this book.

If you prefer not to dirty your hands or muddy your shoes, definitely do not read this book.

**Request.** If you have decided to heed my warning and not to read this book, rest assured that I understand; I understand and I accept. If, despite my warning, you have decided to forge ahead, welcome. When you have finished, or when you are half-way through and feel the urge, I would be interested to know your thoughts, your feelings, whether you have reservations, memories, things to add, or things to rectify. Write to me. Help me give meaning to the Shoah, a prospective meaning. Even though I may count myself as one of the band of skeptics and pessimists, I cannot control myself (a survivor’s strategy, perhaps) and I persist in nurturing a small element of hope.

(You may write to me through the publisher or, if you have e-mail, to: [diana@arnet.com.ar](mailto:diana@arnet.com.ar)).

#### **Florida, Buenos Aires, June 1998**

The word, Shoah, means devastation, disaster, in Hebrew. Researchers have preferred to use this term when referring to the murder of six million Jews in Europe in the Nazi-occupied territories during the Second World War. The word, “Holocaust,” is frequently used, having been chosen by North Americans and disseminated through the mass media and film; it is not easy to replace it with the other term.

The word, Holocaust: in Hebrew, the term is *korban ola*, which was the animal that was offered on the altar as a religious sacrifice; the term is inappropriate because it alludes to a religious sacrifice, a rite of purification by fire, a divine punishment; these meanings, obviously, cloud our vision and understanding of the situation given that the experience was neither a sacrifice nor a purification of anything, a divine punishment, or a religious act. Some theories, with respect to the Nazis and their current followers, as well as with respect to some ultra-religious sectors (on the side of the Jews), may coincide with the idea of sacrifice. The idea implies the notion of guilt, that is, it attributes responsibility for what happened to the Jewish people themselves (misers and conspirators according to the Nazi perspective, punishment imposed by God according to the religious perspective). On the other hand, many holocausts may take place, similar to acts of genocide. Modern thinkers sustain that the events of the Shoah are and were unique in human history; thus, its terminology should reflect that singularity.

The Shoah: devastation, summarizes the specificity of the Jewish people as victim and describes what happened without the need for appendices. It does have the drawback of alluding to a “natural” phenomenon, whereas the systematic murder of the Jewish people by the Nazis was carried out by human beings, driven by human impulse.

## Prologue

### **The Sounds of Silence, by Prof. Raquel Hodara**

In general, in order to sleep, we long for silence. Yet there are certain kinds of silence that preclude sleep, silences that are cries of terror which – suffocated by pain and shame – strain to be heard. Among those who have suddenly been assaulted by this discovery, there are some who have chosen to quickly plug their ears; they cannot be blamed: they only wish to protect their sanity. Others plunge into the sounds, but do not perceive the words they are composed of. A few, very few, dare to decipher the words, to become participants not only in the pain but also in the knowledge and, thus, in the terror that unavoidably accompanies it, hand in hand.

Diana Wang is one of those few. I believe that what characterizes her is precisely that: her daring. After daring to open her ears and discover what took place in her own family, she ventured to open her eyes to the reality of the Shoah; she began to voraciously read everything she could that was related to the topic, attempting to penetrate the topic through chronicles and general historical information, to enter into the “self” of each and every one of the victim-survivors (as she refers to them), trying to rescue their identities, their humanity. Thus, for example, she feels compelled to view them as they were at the age when their worlds changed, suddenly and forever: young, healthy, with plans and dreams for the future, like all young people. In the same way, with startling clarity, she observes how everything possible was done to rob these victims of their dignity, to deny them of even the smallest degree of free will; Diana dares to go so far as to formulate the most terrible of all questions: what would she have done had she been there...

But her daring does not stop there: having opened her ears and eyes, she feels called upon to raise her voice and confront us with more truths: the truth concerning children who grew up without aunts, uncles, cousins or grandparents, without family photographs or medical histories; the truth about parents who hide their pasts believing that, by revealing it, they will no longer serve as good models for their children; the truth about children who wonder about the shameful acts their parents must have committed in order to survive; the truth about others who would have liked to believe that their parents had performed acts of heroism, but were disappointed to learn that, in general, their salvation was due to nothing more than chance; the truth about children who, like many young people, believe in the goodness of man, and the truth about parents who, as genuine experts on the most sordid aspects of human beings, fear destroying the innocence of those children.

How was it born, from where did it come, this silence that accompanied and still accompanies so many children of survivors? Diana states it very well: there are secrets in all homes, they coexist with all families; but in the homes of the “appeared,” the secrets are not just sporadic moments in the past, but rather long years that were converted, for those who lived through them, into the prism through which they view reality. On the other hand, in this case, the roots of secrecy are not in what one did in the past, but rather in what was done to the person. So, why keep silent?

The reasons are varied: first and foremost, the impossibility of understanding – and even of believing – what happened; among other things, they could not – and many still can not – understand that they were persecuted not for something they did, but for the simple fact of being what they are, as if they possessed within them some dangerous mystery of

which not even they were conscious. We are accustomed to seeing them in classes and conferences on the Shoah, or in the archives of *Yad Vashem*, searching for documents that might confirm their memories, and fervently longing to find a satisfactory answer to the questions that perturb them.

According to Aaron Appelfeld (one of the best writers among the survivors), many of the survivors who repeatedly told themselves that, if they survived, they would tell the world in detail what they had been forced to suffer, now confess that when the moment arrived, they preferred to forget, unable to believe that what they had experienced could have been real. If during the war this desire to inform the world was what kept them alive, after the war it seems that only the attempt to forget is what enables them to go on living. If it were not for those survivors who could not repress their need to relate their experiences, the victims themselves would have denied the horrors. This is not surprising: right before their eyes, the world had been transformed into a violent chaos of unpredictability... Others did not consider themselves suitable as mouthpieces for so much death. Many felt, very simply, that language itself distorted their experiences to such an extent that it was better to keep silent.

They were not few, however, who did wish to speak out, in spite of everything, with a sense of desperation: but there was no one to listen, no one to believe them. After the death of Primo Levi, a reporter from the newspaper, *Corriere de la Sera*, wrote the following: "His works will even confront us on Judgement Day," but his first book on Auschwitz was rejected by the prestigious publishing house, Editorial Einaudi; the decision was made by an important Jewish writer. It would appear that not even she could approach the universe of the Shoah at that time. According to Appelfeld, even when people expressed interest, their questions were not helpful. "They were questions from this world that had nothing to do with the world from which we had come; as if one were to ask for information about the primordial abyss or, for that matter, about eternity itself."

It is important to highlight that not only the survivors found it nearly impossible to communicate their experiences; historians and artists as well, each in his respective field, have strugglee to find adequate resources for transmitting what took place. Jean-Francois Lyotard compares the effects of the Shoah to the effects of an earthquake of such magnitude that it would destroy not only lives and buildings, but also all the seismographs capable of registering it.

What language shall we use for describing the planning, the calculation of materials, and the construction of facilities for the express purpose of carrying out the efficient murder – "by the most humane means possible," in Himmler's words – of millions of people? Would it be correct to employ the same terms used for describing any other engineering enterprise? How can we avoid the sin implied by speaking about all of this coldly and objectively without falling, on the other hand, into the easy trap of sentimentalism, which cheapens and trivializes reality? How shall we explain that a century-and-a-half after the apparently definitive triumph of the ideals of Equality and Fraternity in the heart of Christian Europe, the President of the Judicial Court of the Nazi Party, Walter Buch, could have said that the Jews were not human beings, but rather symptoms of putrefaction? What analytic method will enable us to finally understand how so many millions of persons were moved to commit horrendous crimes in the interests of such statements which propose an ideology that is so obviously false? What vocabulary is adequate for describing the treatment suffered by the victims of the ghettos and concentration camps? How can we

explain that the heroism in those places cannot be measured according to the concepts we normally employ?

As a surviving witness of Treblinka said during the trial of Ivan Demianiuk: “Whoever was there can never leave, and whoever was not there, can never enter...”

This “can never leave” is what Diana refers to as “the stone in the shoe” with which the victims who survived must walk through life. The stone cannot be dissolved by forgetting what they experienced; but the courage and empathy of those who sincerely try to understand surely makes it easier for them to endure it.

# REASONS FOR THE SILENCE

## Introduction

I often refer to the survivors of the Shoah as victim-survivors, or “the appeared”. This word is borrowed from Jorge Semprun’s book, *L’écriture ou La vie*, (2) in which, with a goldsmith’s hand, he relates his experiences in Buchenwald, sifting through the intricate impressions of his memory, the recollections stored away for fifty years.

As children of the appeared, the people who returned from Death, we often wonder about our parents’ pasts. These are questions that cannot always be expressed.

Some of us are unaware that we are wondering about these questions.

We have learned not to notice certain things.

We have been instructed to behave as if everything were just fine, we have learned to keep silent.

How have we been instructed to keep quiet?

How have we accepted this complicity of silence, this simulacrum of leading “normal” lives similar to everyone else’s?

Why is it that many of us are unaware that, as children of the appeared, victim-survivors of the Nazis, we unavoidably belong to a singular category of identity?

How is it that this double blindness has been produced, this “not seeing that one doesn’t see”?

These are a few of the questions I will consider here. Of course, there are as many questions as there are families and people. And not all of us children of survivors ask the same questions, but there is always that lingering uncertainty, lurking in those shadowy blind spots of the mind, prohibited topics we are not supposed to mention, having to do with ourselves. Surely, this might be common to all families. Are there any families without some secrets, without compromising episodes in their pasts that they’d prefer not to remember?

Nonetheless, two elements stand out in our situation:

- 1) A psychological, subjective aspect: this seems to be a memory whose nature resists admission to the historical continuum; memory that attacks and subverts the very notion of the “self” (I will return to this aspect below); and
- 2) An objective aspect: never before in history, nor since, has an entire country undertaken a war on the scale of the Second World War with the goal – cold and

calculated – of exterminating an entire people. The benefits of the war for Germany, on all levels, in both geopolitical and economic terms, did not depend upon the extermination of the Jewish people, that is, the war in the field and the annexation of territories were certainly enough. Nonetheless, they set in motion a calculated process of genocide, with Teutonic business-like efficiency and all the technical and human resources available, without prospects of specific benefits whatsoever, I repeat, simple extermination for the sake of extermination. As a consequence, Germany undertook two wars: in addition to military actions in the theater of operations (in France, Russia, the skies over Europe, the seas, etc.) typical of a nation at war, Germany also marched against interior frontiers, at home and in the occupied territories, and waged war against an innocent and unarmed adversary, the Jewish people, dedicated to forcing them from the face of the Earth. The unprecedented nature of the act, the industrial proportions of Germany's achievements, the calculated meticulousness of the procedures, the sophistication of the destructive and fatal Nazi machine, placed the Jewish people, primarily, in this position of dubious and sorrowful privilege.

It has been calculated that approximately six million Jews died, one and a half million of whom were children. Estimates suggest that in Nazi-occupied territories about one million Jews survived. People are usually surprised by these figures. The common idea seems to be that only a few hundred, perhaps thousands, survived. But never a million.

How did they survive? What happened to them?

Were they aware of what was happening to them? Did they foresee events? And if so, why did they stay? Today we know that such questions are inappropriate, they reveal gross ignorance of the situation. But for many of us these and other questions nourished our youth. There is much that we know and even more that we do not know, and so much that we are just beginning to question in loud voices. The stories stored away in silence for so long, packaged away like secrets, may have been well-hidden, but they have never lost their toxicity.

All families have secrets. Perhaps all people have secrets they prefer to keep as such. Nonetheless, belonging to the group of people known as survivors, the appeared-of-the-Shoah, we feel that the stories of survival kept hidden and silent, for so many years, are in some way different from the usual family secrets and dishonors, perhaps belonging to a wholly different order of what is personal and intimate. Ours is a case in which the secrets transcend what merely pertains to ourselves, they implicate all humanity, they question the very idea that we, as human beings, have of ourselves.

For those of us who are curious about the questions posed at the start of these reflections and want to understand this category of identity, let us now review the most important issues with respect to what it means to be “second generation.”

### **The importance of context**

Throughout these reflections the issue of context – temporal, geographic, social, political, etc. – must be kept in mind. It is essential to remember that things are what they are according to how and where we place them: context determines a thing's significance, its interpretation and its evaluation.

Take for example the *topic of age*. The survivors of the Shoah are more than sixty-five years old today. At the end of the war they were almost all between the ages of 15 and 30; the number of survivors outside that age-range sharply declines, that is, there were very few children, very few older adults and almost no elderly among those who appeared.

Not all of the appeared are the same. The infinite, permanent and multiform torture of memory and recrimination is different for everyone. Apart from individual differences, the case of small children is especially unique; many of these reflections will not be applicable to their case because, at their age, they could not consider themselves, nor could they be considered, responsible for anything that happened to them. Feelings such as guilt and the need for expiation are not as relevant in their case as in the case of those who appeared at more advanced ages. However, as always, we must avoid tempting generalizations. Many if not all child survivors of the Shoah bear painful memories, grievous experiences from the first years of their lives. Let us consider, for example, those children adopted and raised by Christian families and the heartbreak for some at the traumatic moment of reunion with their surviving biological parents. So often, they experienced guilt and confusion when confronted with their preference for their adoptive parents. These are sentiments that remain painfully buried forever. But the fact that they were children, defenseless, incapable of making decisions, makes it clear to them and to the rest of us that they were the purest of victims and possessors, therefore, of an incontrovertible innocence. Those who were children, although they suffered unforgettable injury, are freer to remember what they remember, or to forget what they left behind. There is no self-reproach or recrimination, nor profound existential soul-searching. There is, however, great loss and suffering that somehow may be lived through without the need for mitigation or disguise.

This is not the case for those who had already entered adolescence, those few who indeed made decisions and who may see themselves in some way responsible for the things that happened, who may accuse themselves and may be accused of somehow being to blame, who torture themselves, almost without exception, with the idea of not having managed to save their loved ones' lives. These are the people who fifty years later are more than sixty-five years old and who for fifty years have been walking around with a "tiny stone in the shoe."

When we consider the appeared of the Shoah, we can only consider those persons we know, that is, people older than sixty-five. I propose our making the effort to rejuvenate their skin, smooth their wrinkles, strengthen their muscles, reinvigorate their reactions, revive their hopes, and re-place them in that moment when the years behind them were so few and those ahead seemed infinite. When we consider the appeared, we must see before our eyes the figures and bodies of boys and girls, of youths between fifteen and thirty years of age, none prepared for what they would live through, none prepared for anything other than what had been the dream of their parents: to grow up, to raise families, and to die of old age in their own beds.

Many of us have children, nieces, nephews and acquaintances, who are that age now. Let us whisper their names, let us remember their faces, their energy, their joy, their weaknesses and fears, their talents and concerns, their emotional needs, their romances and their dreams. Our parents, the appeared, were the way these children are today, when they were overcome by the sudden cataclysm that was the Nazi invasion. (So young, they knew so little! Suddenly they were hurled into an every-man-for-himself chaos with none of the usual referents, in a constant and mind-boggling process of daily adaptation and re-

adaptation to the changing and arbitrary laws of the occupying army. To enumerate the losses could take many pages, and they would never be sufficient for providing an accurate idea of the degree to which they had become vulnerable. I imagine them scratching, scrambling, improvising, inventing, deaf and blind when necessary, also alert and attentive to every new alternative, capable of maintaining themselves afloat in the eye of the storm, sleeping while longing for those familiar beds with foreseeable fragrances that they surely believed they had lost forever.

We should remember, each time we use the word “survivor,” or the “appeared” of the Shoah, whenever we think of them, whenever the topic comes up, that within each of these elderly people we see today, within that coat of skin worn thin by life, there is a fragile and tender bud preserved and carefully stored away, the adolescent or youth that was, who had to hold back tears and hide desperation because there was nowhere to turn for consolation, understanding or protection.

### **But the topic was Silence.**

I mean, of course, the silence of those who remained silent. Not all did. Nor can those who spoke out be neatly filed into general categories; not all behaved in the same way.

As in so many situations concerning human conduct, it is dangerous to establish generalizations. No one has told everything. Nor has anyone remained absolutely silent. However, we can loosely establish two categories: first, a group that predominantly chose to remain silent in the presence of their children and society, and second, a group that, to a significant degree, chose to speak out.

For those of us who grew up in homes where silence was maintained, the principal question that many of us have posed to ourselves is: Why the silence? Why weren't we told more? And here there are a number of sub-questions:

Why were we only told some things?

Why weren't we told everything in an organized way?

Why did they prefer not to speak out?

What was it like?

What was done to them?

What were they forced to do?

Although no situation can be generalized, the sensation of “not knowing,” at least to some degree, seems to be a common circumstance for all of us. Even in those families where parents spoke out, the children's memories are only of related fragments, without chronology, with essential portions remaining in the shadows, generating suspicions and threats. Perhaps they are the mysterious avatars of memory, of the fragility of memory, which is common to all people. However, it may be suspected that in our case there is something else, something that is central and critical.

It seems that this silence is one of the pillars sustaining our identity as second generation. And it is this same silence that paradoxically has rendered it impossible for us to recognize ourselves as the second generation inasmuch as we remain isolated from each other.

We were unaware that we were unaware.

We didn't know that there were others who didn't know.

## **Silence and our identity**

This silence is, then, both a platform for our identity and an obstacle for its very recognition.

From this perspective, I believe it is crucial for us, the children, the second generation of the appeared, especially for children of parents who remained silent, to begin asking the questions and seeking the answers that may explain, or at least give some sense to, the silence and, finally, to a part of our identity.

Many of us have believed that for all these years these were things that only happened in our own families. In our meetings, we have been moved by the discovery that that the silence surrounding what happened during the Shoah was a constant in almost all of our families. Naturally, with certain variations.

Over and over in our meetings we have observed the same coincidences: the search for answers and explanations, the need to accustom ourselves to a new identity and to feel secure with that identity in order to, in turn, pass on to our own children a sense of what we are, and how they may participate in this identity.

### **The Shoah did not end.**

The war did not end with the surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945. This is something we have learned and that we must learn to pass along.

It did not end for the families of the murdered victims who will never know consolation.

It did not end for the victims who managed to stay alive, the appeared, and their families.

It did not end for the perpetrators of these crimes either, not even for their children: additional and seldom considered victims who ask, or dare not to ask their parents dangerous questions.

It did not end for the world at large, and this is perhaps one of the most difficult consequences for us to live with, for the world must bear the knowledge of what men can do to other men, not solely out of hatred, nor in the heat of some overwhelming passion, but with the cold calculated decision to murder, to follow murderous orders as if carrying out mundane bureaucratic procedures.

### **The mission.**

In conversations with people of the second generation, it is common to hear the word “mission”. We feel – we like to believe – that we are entrusted with a mission: we are part of the consequences of the Shoah, our lives and our testimonies shed light on some of the corollaries regarding what happens to people in war and in extreme situations of humiliation, victimization, intolerance and dehumanization. We are like radioactive particles that, even buried, maintain some potency after long periods of time. We and our children and their children after them all carry the memory not only of the pain but also of the shame, the humiliation and the extension of human evil.

Perhaps, if it is true that we are embarked on a mission, then it is a mission to impregnate the world with our testimony and to keep the flame of memory burning. Like vaccines against an endemic social disease. Perhaps the idea of a mission is just an expression of desire after living with so much impotence and frustration, a need to give a more transcendent sense to the quest we have set out upon.

Perhaps it serves no purpose whatsoever.

Perhaps as with survivors, no one will listen.

Not even to us.

## **Reasons for the silence.**

In what follows, I propose a series of non-exhaustive topics or, perhaps, apertures, for embarking on a discussion of our parents' silence:

- 1) Post-war society did not want to listen;
- 2) Adequate words did not exist;
- 3) Categories of suffering, lack of heroism and their relation to silence;
- 4) Avoidance of suffering on behalf of the children (if they don't know, then they can live normal lives);
- 5) Breaking with the flow of life: the "Gap;"
- 6) Collective memory and other memories.

### **1) POST-WAR SOCIETY DID NOT WANT TO LISTEN.**

One reason for the silence may be found in the way survivors were received when they appeared in their new environments.

*At the end of the war, Europe became a huge traffic jam. Some fourteen million displaced persons were trying to get home....*

*All told, there were about a million Jews remaining in the territories that had been under Nazi rule, most of them in Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Poland: many were on the road. The migration began spontaneously, without a plan. The Nazis were defeated. The concentration camps were liberated and people set out, first of all, to search for their families; the hope of finding them alive had been a source of strength in the camps. Most of the wanderers turned east; others returned from the Soviet Union, to which they had fled during the war....*

*Many who returned found their houses and property destroyed, plundered, or handed over to others....*

*The heaviest blow for the refugees was not finding lost loved ones; and once they realized they were alone in the world, they no longer saw any reason to stay where they were. They began to return west, to look for a new life, far from the lands of devastation. Many of them mingled with the waves of German refugees expelled from the East. (p. 123-4)*

The *appeared-of-the-Shoah*, Jews coming predominantly from central Europe and arriving in Argentina, the new immigrants, were quite different from the type of Jew that had developed previously in the local community.

There were two major groups in the local Jewish community: the descendants of the great Russian immigration at the turn of the century, and those that had arrived in the thirties, before the outbreak of war, coming mostly from Poland and, to a lesser degree, from Germany and Austria.

The first group arrived with the great waves of immigration that landed in Argentina at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of World War II, they already had two or three generations behind them and had integrated into Argentine society at many different levels. They maintained Jewish culture and traditions, as well as habits and customs pertaining to their place of origin at the time of their migration; the majority had also acquired and adopted native cultural values and were integrated into the local cultural and political life.

The second group, those who had arrived shortly before the outbreak of the horror, were still in the process of learning the Spanish language when the war finally ended; they were still adapting to this land that was so different from the one they had lost. They had spent the war years with their ears pressed to the radio, listening to the lists of survivors in the hopes of hearing mention of their parents, a brother or sister, some friends, anyone they had left over there, fearing for their fate, overcome by impotence and desperation. They were aware that they had escaped from hell by mere chance, that they could have easily been trapped over there. The news, for them, was embodied by faces and people they had known and been close to. They could feel what was happening in their own bodies and, during the years immediately following the war, they received those who arrived in Argentina, the appeared, as brothers, as if they were of their own flesh and blood.

The first group, the native Argentines, had not been part of the great integration movement that spread through central Europe in the 1930s, whose result was that, among other things, many young people stopped speaking Yiddish in order to communicate in the language dictated by the country, primarily Polish, Hungarian, German, etc. Another result was the increasing “de-schtetlization”, which led to a more urban lifestyle in accordance with parameters set by the new media (radio, film, recordings, books, magazines) as to what was considered “modern”. While Jewish communities in Argentina, established decades before, were observing traditional cultural customs from the turn of the century, the newly arrived, the *grine*, had undergone a process of *aggiornamento* (updating) that was unknown and strange to the locals, and, in addition, they brought with them a whole new form of Jewish identity. The recent arrivals spoke Polish, Hungarian, German, all languages that were disdained by the locals as languages used by their enemies; the women smoked in public and sometimes wore trousers, they wore make-up shamelessly and were seen as prostitutes or, at best, sluts and lunatics.

These notes may help us in imagining the context that today has been all but forgotten, they may help give us an idea of the true culture-shock that was produced at this time.

Life in the Argentine Jewish community during this period was very intense. Schools, synagogues, cultural centers, theaters, bars, all kinds of publications, demonstrated a level of activity that today is no more than a nostalgic remembrance. In the early post-war years, the most distinguished groups, both culturally and politically, adopted attitudes that were combative, militant and very committed; they received the survivors with

encouragement to make their stories public. Those were years of desperation, impotence and rage for those who listened. Some of the appeared, especially those who arrived early on, had the opportunity to get their stories told. But this was not the experience of the majority who remained silent, both outwardly and inwardly. In fact, many of us, the children of the appeared, remained “ignorant” of what had happened for most of our lives. Probably, the children of the victim-survivors fall into two groups: those who knew and were able to find out, and those who knew they shouldn’t even ask. The first, children of survivors who spoke of their previous lives, will probably be surprised by much of what they read here. The second group will perhaps encounter some of their most familiar ghosts in these pages.

As a member of this latter group, I will focus mostly on the group of victim-survivors that I know best: those who remained silent, those who were not received by the community with open arms and a favorable disposition toward hearing about what they had lived through, those who were isolated and never became politically militant nor acquired specific cultural interests, those who had nowhere to go and no one to talk to.

### **An unexpected reception.**

The appeared of the Shoah discovered dark areas in the reception they were given by their countrymen. And, apparently, this situation was not exclusive to our country. Tom Segev, for example, who studied the phenomenon of integration of Shoah survivor-victims into Israeli society, offers a hypothesis regarding members of the local Jewish communities that may be useful to us as well:

*It was an incomparably cruel reality: every Jew who received an immigration certificate during those years lived in Palestine knowing that some other Jew who had not received that certificate had been murdered. This was the basis for the sense of guilt that would later trouble so many Israelis who escaped the Holocaust.*

The appeared arrived in the new environment carrying with them stories of death and suffering. They were viewed by this new environment as strangers, outsiders who represented a different type of Jew, one that was not of their own kind. It is not difficult to understand, then, that many of the appeared sought out others like themselves, fleeing contact with the rest of the community.

The reception they received was generally reserved and, not uncommonly, wrought with suspicion. Questions were asked, that much is certain. They were asked questions about family members who had remained in Europe, the appeared were asked to provide information on the fate of friends and relatives. But it was not common for them to be asked questions directly related to their own experiences as victim-survivors, it seemed that people did not want to know the details of how their lives had been, the torturous tales of inequities and constant, hopeless humiliation. It must have been unbearable.

According to Semprun, upon his return to France:

*“... I encountered only two kinds of reactions from people on the outside. Some avoided questioning you, treated you as though you’d returned from a banal trip abroad. Oh, so you’re back! The thing is, though, they were*

*afraid of what you might say, terrified of the moral discomfort your replies might cause them. Other people asked heaps of superficial, stupid questions (of the It-was-rough-huh? type), but if you answered them, even succinctly, addressing the truest and deepest part, the opaque, unspeakable heart of the experience – they became quiet, agitated, wrung their hands, hoping to heaven they could just leave it at that. And then they'd fall silent, the way you fall into a void, a black hole, a dream.*

*Neither group asked questions because they wanted to know the answers. They asked questions to show good manners, be polite, observe social conventions. Because they had to make do or make believe. As soon as death turned up among the answers, they didn't want to hear anymore. They became incapable of listening any further."*

Only if there was a possibility that the story would touch on honorable, tolerable and digestible events, would some people be willing to lend an ear. But the stories that they needed to hear, stories that ennobled battered human dignity, that elevated the spirit of Judaism to heroism and glory, were not forthcoming.

Here are two such testimonies as related by Tom Segev:

*Miriam Weinfeld felt shunned by the young people at Degania Bet. Although she did not speak Hebrew, their cliquishness hurt; she sensed arrogance, sometimes even mockery and hostility. The older members were more welcoming; they tried to adopt the new couple, but did not know how to make life easier for them. She sensed in their kindness guilt, even shame. She wanted to be asked about herself; her story was the only thing she had to contribute to her relationship with the new country. But no one asked.*

*.... Often, the stories were simply not believed. (p. 155)*

*A few days after he came home from his mission to Hungary, paratrooper Yoel Palgi went to a veterans' club in Tel Aviv. It was June 1945. Everyone received him warmly and with admiration, he later wrote. They all wanted to hear what had happened over there. But no one was interested in accounts of Jewish suffering. They wanted a different story, about the few who had fought like lions. "Everywhere I turned" Palgi wrote, "the question was fired at me: why did the Jews not rebel? Why did they go like lambs to the slaughter? Suddenly I realized that we were ashamed of those who were tortured, shot, burned. There is a kind of general agreement that the Holocaust dead were worthless people. Unconsciously, we have accepted the Nazi view that the Jews were subhuman.*

*... History is playing a bitter joke on us: have we ourselves put the six million on trial?"*

*The bluntest expression of this was in yishuv slang. At some point the word savon, "soap", came to be used to refer to Holocaust survivors. (p183)*

Members of the local community also often asked questions that revealed the degree of ignorance that prevailed regarding the conditions people endured during the Shoah. Why didn't you leave sooner? Why did you let yourselves be driven like sheep to the

slaughterhouse? As if there had been a possibility to choose, as if they had had the opportunity to foresee what was going to happen.

In this context, Professor Rachel Hodara, researcher and teacher of the Shoah, identifies the kinds of questions that should not be asked: “How could you not know that this was going to happen? How could you not foresee it? Why didn’t you leave in time? Why did you march to the gas chambers like sheep to the slaughterhouse? Was fighting back the only form of resistance? Why did the *Judenrat* collaborate? Why did people help the Nazis in their task? Why do survivors remain silent? Professor Hodara comments that the formulation of such questions only reveals the interrogator’s ignorance concerning the Shoah. These questions are judgemental, they derive from prejudice, the kind of thinking that is based not on actual facts but on ignorance and myth.

However, there were even more profound, insidious and disturbing difficulties that only now are coming to light as some of the appeared are finding the words to apply to those painful, early immigration experiences, as they are finally becoming capable of reentering the continuum of daily life.

### **Hypotheses and suspicions as to why they remained alive.**

The world entered a new era with the end of the war. A new distribution of power, the reconstruction of what had been lost, the Soviet Bloc in confrontation with North America, the Cold War. Camps for displaced persons, millions of people moving from one place to another, migratory fever, searching and uncertainty.

Segev comments:

*Like the survivors, the entire country was in the throes of an emotional crisis. Thousands of those who had come to Palestine before the War had also lost relatives; they too were in mourning. Many tortured themselves with the same guilt feelings that plagued the survivors. Shouldn’t they have died in place of a loved one? There were, of course, many who felt an obligation to help the survivors, as if the survivors were their lost parents and siblings. But many others blamed the survivors, as if these had survived at the expense of their relatives and so shared part of the guilt for their deaths. One survivor, Simha Rotem, wrote, “In almost every contact with the inhabitants of the country, the question would come up of how we had remained alive. It was asked again and again and not always in the most delicate way. I had a feeling that I was being blamed for having stayed alive” (p160)*

There were also those questions that went not formulated but were always present, latent accusations that were sometimes veiled, sometimes quite open:

*“How is it that you managed to save yourselves?” which served as a screen for other more terrible questions:*

*“What did you do in order to avoid the same fate as the rest? Did you inform? Were you accomplices? Did you collaborate?”*

*The Embarrassing Jew.* The post-war period saw the creation of the State of Israel. One of the struggles of the *yishuv*, ever since the dawn of agrarian colonization, has been

the establishment of a new Jewish identity. The State of Israel would be the home and matrix of the valiant, arrogant and proud Jew, brought up in contact with Nature, in direct contrast to the contemptible image of the submissive, cowardly and humiliated Jew cowering in the shadows and condemned to a life of commerce and usury. The State of Israel set out to produce a very different Jewish prototype from that constructed by anti-Semitic ideologues (the French, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion of the Czarist police, and the Nazis). The *yishuv* had laid claim to the image of European Jewry disseminated by anti-Semites.

In this context the appeared of the Shoah arrived in the land where they would be free.

According to Segev:

*The yishuv was permeated with a deep, almost mystic faith in its superiority, as symbolized by a hardy cactus whose fruit was spiked on the outside and sweet inside –the prickly pear, the sabra. Author Yehudit Hendel once said on Israeli television:*

*To put it bluntly, there were almost two races in this country. There was one race of people who thought they were gods. These were the ones who had had the honor and privilege of being born in Degania, or in the Borochov neighborhood of Givataim, and I belong, as it were, to those gods. I grew up in a workers' neighborhood near Haifa. And there was, we can certainly say, an inferior race. People we saw as inferior who had some kind of flaw, some kind of hunchback, and these were the people who came after the war. I was taught in school that the ugliest, basest thing is not the Exile but the Jew who came from there. (p 179)*

*The sabra represented a national ideal, and the Holocaust survivor the reverse. (p180)*

*David Shaltiel proposed a theory to his party (Mapai 1945): “I believe that those who remained alive lived because they were oigotists and looked out for themselves first”.*

*Ben Gurion (1945) said “Among the survivors of the German concentration camps, were those who, had they not been what they were –harsh, evil and egotistical people- would not have survived, and all they endured rooted out every good part of their souls”.*

*“We have to see things with open eyes” Haaretz wrote (1945), “the few that remain to us in Europe are not necessarily Judaism’s best. The nation’s jewels were destroyed first and many of the survivors are suspected of low morality. (p 118-9)*

But this is contemporary history: today, it is still very difficult to confront the issue of the appeared of the Shoah in just measure, free of prejudice and preconceptions, in relation to the State of Israel as well as to the Diaspora.

How much of what was believed in 1945 is still considered valid today? The Warsaw ghetto uprising, for example, is still glorified, a praiseworthy event to be sure, like other acts of Jewish armed resistance, but its glorification may have harmful consequences:

1) the fact that it was impossible for the vast majority of Jewish survivor-victims to react may, on the contrary, hold these people up as inept, useless cowards, and, 2) that the daily and “insignificant” heroism of remaining clean and dignified, of encouraging hope, of clandestinely writing and publishing, of keeping schools in operation, of running the theaters, of organizing support networks, might be overlooked and unrecognized. It is painfully clear to me that the need to celebrate the date of the Warsaw uprising has a direct relation to the still valid idea that “they went passively like sheep to the slaughterhouse,” as if the complex scenario of the Shoah could be reduced to this oft-used and highly damaging image.

It is easily observed that, in principle, there has been a persistent need to discover acts of heroism and to cover up the reality of weakness and arbitrariness in which the victims lived with a patina of supposed exemplary behaviors oriented toward survival. The idea that people survived for the sake of survival, by pure chance, coincidence or arbitrariness, is by no means popular. This holds true even among the survivor-victims themselves, the appeared. And also among us, the children. The notion that they simply could not resist is, apparently, unacceptable to us.

Can we expect any different from the rest of the Jewish community and society as a whole?

### **The “survivor syndrome.”**

In the field of psychotherapy, where so many important and productive advances have been made in recent years, the appeared-of-the-Shoah have also been treated rather uncharitably. Dr. William Niederland coined the term “survivor syndrome,” describing survivors with indelible labels of pathology and powerful psychotic ingredients.

In 1968, Dr. William Niederland wrote the following:

*The syndrome appears to be characterized by the persistence of multiple symptoms among which chronic depressive and anxiety reactions, insomnia, nightmares, personality changes, and far-reaching somatization prevail, he wrote in 1968. More specifically, clinical observation of about eight hundred survivors of Nazi persecution revealed that the Survivor Syndrome is composed of the following manifestations: anxiety; disturbances of cognition and memory; chronic depressive states; tendency to isolation, withdrawal and brooding seclusion; alterations of personal identity; psychosomatic conditions and “living corpse” appearance..... Another importance characteristic of such patients is their inability to verbalize the traumatic events. (p. 104-5)*

Thus, the appeared not only had to shoulder the heavy burden of memory, the peremptoriness of forgetting, the questions that still remained unanswered, the fruitless attempts to reassemble their fragmented lives, the memories of lost contacts and intimate friends, but they also had to bear the additional burden of the disqualifying label of insanity. Although some of the appeared, as well as a percentage of the population at large, certainly suffer characteristics of seriously disturbed individuals, this does not represent the reality for the vast majority. In general, the appeared resumed normal lives, the same, in almost all respects, as the rest of society.

What was suffered during the Shoah, however, was not gratuitous. The appeared still walk with that tiny stone in their shoe, though frequently they themselves are unaware of it. For all, there remain indelible scars, pits of horror fixed in the memory from which it is often only with great difficulty that a person can emerge into the light. Of this, we the children are acutely aware and have often been intimate witnesses.

The “survival syndrome” offered a scientific framework for what ended up being a prejudice, one that often led to discrediting testimony given by an appeared person due to “insanity” or “instability.” This, in turn, constituted one more reason to maintain silence, to avoid exposure and disqualification.

So then, where did this term, “survival syndrome,” come from, having caused so much damage to the understanding of victim-survivors in their attempts to obtain psychotherapy, and their rejection of the label, “disturbed?”

After 1957, when Germany enacted the Federal Restitution Law, or *Wiedergutmachung* (approved in 1953), psychiatric evaluations were required for anyone pressing financial claims against the German State.

The community of the appeared, if we may call it a “community,” became divided between those who flatly rejected any type of compensation from the Germans – “we want none of that blood money, they will not buy off their guilt, there is no forgiveness for them” – and those who hoped that in this way Germans would recognize their guilt – “take them for all they are worth, don’t let them keep any of what they have stolen, let the world see what they have done.” Complicated and often humiliating evaluation procedures were established for determining if a claimant had grounds or not. The appeared had to demonstrate their status as victims, they had to allay German suspicions that they might be lying. To this end, in addition to providing witnesses and submitting themselves to exhaustive interrogations during which they had to provide exact dates and references to places, names, and all other information establishing that they had, in fact, been victims of the Nazis – that they had lost property, social and professional positions, etc. – in addition to all of this, they had to submit to meticulous medical and psychiatric examinations to determine whether or not there were any physical and/or mental aftereffects. The “Survivor Syndrome” was a term created in large part as a consequence of these interviews to which the appeared submitted in order to convince psychiatrists of their madness, of the irreparable damage caused them by the Nazi machine, in order to qualify as recipients for some kind of financial reparation. They knew that the money would not compensate for one single second spent in the inferno, but they needed some kind of recognition, an official word that would restore to them some bit of their lost humanity. Furthermore, they were finally able to speak out, to spill everything, to tell their stories and the stories of so many others, without having to protect or worry about their listeners.

The *Wiedergutmachung* was legislation for making financial reparations. It was a legal action. In legal actions, damages must be quantifiable, capable of being measured. But we cannot measure pain, blood, death, or the loss of our loved ones. All that can be proven, all that can be sought as reparation, is that which can be considered as damage to property, health, professional or economic situations. Many of the appeared had no way of demonstrating loss of property or employment. Their only recourse was to press claims for disabling psychological disturbances. Clearly, faced with the impossibility of their word being taken for truth relative to the loss of property, they did not hesitate in exaggerating psychological disturbances when they felt it necessary for winning this small and personal battle against the German people. These desperate individual attempts at obtaining some

degree of recognition for their condition as victims, were the raw material for the fabrication of what is known as the “Survivor Syndrome.”

With the passage of time, the ideas proposed as part of the syndrome were seen as requiring revision by therapists who could not confirm the syndrome, as such, in their own patients. However, this required much time owing to, among other things, the fact that it is uncommon for an appeared person to seek psychological help for his condition, explicitly, as a victim-survivor. The presence of such a person in the therapist’s office would be due to some other problem and, thus, the condition of victim-survivor would not be the focus of conversation. To date, the total number of such consultations does not permit drawing general or universal conclusions.

Even though compelling and heartrending descriptions of their experiences have been produced by literary figures such as Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Jorge Semprún, Charlotte Delbo, and others, it has not been until recently, especially with the release of the film “Schindler’s List,” that the victimization of the Jewish people began to be seen in a more realistic way by people in general. Some years earlier, Claude Lanzmann produced his remarkable documentary, “Shoah,” which opened the doors to new perspectives, but, of course, it did not have the enormous distribution and repercussion that Steven Spielberg’s film achieved (due to the massive response and attraction commanded by the director himself as well as the powerful distribution and colonization mechanism of the North American film industry). For many people, for the vast majority, the images presented in “Schindler’s List” were their first exposure to what occurred during the Shoah.

But the phenomena of reexamining the subject had already begun during the 1980s. Some forty years after the end of the war, voices were being heard, especially from the second generation. And it is no coincidence that this should have occurred simultaneously with a growing interest in film-recorded testimonies, at first in isolated cases and, now, in a more organized and comprehensive manner. After so much time spent keeping silent, longing for an opportunity to speak out, some of the appeared had the opportunity to be heard, to describe what happened and what they themselves did. These testimonies are hesitant, fearful, and personal, revealing unthinkable suffering and humiliation, exhibiting intolerable extremes of degradation through dense silences, confusion, and paralysis, punctuated by the insistent and penetrating question of “Why?” and the more specific question of “Why me?” rendering impossible the continuing simplification, mystification and hypocrisy that had surrounded the topic of survival during the Shoah for so long.

The youngest of the appeared are now approaching seventy years of age. Many have already succumbed to silence forever. Meanwhile, in response to the urgency of the situation, desperate efforts are now being made to record the testimonies of those who are still alive.

It is now our turn, the turn of the second generation, those of us who have been, until now, subjects of the silence and the simulacrum of amnesia.

## **2) ADEQUATE WORDS DO NOT EXIST FOR DESCRIBING WHAT OCCURRED.**

*Irene W. was in Auschwitz for a long time, including six months in the Kanadakommando (a work detail whose job was to sort out the clothing and belongings of those sent directly to their death), where she arrived at age*

*fourteen. Her mother and three younger siblings were sent straight to the gas chambers; her father and older brother went “to the right”, but she never saw them again. She and her older sister remained. Although she narrates these details dispassionately, she is firm in her conviction that they are the genesis of the problem she still wrestles with today: how to talk about them meaningfully to an audience of outsiders.*

*She first encountered this dilemma immediately after the war, when she returned briefly to the town of her birth and tried to tell people there what had happened to her family. She remembers thinking that “my family were killed” was totally inadequate, because “killed”, she says, “was a word used for ordinary forms of dying, but to say matter of factly that my mother and brother and two sisters were gassed, as soon as they arrived at Auschwitz” seemed equally unsatisfactory, because plain factuality could not convey the enormity of the event. She was specially reluctant to reduce her family’s disappearance to a mere statistic, because she was sure that was what her audience wanted to hear about it. That night, she insists, she could not describe it in that way, but her refusal to speak had nothing to do with the oft, repeated bill that perhaps silence was the only appropriate response to such catastrophe. The seeds of anguished memory are sown in the barren belief that the very story you try to tell drives off the audience you seek to capture. Those seeds often shrivel in the farther suspicion that the story you tell cannot be precisely the story as it happened. Reluctance to speak has little to do with preference for silence.*

*(p.61)*

So, another reason for keeping silent has been the sense of desperation felt due to the absence of words capable of expressing what was lived through.

In recorded testimonies and conversations, it is frequent for the victim-survivor to say, sooner or later, “it can’t be expressed”, “the words don’t exist”, “I can’t explain it”, “nobody can understand”, “it was as if...” (with a gesture of mute impotence, a sigh, a long silence).

One might almost suppose that these were people with difficulties in expressing themselves, the so-called Survivor Syndrome, when they mention the “inability to verbalize” an idea. One might also suppose that a literate person, someone with some expertise in words, would find the adequate way to express or describe what happened. Yet, curiously enough, not even the “literati” have succeeded. Neither Primo Levi nor Elie Wiesel, to name just two of the most talented, have come close to what they themselves felt was an accurate description of what happened. I don’t know how Jorge Semprún felt upon publication of his book, did he capture it? Is his piercing and majestic narration a fair representation of the way it really happened? Is he satisfied? In these freshly disinterred memories, imbued with fifty years worth of meaning, how much of what he says is the way it truly was?

Judging from the experience itself, there are no adequate referents in the language.

Language, the words we use for speaking and within the confines of which we live our lives, are a consequence of the reiteration of experiences. They are constructed through successive social interactions as a way of denominating and representing, to give existence to one’s own experience. We have no manner of expressing what is unknown to us, for

objects or phenomena that supposedly do not exist. If something does not exist, it has no word, that is, it has never been necessary to activate the social mechanism for its denomination.

One of the persisting struggles for the appeared of the Shoah, fifty years beyond the end of the war, is that of finding the words to account for the things they lived through. It is just one more frustration among many that they must suffer.

Let us examine a few examples.

*The word Life, the verb To Live.* I have a permanent residence, a bed, a bathroom with a door that I can leave open or close as I please, I eat as often as I like, I dress warmly when I feel cold, I am at liberty to go outside in the fresh air when I feel too warm, I can look up at the sky every night, when I go to sleep I have reasonable expectations of waking up refreshed, I know that I am immersed in a social circumstance that permits me to predict with near certainty what behaviors will be accepted and which rewarded and which shall be rejected and even punished, I have created a family with which I live, I work, I earn money, I plan for my free time, if I get sick I go to the doctor, I have hopes, dreams, some utopian others more realistic, I enjoy getting together with my friends, I listen to music, I take vacations, I read a lot, I write, I go to the movies and the theater, I like traveling around my city, sometimes I treat myself to a trip abroad, I love and I am loved, I raised and cared for my children who have studied and developed as persons, I was with my parents until the end of their days, I cried when they died, I buried them in a cemetery beneath a gravestone that bears their names. All of this is for me the verb, to Live.

How can the same verb be applied to what was experienced by the appeared-of-the-Shoah? Can we employ the verb “to live” in describing that sensation of eternal transience and arbitrariness, that lack of even minimal conditions for subsistence and dignity? Can we say that the denial of choices, being treated like zombies and submitted to the whims of others, is “to live?” Was it “to live” not knowing what to do in order to go on breathing: at one moment it was necessary to run, at another, to remain still, at another to scream, the next, to keep quiet? Can we use the same word in reference to two things that are so different? But what other words are there? Some people have suggested using the word “to remain,” which alludes to inertia, the inability to make a decision, the sensation of being beneath the rest, of having lost efficacy and the ability to take any initiative whatsoever. But there is no consensus. The only word that we have is “to live” and the victims cannot use it without feeling that they are betraying the essence of their experience. If the word “to live” applies to their situations today, then they cannot use the same word for describing what happened to them during the Shoah.

*The word Death, to Die.* How can we apply any word that has its origin in the natural experience of human life to the horror, the humiliation, the degradation, the progressive dehumanization to which our family members were submitted before the ultimate moment of “death” to which they had to bear witness time after time? In many cases, this death represented a liberation, a tremendous relief. Many chose death for their loved ones rather than having them pass through the torturous anterooms of the Nazi death machine. At certain moments, to die was attractive. To die was not natural, it was not the logical consequence of a complete, fulfilled and finished life. To die during the Shoah was an abrupt interruption, an arbitrary event, an injustice, but also the interruption of arbitrariness. It wasn't just the sick, the old, or the injured that died, everyone died,

especially the children, but there was no rhyme nor reason. How should we speak of it, then? In what category of experience can we include this form of dying? It was not a form of dying linked to personal hatred, to some ferocious passion unleashed at one person in particular. How can we comprehend this form of killing that is so distant from human experience, carried out with neither hatred nor passion? What is the correct word?

What words do our parents have available to them, besides “to live” and “to die?” What to call their life experiences, how to remember them, how to transmit them?

It would be the same, even with other words.

*The word love.* One of the many dilemmas for parents during the Shoah was that of keeping their babies with them, which implied certain death, or leaving them with a Christian family, or an orphanage, or wherever, in the hopes that the child might survive; but what would happen later, if and when the unexpected took place, in the event that the parents survived and the child did not? What can we call such conduct, the delivering of a child to its death? Can that be called love?

*The word guilt.* This is a feeling that troubles many of the appeared but it is not the same “guilt” as most of us feel as we live our normal lives; the concept of guilt itself is inappropriate as it implies the possibility of making and effecting decisions; one is only guilty for conduct that one freely and consciously chooses to perform. If, out of laziness, we use the word “guilt” in referring to the recurrent thoughts and reproaches of the appeared, this implies inserting them into a context where free will was operative, a context that was absolutely non-existent during the Shoah. Much of the moral misery suffered by the appeared has to do with this error, this particular trap: the inappropriate gauging of conduct according to parameters that pertain to normal life before and after the Shoah. I will refer to these sentiments as “torturous thoughts”.

Similar observations could be made with respect to many other words, such as the words *hunger, dream, tomorrow, I*, etc. (We will turn our attention to the word “I” below).

### **Words and social manipulation.**

Even as we recognize that adequate words for describing these experiences do not exist, we should also recognize ways in which the use of certain words has served for the social manipulation of the topic of the Shoah.

The words we choose are never objective or completely innocent. In general, opinion-makers – journalists, politicians, social commentators – know very well the evocative and contextual power of the words they employ, they are aware of their manipulative potential. Nazi propaganda was based on this concept, as is generally recognized by politicians and the mass media today.

Let us take a simple example: given an episode in which one person caused the death of another, we might say,

- 1) (So-and-so) committed a brutal murder, or
- 2) (So-and-so) killed in legitimate self-defense, or
- 3) (So-and-so) stabbed in a fit of insanity.

The statement given in the example, “one person caused the death of another,” is merely descriptive, assuming no particular position nor qualifying the conduct of the actor in any way. This is not the case in the other three statements.

In the statement, so-and-so “committed a brutal murder”, the speaker accuses so-and-so with guilt, the words “committed”, “brutal”, and “murder”, lead to a clear and singular understanding of the event.

Saying that so-and-so “killed in legitimate self-defense” is a more benign formulation. The person appears to have been justified in his/her action given that he “killed in legitimate self-defense”. The word “killed”, which implies the idea of “murder,” is tempered by the words, “legitimate,” and “defense,” which refer to a context of justice, an action that was merited.

When the formulation states that so-and-so “stabbed in a fit of insanity,” the qualification leads to the idea of innocence by virtue of insanity, which in turn leads to the impunity of the actor. The word “stabbed” suggests a carnal and passionate context, reinforced by the clearly exculpatory words, “in a fit” and the definitive, “insanity.”

Within the statement itself there is an implicit opinion with respect to the innocence or guilt of the actor.

Every choice of words expresses an opinion. An event is inserted into a significant context, thus conferring meaning upon the event itself, meaning that is expressly intended by the speaker. The listener must be aware of the manipulative power of language and must constantly exercise critical discretion. If the listener validates the statement by accepting it, then the entire context in which it is included is also confirmed.

If, during a conversation, someone mentions “the Jewish race” and the listener lets it pass, he is confirming the idea that there are races of human beings, implying genetic differences such that Jews, Negroes, Asians would have human qualities that are different from those of other “races.” In addition to the fact that the concept of race itself is biologically incorrect, the word “race” leads to the Nazi view of human beings and, suddenly, the conversation is suffused with anti-Semitic paraphernalia detailing the size of the nose, the cranial orbs, the color of the skin, the eyes, and the skin, not to mention greed, cruelty and conspiracy. What is surprising is that if one asks the speaker what was meant by referring to the “Jewish race,” if he was referring to all of the above, he will probably object, asserting that he didn’t mean to say as much, that it was just a “manner of speech, not to be taken so far.”

However, it is through words that we construct consensus, meanings and frameworks that give form to our perception of reality and the way we see ourselves. Jews and other ethnic or social minorities are conscious of the pragmatic consequences conveyed by language, we have learned to respect words and to fear the actions that may correspond to them.

Another example of social manipulation may be found in the choice of the word, Holocaust. Holocaust, as mentioned in the footnote in the introduction, means purification by fire, sacrifice or ritual. None of these meanings may be applied to the experience of the victims of the Shoah.

There was no connection to purification, nor sacrifice, nor ritual, nor anything related to divine designs or greater justice. This idea, appearing like an uninvited guest, implies the idea of guilt, of deserved punishment, because if God permitted it, “there must have been a reason.”

To lay blame on the million-and-a-half children that were murdered, and the four-and-a-half-million adults (to name only the Jewish victims), is to distort the facts. It is offensive and removes the burden of responsibility from the guilty parties. It is to transfer responsibility from the victimizers to the victims: if they “deserved” such treatment, if

some form of purification was produced in this way, if there was some kind of ritual performed that had to do with religion or divinity, then the Nazis were only tools in a much grander scheme, that is, they were innocent. Thus, not only are the victims accused of their own victimization, but the nation of victimizers are judged innocent and, in one swift movement, all of humanity is washed clean of guilt. If it was God's will, then Man is not responsible.

Many skeptical and troubled victims have attempted to find some kind of lesson in what took place. If there is a lesson to be extracted from this tragedy, it is that what happened – this incredible, unimaginable and inhuman event – was enacted by human beings upon other human beings with the tacit acceptance of the rest of the world, also composed of human beings, which could not and would not intercede in the process and, much later, cannot assimilate the event into human experience. The image in the mirror is unbearable and yet could be the essential lesson.

The horror of what happened is the patrimony of all humanity. It is such an intolerable concept that the idea of the existence of a superior design, which exempts sacrosanct humanity from any such guilt, has been accepted and popularized. We even refer to it, and any such massive killing, with the word "Holocaust," regardless of what the reasons for it may have been.

*The word Shoah*, meaning devastation, annihilation, seems more adequate. Without religious or fatalistic implications, without attributes of thinly disguised guilt, the word describes the void, the senselessness, the timelessness. However, it does have the problem of referring to natural disasters; for those of us who use the word it is necessary to indicate that a deliberate policy was applied and executed by people. On the other hand, the fact that it is a word of Hebrew origin reinforces the uniqueness of what happened: the Shoah was and remains a singular case of devastation carried out against the Jewish people. There may be many Holocausts, but there is only one Shoah.

A further example of social manipulation is evident in the use of the word *survivor*, a word that I dislike using. Although it is a word often used in the context of serious accidents and catastrophes, in which case it carries connotations of "chance" or "fortuity", when it is used in reference to the Shoah it carries with it an added value, a hint of heroism, a degree of the will to live, of exerting effort and effecting appropriate decisions, it alludes to the human capacity for overcoming adversity, for emerging victorious, in short, the force of life itself. These are ideas and concepts that our society venerates, ones that reflect an ideal person who is superior, ethical and of divine material. It is as if we were making ourselves believe that we are a certain way, with no other device than that of telling ourselves that this is how we are. Our society, self-satisfied and proud, takes great pains to reflect images of ourselves that coincide with our loftiest, declared spiritual objectives. For me, the word survivor alludes to this entire context.

The words of the appeared do not coincide with these ideas. The majority of the appeared say that they do not know why they survived; some say that it was just by chance, others say that it was fate, others attribute their survival to some incomprehensible, surprising and sudden behavior, others say that it was due to a misunderstanding. In all these explanations there is an element in common: none feel that they were agents in keeping themselves alive, it was not due to intentional behavior or strategies, it was just something that happened.

According to Semprún:

*“...Of course, there was no merit in having survived. Unscathed, at least to all appearances. There was no difference in worth between the living and the dead. None of us deserved to live. Or to die, either... surviving wasn't a question of worthiness, it was a question of chance.” (p. 155)*

Victim-survivors of the camps do not appear to be proud of having remained alive, they don't see themselves as representing any kind of triumph over adversity. They describe themselves living through the Shoah as anesthetized, dazed, automatons. With overwhelming insistence, they repeat that the only thought in their head was that of surviving for five more minutes, getting through the night, passing unnoticed through *Appel* (role call), obtaining food, escaping the cold or too much heat, finding the opportunity to take care of their needs whenever necessary... they speak of a reality composed of priorities, a reality that is unimaginable for those of us who have not lived through it. The issue of overcoming adversity, heroic conduct, ethical dilemmas, all of this was distant from their daily lives. For this reason I prefer not to use the term “survivors.” I feel more comfortable with Semprun's distillation of the idea with the word, “appeared”, which alludes to the living-dead, or the dead-living, to the imprecise sensation of death with which they lived and still live, to their condition as subjects to others, to the hallucination, to the absolute arbitrariness that was their condition, to the memory of their inability to make decisions on how to live, how to die, or how to save one another, and their continued wandering through that limbo without clear frontiers, leading them to conceal their ghost-like conditions, as much as possible, from those around them in order to be accepted by the world and to be able to return once again, finally, to the land of the living.

The word “survivor” has still another painful dimension: it establishes a distinction between survivors and victims, it insidiously takes from the survivors their identity as victims, it devalues their suffering. The victims are those who were executed, the dead. The survivors are those who managed to live, those who saved themselves. Saved from death, most certainly, but not saved from disgrace and, much less, from excruciating memory.

“What are you complaining about?” the living-dead were asking immediately following the war. “So long as you're still alive...” As if the fact that they were still alive warranted what had happened; as if the fact that they were alive had anything to do with the death of the others; as if they were somehow guilty...

There are, then, victims who died and victims who lived. For this reason, I precede the word “survivor” with the word “victim.”

The words we use – both tools and manacles – are powerful and must be carefully considered.

### **3) THE CATEGORIES OF SUFFERING**

Another reason for the silence of those who have remained silent follows from the point made at the end of the previous section, the question of whether the appeared may be considered, and may consider themselves, as victims. Categories of suffering have been established that seem to doubt the degree to which survivors were indeed victims.

The establishment of hierarchies is a natural human behavior. We need to categorize experiences in order to place them in contexts that permit us to use them, to endow our experiences with meaning in order to understand them, in order to remember them, in order

to incorporate them into our lives. We also need to place every circumstance in some kind of hierarchical order that will enable us to discriminate between them in terms of levels of importance, to establish distinctions, to compare, to know how to limit ourselves. This is true for all orders of life including suffering, pain and disgrace. This is also true in relation to the Shoah. These categories establish areas of authority, rights and attributes, though not always by consensus. Each person, according to the level of suffering experienced, feels endowed with certain rights that may be denied to those considered to have suffered at inferior levels.

### **On which side of the barbed wire?**

An important distinction may be established directly for categorizing the experience of the appeared according to which side of the barbed wire they were on: those who were caught inside the *Shoah*, and those of us who were not. It is generally accepted that “survivors of the *Shoah*” are considered to be all of those who lived in Nazi-occupied territories, inasmuch as the popular view is that those who had the fortune to escape before the war do not form part of the group. Consequently, great numbers of people feel excluded, and have indeed been excluded, from the categories of victims because “they weren’t there,” the stains of iniquity did not stain them quite enough. Victims and witnesses of rising anti-Semitism, of progressive restrictions on Jews, of persecution, harassment, attacks by neighbors, are stifled into silence by this categorization from which they are excluded. Nonetheless, they too are among the appeared. They too know that they are alive only by chance. Most likely, many of them also feel the retrospective anguish of knowing that they could have died, that they brushed up against evil, the experience of arbitrariness and injustice, outrage and violation, humiliating anti-Semitism and even prison, torture or the death of a loved one.

These categories extend to the second generation: those of us who are direct descendents of appeared parents, those who lost more distant relatives, those who are children of parents who saved themselves in time, and, finally, those who lost no one.

### **The dead (the victims) and the living (the survivors): are not the living victims too?**

Another distinction is made between the categories of the six million who died and the one million that lived. The first are viewed by all, no matter what side of the barbed wire, as victims, the quintessential victims.

Among those who remained alive, the so-called survivors, or the appeared, new hierarchies have been established: those who were in camps and those who were not.

### **In the Camps**

Within this first category, there is a further distinction between those who were in the camps of extermination and those who were ‘merely’ in concentration and/or work camps. Even among the camps there is a certain preeminence conferred on those who suffered the misfortune of being in the most infamous camps, such as Auschwitz (the most heinous), Treblinka, Maidenaek, Mauthausen and Buchenwald, not because the hundreds of others were more benevolent, but because these have attracted the most attention and publicity. This is so much the case that, for many people, the mere mention of the word

“survivor” is synonymous with Auschwitz. Inside the camps, still further distinctions are applied: there are those who worked in the infirmary, the kitchen, the warehouses, the supply houses or carrying out administrative tasks, and then, at the other extreme, there are those who worked in what was called the *Sonderkommando*, assigned by the Nazis to do the “dirty work” (stacking bodies, extracting gold from the teeth, operating the ovens of the crematorium, and sorting objects). In a category apart, due to the generalized repulsion that they generated, though not always justified, are the *Kapos*, the Jewish prisoners designated by the Nazis as responsible for discipline in the barracks or work crews, who demonstrated a cruelty superior even to that of the victimizers themselves, in the hope of ingratiating themselves and perhaps gaining the right, usually frustrated, to live.

### **Those who were not in the camps**

Then there is the vast majority of the appeared, those who were hidden in attics, basements, sewers, holes, barns; those who disguised their identities and passed themselves off as Aryans, little boys who pretended to be little girls, those who were protected by Christian families or religious institutions, those who wandered the land by the grace of God, those who escaped to Russia, those who hid in the woods.

*Those who “Aryanized” or lived among the Nazis:* Jews who saved themselves by integrating into the daily life of the occupied territories (servants, helpers, store-clerks, office-workers, waiters and waitresses, prostitutes).

*Those who collaborated.* Finally, the last and lowest level on this shameful and humiliating scale of suffering during the *Shoah* pertains to those who profited during the war, those who collaborated, the accomplices.

A special chapter is merited for those who formed part of the *Judenräte* that the Nazis established and forced upon Jewish populations. There is a generalized notion that the *Judenräte* were submissive and acted in complicity with the Nazis; consequently, it followed that anyone suspected of having participated in a *Judenrat* immediately became the object of community repulsion. Certainly, the phenomenon of the *Judenräte* is extremely complex. Each one was unique. We cannot generalize nor draw conclusions based only on the cases of the most well-known, such as that of Lodz, led by Rumkowski; each one had to respond to different challenges according to place and time; some were even involved in some kind of resistance and others collaborated in saving a portion of the population. But even within the *Judenräte*, beyond the particularities of each case, there is a kind of hierarchization and those at the bottom, in the lowest category, are those who collaborated, those who formed part of the Jewish Police, the Nazi henchmen, on a par with the *Kapos* in the camps. However, it is difficult to generalize as, in some of the ghettos, members of the Jewish Police were also members of the Resistance.

When the appeared speak about what happened, for the most part, they tend to relate events that do not expose them to the possibility of social condemnation. Nonetheless, no appeared person can tell a personal history that is simple and univocal; most likely they had such a vast variety of experiences during those years that it is not surprising when their stories, at times, lose chronological coherence, skip over large portions of time, give rise to unexplainable contradictions and surprising lapses of memory that lead to strange narrative disruptions. There are things that they will never relate, especially referring to humiliating or shameful events, things that they do not want anyone to know, things that they cannot

even face themselves. The more torturous, shameful and humiliating a memory is, the less disposed the person is to speak about it.

**The Heroes.** I have left this category for the end, the category of those who took some sort of action against the Nazi system: those who participated in uprisings (the most famous was that of the Warsaw ghetto, though it was not the only one), mutinies, partisan groups, information networks, plots of sabotage, contraband, clandestine publications, in short, the handful of heroes who did something they can be proud of. They can speak freely of the moments in which they behaved bravely and decisively; what they have to say is what the world wants to hear, they are applauded, rewarded, recognized in a different way. They may bear or overcome their suffering and loss with a consolation prize that the rest of the appeared must do without: the trophy of heroism.

*Those people who knew her story always asked her why she and her husband had not done anything against the Nazis early on. And they always, always asked her how she had been saved, until she began to feel that she had to apologize for living. The stories she and her husband told competed with the stories of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, she said, and could not win: they had only fought for their lives, not to be heroes. The country wanted heroes. The Brands could only offer a story of survival. People did not know how hard it had been just to stay alive. They didn't comprehend that; they wanted stories of glory (p. 472)*

### **Self-disqualification.**

This question of categories enables us to understand why there has been such a generalized silence. It is common for the appeared who did not pass through the camps to disqualify themselves in the belief that their suffering “was not so serious” compared with those who were in the camps. “Why talk about it if no one is interested? There’s nothing glorious or heroic about it if you compare it to what one hears about the camps, it’s embarrassing to say that one suffered.”

For some, there are only the two categories: those who died and those who came out alive. Many of the appeared feel that, having survived, they have no right to complain. And they don’t complain, at least not explicitly.

*This was a common feeling; and though most survivors owed their lives to chance, not to another’s sacrifice, they still felt guilt for having survived. The feeling often served a psychological and moral purpose: it acted as a cover for the powerlessness of the victims. It allowed them to think they had had a choice, and had chosen to live. The sense of guilt had a contrary purpose, too. It was for the survivors a kind of pledge of allegiance to humanistic ethical values, another bid, after the fact, to counter the attempt to rob them of their humanity. The few who had resisted had it easier; many of them tended to set themselves off from the other survivors, even displaying a measure of arrogance. But they too tortured themselves; perhaps they could have done more. “When the Germans entered Poland, had we immediately recognized the danger and*

*started to act,” Tzivia Lubetkin said, “perhaps the whole thing would have looked different”. (p. 160.)*

These categories, which we all establish in one way or another, are meant to give us an objective measurement of suffering, a concept that is untenable given that suffering is, by definition, a subjective, personal and non-transferable experience, like different degrees of pain.

These are mystifying categories, yet they are powerful and intensely persistent. They can be used – and in fact they are often used – to obtain rights and powers, to establish justifications, to enable those who consider themselves as deserving a higher position in this denigrating hierarchy of penury to feel that they are the principle actors now, at least with respect to who has custody over the memories, and that they have some dominion over their lives and can extract a paradoxical triumph from having been among those who suffered the most.

#### **4) THEY DIDN'T WANT TO HURT THEIR CHILDREN**

Among the reasons for the silence being maintained, we should also consider the question of love and concern for the children who were born in the new life, on the second opportunity.

*The parents were not accustomed to speaking with their children.* First, as in the case elsewhere in these reflections, I think it is appropriate to establish the context. Let us consider the ten-year period from 1945 to 1955, during which time the majority of the second generation was born. Let us think, specifically, in the educational techniques and communicational styles of the period. Our current world, our form of living and thinking and, especially, the emphasis we place on our children, is different from how it was then. The post-war world had not yet enthroned *their majesties our children* in the spotlight of family concern as we observe today. Parents then did not know much about infant trauma, autism, schizophrenia, hyperactivity, abulia, depression and all the other categories that today are common knowledge. Parents then were not as concerned as parents today with questions such as whether or not to advise the children of economic problems, deaths, or cases of adoption; in general children were not informed of issues that were considered to be for adults only. The increased diffusion of psychological viewpoints has defined a radical change in such behavior to such an extent that we have probably lost view of the fact that, until recently, child-rearing was very different. Whether the children learned certain things was not such a major concern. Parents focused on more concrete issues, such as nutrition and health, and were unaware of conflict assessment, negotiation differences, encouraging sibling alliances, sex education, etc. Dialogue, when it existed, followed other lines: it is common to hear, among those of us who are nearing our fifties, that “in the house we didn’t discuss what happened in the house.”

The child-rearing approach that was most in vogue was simply that it was quite unnecessary to complicate the lives of the children with the problems of adults, they would have plenty of time for that kind of thing later, it was better to let them enjoy growing up innocently while that was still possible.

*The parents as role-models.* Another general aspect to consider is the idea that we have today of parents as role models for our children. In this context, a generalized

educational criteria prescribes supplying encouragement toward ethical goals (for example, not to lie, steal, or kill) and directing children toward personal fulfillment and professional success. Where in the parent-child relationship does the parent's possible failure in any one of these areas fit in? Or the exhibition of weakness and vulnerability? Considering the ideal educational goals held dear by society, how can we account for or justify such behavior as lying, minor and more serious transgressions (not to mention acts of even greater magnitude)? The tendency is to cover up anything that might not be deemed pure, moral and proper, generating the usual double discourse that we see so often these days of saying one thing and doing another.

Our parents wanted to be the best they could for us. Just like all parents. They wanted our respect, our love, our consideration, our appreciation and our recognition. Just like all parents. They came into contact with unimaginable levels of misery and suffering, they witnessed the unbearable. They were submitted to extreme victimization. They lived through circumstances that led to their behaving in ways that they could not speak about with us, they thought it would be inappropriate as part of our education, that it would not only fail to enrich our lives, but that it could detract from the image we had of them. I am referring principally to issues that touch upon guilt, humiliation and shame, the unbearable issues for the appeared of the Shoah.

*If they don't know, they won't suffer.* This line of reason follows from the above and was the current line of thought at the time, though modern psychology refutes it. It was not customary, for instance, to take the children to the cemetery, or to have them visit the sick, or, as mentioned earlier, to share with them the pain, suffering, and difficulties that adults considered inappropriate for children to know about.

Out of sight, out of mind. In general, the question of telling the children things did not even come up, it was never an issue. Such things were just not mentioned, there was no reason to subject the children to such suffering, they had to be protected and made happy.

**But things cannot be hidden from children.** The silence, when it was present, was rarely an absolute silence. In spite of the parents' best efforts to keep distressing information from their children, there were unintentional "leaks" that filtered through in vague and ambiguous ways. And for this reason they were infinitely more threatening.

Words are not the only form of communication, Frequently, they aren't even the most important.

*THE DAUGHTER OF SURVIVORS*  
*Hilary Tham*  
*She is screaming again.*  
*You stand at your bedroom door.*  
*Her dream claws her sleep to shreds.*  
*Shivering, you will her to stop, will it*  
*to go away. You father's voice*  
*rises and falls with the burden of her name.*

*She is awake. You hear her voice cling  
To his, as a shipwrecked cat  
Digs its claws into a floating spar.  
You hear the creak of bedsprings as they rise.*

*Soon, the kettle whistles in the kitchen.  
When you peer in, they are huddled together  
Over the kitchen table. Her pale hands clenched  
Around the teacup, she whispers her dream.  
He has heard it six million times,  
but he listens, his arm clamped around her  
to contain her shudders.  
He, too, has bad dreams, different faces,  
the same sequence of events.*

*You are afraid of this trembling woman  
who replaces your mother each night.  
You want the daylight woman  
who bakes honeycake, and brushes your hair  
smiling, as if you are her good dream.*

*Your father does not change at night.  
He, too, fears the knock on the door.  
He makes you learn street maps  
by heart, sends you out alone  
on the New York subway so that  
if you should come home from school  
and find them missing, you would  
know how and where to run.*

Clearly, it was not a very quiet silence. On the contrary, it was a silence impregnated by troublesome issues that persistently cast a shadow over even the most insignificant fragments of daily life. Uneasy moments and half-finished sentences, locked drawers, far-off gazes, insomnia, restricted topics of conversation and total avoidance of others, overprotective behavior, itinerant fears, unexplainable aversions to certain experiences, caresses overlaid with a strange nostalgia, photographs and objects that were always present but never mentioned or explained, fragments of the past that were erased along with the names of non-existent relatives – fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins. These were considered normal forms of household behavior, they were not recognized as indicative of anything beyond the ordinary but, rather, were surprisingly assumed to be completely natural, one became accustomed to not noticing, to never asking questions, simply getting along and learning the lessons of our parents, learning to live as if this special behavior didn't exist, just as they had learned to live and to be able to live, as if what they had lived through during the Shoah had never happened. We signed a pact of silence: never to ask questions.

*Many raised their children with the feeling that their own lives were barely worth living, that their only purpose in living was to ensure the good, the welfare and the future of their children. Many forced the children to bare the burden of memory by giving them the names of relatives who had died in the Holocaust. Many, perhaps most, could not, and did not want to, tell their children what they had experienced, and the children did not dare ask, as if the answer were a terrible, threatening family secret. Holocaust anxieties could suddenly break into daily life, triggered by routine events at home or at work or on the news. An illness, losing a job, or a border incident –everything took them back to “there”. For many, the past continued to intrude years after the end of the war.(p.159)*

The stories and reactions of the appeared were not univocal. Nor were the experiences of their children, the second generation. Whatever the manner in which each family confronted the issue, according to intrinsic characteristics of each particular family, it still remains that the issue was, I dare say, *the issue*. The greater the effort made to avoid the issue, the more pervasive it became, with that perverse insistence so common to painful memories and secrets that flutter before our eyes like pesky flies that cannot be frightened away.

## **5) THE INTERRUPTION OF CONTINUITY: THE “GAP”.**

There is another reason for the silence being maintained, which involves the interruption of continuity between life and memory.

Lawrence Langer calls our attention to what he calls “discontinuity,” the interruption in the normal flow of life represented by the Shoah for those who lived through it. The idea speaks to us of a rupture, a surprising alteration; there is the suggestion of a gap, a black hole, invisible at first sight, into which one may seem to fall without knowing if there is a bottom or any notion of an exterior. One moment there is normal life, a day like any other, the next moment one falls into the gap, darkness, life without reason, only arbitrariness, a fatal break with the sublime breath of hope. Those who were able to emerge from the gap, the appeared, those who returned, albeit without completely returning, discovered that outside the gap the world was the same as before, life went on as usual and they had to quickly assimilate, no questions asked, without having the opportunity to visualize the enormous cataclysm through which they had been processed. They emerged from the black hole out of desperation and without looking back. They went on living without understanding, to the best of their ability, groping, improvising, fleeing, searching for other appeared persons similar to themselves, reconstructing their lives, commencing to dream all over. And between their two normal lives – their lives before and after the Shoah – there remained that great dark stain, the gap, bottomless, discontinuous, shattered (Grossman calls it “the World Over There” and “The Beast”).

*We must develop new ears.* Only recently, with the advent of filmed testimonials, have we begun to venture into the gap and listen to the echoes. Langer says that we are unable to listen to the testimonials with the normal ears of our normal everyday lives, that we must set aside our usual assumptions regarding people, morality and traditional

distinctions between what is good and evil. When the appeared insist that their experience was “different,” they must be believed, they are making a special appeal for us to listen with different ears.

It was another world. But not from another planet. These were human beings on Earth, the same as the rest of us. However, there were other laws of such an order that they subverted the basic notions that sustain life in society.

*The basic notion of predictability.* An essential pillar of our daily existence is the notion that there are things we can predict with a certain degree of certainty relative to our own behavior. We have a fairly good and basic idea of what is predictable and what is not, of which behaviors will be rewarded and which will be punished. This was not true during the period known as the Gap. It was impossible to predict what would be appropriate behavior at any given moment; what one had to do in order to stay alive, what one had to do to protect one’s loved ones. In one situation a person might have to lie, in another it would be better to tell the truth, or to remain silent, sometimes it was best to scream or remain motionless, to run, to try not to be noticed, or to attract attention... Consequences did not depend on behavior but, rather, exclusively, on the will or whim of whoever was in charge of a situation. Responses were unpredictable. It was a realm of arbitrariness that subverted the notion of predictability, one of the most essential tenets of civilized society.

*The illusion that it was possible to make choices.* Another notion that was profoundly altered and mystified in the Gap was that of free will. Langer affirms that the victims were prisoners to “choiceless choice,” that is, choices that were impossible to make (like that presented in the film, “Sophie’s Choice,” in which a woman must choose which of her children shall live and which shall die). As subjects of the most absolute arbitrariness, the supposed possibility that they could make choices was a mystifying illusion that was difficult to unmask. The idea of choice itself implies an array of different alternatives, diverse avenues. If we take time to examine the conditions in which they lived, we see that there were no alternative avenues, only illusions. In general, their lives took place under conditions of such extreme want and progressive deterioration, that they were unable to focus their attention and energies on anything beyond the primary needs of subsistence; they were reduced to animal states, living in conditions of extreme hunger and thirst, heat and cold, stress and anguish, and desensitized thought and emotion. The future was limited to the next few minutes, the night, getting through *Appel*, or surviving the *akcja*. Death could overcome anyone at any moment. There was no hope. In many witness testimonies, the appeared say that they have no recollection of having thought about whether an action they were about to perform was either good or bad. Ethical behavior would appear to be an attribute or a luxury of satisfied bellies, one that comes with the certainty that one will go on living. The appeared often comment that they simply did what they did, their movements were almost instinctual, it was behavior that was previous to, or absent of, reflection. Reflections, questions and doubts came later. Many say that to think about eating, to only think a few minutes ahead, somehow provided a protective shell that helped take their minds off their immense sense of loss, it forced them to have an immediate objective, one that did not extend too far into the future but that gave them some semblance of a reason to go on living. Many speak of how, when they look back, they see themselves as if they were asleep, dazed, anesthetized, devoid of their most human essence.

Many of the appeared say that the absence of emotion was so complete that when the moment of their liberation finally arrived, they hardly took notice, they did not believe it, they could not feel happiness.

For fifty years they have tried to understand how they became that way. They do not recognize themselves. They do not understand themselves. They cannot accept themselves.

*The two versions of identity. The word "I".* The gap, the discontinuity between the two portions of normal life, confronts the appeared with a dilemma that has no apparent solution: how to reconcile the two versions of their identity that are a result of such disparate experiences. When the appeared use the word "I" as they narrate their experiences during the Shoah, to whom do they refer? Often, they wonder about this very question themselves: how is it possible that *I* experienced this? How is it possible that *I* watched as they killed my brother and still remained in hiding? How is it possible that *I* let myself be so humiliated just to live a little longer? This phrase, "How is it possible...?", refers to the question of how it is possible that both the *I* of then and the *I* of now correspond to the same person. For fifty years the appeared have struggled with this internal and eternal dialogue in which they try to integrate, to harmonize, these two versions into one. And they cannot. The gap remains in the shadows, inaccessible, sealed off, impossible to integrate into the continuum of their lives, the before and after, there is no place for it, it remains embedded like an often malignant tumor that can only be observed as it grows in the hope that it will remain silent, that it will not attack during the night, that they will be able to go on walking without feeling the tiny stone in their shoe.

## **6) DIFFERENT TYPES OF MEMORY.**

There is an important reason for trying to understand the silence of those who have kept silent: to come to an understanding of the torturous ins and outs of memory and its mysterious vicissitudes.

Lawrence Langer has published many texts on the subject of the Shoah. One of the principal sources of information for his work has been the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. These oral testimonies confronted him with the living word of the appeared, their silences, disruptions, incongruences, difficulties, mental blocks, and, at the same time, a vivid and personal sensation of the profound and indelible impact of the experiences they were compelled to live through. In the prologue of his book, "Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory," from which I have borrowed his ideas on the different kinds of memory, he observes:

*...they use a lexicon of disruption, absence, and irreversible loss. It took me some time to realize that all of them were telling a version of the truth as they grasped it, that several currents flow at different depths in Holocaust testimonies...*

*... If I have discovered anything in my investigation, it is that oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed on one level to remain disrupted narratives, not only by the vicissitudes of technology but by the quintessence of the experiences they record. Instead of leading to further chapters in the autobiography of the witnesses they exhaust themselves in the telling.*

*...Moral formulas about learning from experience and growing through suffering rapidly disintegrate into meaningless fragments of rhetorical consolation as the testimony of these interviews proceeds.*

*....When former victims, entreating our sympathetic understanding, insist that the situations in which they found themselves in ghettos and camps were “different”, they are making a specific appeal to us to abandon traditional assumptions about moral conduct and the “privileged” distinctions between right and wrong that usually inspire such assumptions.*

*....I often found myself naked before their nakedness, defenseless in presence of their vulnerability.*

*....From the point of view of the witness, the urge to tell meets resistance from the certainty that one’s audience will not understand.*

## **The five memories**

Observation of witness testimonies led Langer to conceptualize five types of memory, all differing from one another as well as from what we generally consider “normal” memory. Each type of memory, in turn, gives rise to a distinct version of the self, one that is neither coherent nor possible to incorporate into a “normal” identity. One of Langer’s central ideas, one which he insists upon throughout his work, is that post-war society refused to recognize the psychic reality of the appeared victims, and he suggests that it is only through oral testimonies that we can gain access to it.

A common characteristic of the five memories described by Langer is implicit chronology, that is, a different and altered chronology, a period of time outside of time. The appeared all seem to coincide in speaking about something that both *was* and *is*; that both *is* and *is not present*; thus, they proceed, eternally following disjunctive paths.

1) *Deep Memory* → *The Buried Self*. Memory that remains alive then and there, but simultaneously here and now. When the appeared person seems to be remembering, he/she is really re-living, he/she speaks in the present tense. Langer refers to Charlotte Delbo’s distinction between deep memory and common memory. Common memory – common to all of us – refers to a memory of normalcy, one that establishes chronologies and differentiates through the use of verb tenses.

*One effect of common memory with its talk of normalcy amid chaos, is to mediate atrocity, to reassure us that in spite of the ordeal some human bonds were inviolable. For instance, a recurrent theme in the oral testimonies is the mutuality that sustained sisters who went through the camp experience together. Common memory recalls family unity as a nurturing value in one’s darkest moments-and there is no reason to dispute this. But simultaneously deep memory, often in the same testimony, burrows beneath the surface of the narrative to excavate episodes that corrode the comforts of common memory. Remembering and recording what happened operate on several levels, leaving atrocity and order in a permanently disrupted suspension.*

*(p. 9)*

Langer goes on to present the situation of two sisters, both adolescents, who were hidden for a year-and-a-half in a hole in a barn, a hole that was scarcely a meter-and-a-half in diameter, “with rats that chewed at our toes.” One day, one of their brothers, who was fighting in the woods with the partisans, came and brought them a gun. He told them that if the Germans were to come, they must not get caught alive but that one of them must shoot the other and then commit suicide. Celia K., who gave this testimony, continues:

*We heard the farmer coming and he said: “Quick, Germans. Be as quiet as you can”. We were in this little hole. I don’t know what happened. So much water started coming in. We didn’t have any air to breathe, and the water was coming up to our chins. I don’t know how long we stood it but three days, four days, five days, I don’t know. And then we heard footsteps over us. So I said to my sister: “Now. You kill me first and then kill yourself”. She said, “No, you’re the older one. You want to kill me”. I said, “No, you’re the younger one. You are going to kill me”. And she had her gun poised at me already because we heard German [being spoken] and we heard a lot of footsteps. It just so happened they were retreating, leaving the barn, and the farmer gave us three nocks and we knew we were safe. And this was something that I’ll never forget in my life. We were drawing.*

*And the two sisters, their unique form of sibling rivalry temporarily suspended, remain –with what? A feeling of relief? Imperishable terror? Stupefaction, as the subject of their dialogue sinks in? If we can’t speak of mutual support, what can we speak of here? How do we define the role of the “angry” mother, who sends her daughter away, and the “nurturing” brother, who sanctions the pact of murder and suicide? (p10.-11)*

Such questions as these cannot be responded to with common morality, with a common view on life. Celia K. buried them in the deepest recesses of her memory, unable to respond to such a tremendous subversion of what is good, and what is evil.

*Moral distinctions crumble even further in the following episode from the testimony from Moses S. The reported dialogue beginning with a perfectly normal gesture, quickly disintegrates into a “logical” sequence whose rules violates our expectations at every time. The witness does not tell the story; he reenacts it. The brusque economy of his narrative, the motions of his arms, as if placing the actors on the stage (and then playing all the roles himself), the brief, staccato, sentences, with connectives often omitted, all conspire to reduce the value of verbal effect and to remind us how often terms like “heroic”, and “dignified” become orphans in this obscure universe:*

*Two boys having one bunk. One said to the other “will you watch after my piece of bread? I’m going to the bathroom”. He said: “OK”. When he came back was no bread. Where was the bread?*

*“I’m sorry. I eat it up”.*

*So he reported to the Kapo [inmate supervisor]. Kapo come along, he said: “what happened?”*

*“Look, I ask him to look after my piece of bread, and he eat it up”.*

*The Kapo said: “you took away his life. Right?”*

*He said: "Well, I'll give it back this afternoon, the ration..."*

*He [the Kapo] said: "No, come outside". He took the fellow outside. "Lie on the floor". He put a piece of Brett [a small board or plank] on his neck, and with his boots [imitating the action with his hands and feet] – bang! on his neck. Fertig! [finished].*

*How are we to follow the inner coherence of this exercise in "destructive reasoning", an example of camp "justice" that eludes all traditional conceptions of crime? We grope for a context –and we are not the only ones. Careful examination of this witness's testimony suggests that he intentionally seeks to offend our sense of order, reason, and civilized behavior, so as to break us out of the patterns of thought that desensitize us to the implications of his camp experience. His words virtually dare us to accept the condition of vulnerability he trusts upon us.*

*(p 27-28)*

At the end of his film, "Shoah," Claude Lanzmann solicits a commentary from Itzhak Zuckerman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Uprising. Zuckerman says: "If you could lick my heart, it would poison you." Langer says:

*We know of course that many life-sustaining nutrients also seep from the human heart and that some of them nourished men and women even during the event Lanzmann and Zuckerman are speaking of. But we know as well that this did not stop the annihilation of European Jewry. We may peer into the deep memory from which a statement like Zuckerman's rises without fear of contamination, because its sources are so obviously complex and private the nature of the taint, however, solicits our response; we enter that juncture between venom and antidote where one goes on living in spite of the toxin. If that tentative gesture teaches us something about what it meant to have been a victim of the inhuman during that abysmal period, it also teaches us something about what it means to be human in the post-Holocaust era.*

*(p37-38)*

2) *Anguished Memory* → *The Divided Self*. Memory that is often expressed in the conditional tense: if I had only done something, if I had only not done what I did. There is no relief, no answers. From the present, the past is constantly judged; one identifies with those that perished, one constantly revises one's own responsibility in the events. Anguished memory imprisons the conscience rather than liberating it.

The impact of anguished memory derives from the witness's inability to identify with who he was, his past and his present seem to follow parallel paths.

*Zoltan G, for example, enters into a dialogue with himself on this subject, developing a pattern of looking back and listening to his own testimony as if no one else were present. He distinguishes between the self who "does" and the self who is "done to" but cannot reconcile to the two roles. Describing the roundups in his town for deportation to Auschwitz, he tries to explain why no one did anything to protest. We had no leaders, he reminds himself; we lacked*

*confidence, were without choice. But this explanation exasperate rather than satisfy him. He still can't understand why he didn't grab an SS man's gun and shoot some Nazis before they killed him. He insists that, given the opportunity again, he'd do it today. He suffers from a scarred memory, too honest to conceal the original wound, but helpless to heal it. "It bothers me, you know", he confesses, returning to the world of the interview: "why, why, why" [didn't anyone refuse to obey]?*

*There is in fact no way to bridge his two identities: discovering this is a chief source of anguish, just as its revelation is perhaps the main drama of the testimonies. You're not "going" to "nowhere", says Zoltan G of this ordeal; they're "taking" you to "nowhere". Meanwhile, he says, the mind cheats itself into believing that "this" is not happening in the twentieth century. (p.47)*

Langer says that anguished memory, as observed in the victim-survivors, cannot be separated from the memory of the victims that perished,

*...dividing the self between conflicting claims –the need and the inability to recover from the loss (p. 75)*

3) *Humiliated Memory*→ *The Besieged Self*. The sensation of impotence, lack of control; the constant battle with the memory of shame, memories that cannot be placed within parameters of what is moral and normal, memories that hardly deserve to be told, that offer no lesson, that are the antithesis of exemplary.

*Of course there are all kinds of difficult periods that you cannot..... for example, in that camp of Langenstein [a Nazi labor camp] I was so hungry that I don't know what I would have eat. We were sleeping on the floor and next to me was another camp inmate. I don't know how old he was –he looked old. And we just got our ration of bread, and he was already so sick that he couldn't eat that bread and I was laying next to him waiting that he should die, so that I can [prolonged pause] grab his bread. (p.83)*

The pause between the words “can” and “grab” expresses, for Langer, the drama of humiliated memory, the necessity to tell the memory and, at the same time, the profound conviction that it cannot be told.

*Leo P. speculates on the reluctance of some former victims to tell their stories. Though he is uncertain about the reasons, he suggests that for many the experience was too degrading to review. "I was ashamed" he confesses about his own encounter with the Gestapo, "And when I am ashamed, I don't like to talk about it". (p.88)*

Another victim-survivor speaks of the consequences as much for himself as for all the others:

*I was ashamed of the whole thing –I was so shameful. It was so degrading. You were completely turned. Hunger was devastating to the human spirit; it was devastating to the human body, and you didn't know how to function. Families were beginning to –some were even fighting among themselves over a piece of bread. Some were stealing from each other. It was horrible. Some became informers to the Germans for a piece of bread. They thought they would be saved, and [would save] their families. Every body did what they could, just to save their family. (p.91)*

Langer says that humiliated memory touches upon the critical ethical point.

*Humiliated memory is compelled to dwell in a twilight realm that ethical insight can never illuminate. It can thus never be joined to the world he inhabits now. This suggests a permanent duality, not exactly a split or a doubling but a parallel existence. (p. 95)*

*...Humiliated memory is a content in search of a form. The moments it recalls float in a void because they cannot be connected to a conception of behavior that might establish meaning through analogy. Malka D is reluctant to tell part of her story because she cannot bear remembering them herself and refuses to believe that her audience has the capacity to understand her. Nonetheless, she haltingly offers her narration. Because of some irregularity, the SS at Radom took thirty Jews, including her, from the munitions factory where they were working and locked them in a dark cellar without windows. They couldn't see, had no food, and were left fearfully awaiting questioning and torture. At this point, we might imagine a half dozen reasons for their anxiety. But according to Malka D, what troubled them most was the lack of toilet facilities. She seems to tear the words out of the silence that possesses her on this issue; people were civilized, she says, and afraid to relieve themselves in the presence of others. Finally, she whispers, the men took string and tied it around themselves. "You mean tied their penis?" asked the interviewer, and she replies, "yes, so urine wouldn't come out".*

*She's so humiliated by the limits to which the quest for a minimal dignity had driven some men that she can scarcely finish this portion of her testimony. (p. 113)*

4) *Tainted Memory* → *The Impromptu Self*. Related to behavior involving thefts, lies, cowardice, brutality, cannibalism; memories that contaminate and poison the entire life of the victim, that prevent his being empathetic even with himself, there is no forgiveness nor absolution.

*Tainted memory, a narrative stained by the disapproval of the witness's own present moral sensibility, as well as by some of the incidents it relates. Tainted memory is nonetheless a form of self-justification, a painful validation of necessary if not always admirable conduct (p 122)*

*Tainted memory cannot purify itself, because it is trapped by a moral design that is virtually useless in helping us understand the episodes that Myra L describes. Because the moral systems that we are familiar with are built on the premise of individual choice and responsibility for the consequences of choice... “We had to behave like animals”, she complains. “There was no other way to behave” (p.125)*

*Tainted memory seems inconsistent with the rhetoric of hope (p128).*

5) *Unheroic Memory* → *The Unheroic Self*. Disqualification. Having to do with the illogic of having survived, or appeared. Witnesses insist that beyond the sheer will to live – as we would like to believe – they really don’t know how or why they were the ones to appear alive. From their perspective, neither their will to survive nor their behavior in any way affected whether they came out alive or not.

*Chaim E, for example, arrived at Sobibor on a transport with about one thousand other Jews. The SS chose eighteen of them to work inside the camp; the rest, including his brother, were sent directly to the gas chambers. Asked why he thought he was chosen, he replies without hesitation, “just random picking”. The notion of some connection between individuality and fate had simply disappeared. Ignorant of the nature of the place on arrival, he had relied on the rudimentary assumption that work, no matter how hard, would be manageable: “whatever it happened, you will still be alive... you didn’t picture the extreme”. But even this misplaced optimism was a view without illusions, at least as Chaim E explains it today; it was not meant to convey the idea of a self in command of its situation. Chaim E then formulates some important redefinitions: “On the other side, you didn’t have any choices. You just were driven to do whatever you did. So it is not things that you plan that you do; it’s just whatever happened, happened. You don’t think. You think on the moment what will happen this moment, not what the next moment will happen. Because you’re just driven, you do whatever you have to do from other people (p.177)*

*Joseph K offers an example, in an effort to explain to his interviewers a dilemma as alien to him today as it is to them. If a Gestapo man were abusing his father, he could vent his anger. He could in fact, even injure the Gestapo man. But the punishment meted to him would be negligible compared to the knowledge that he would be causing the death of ten innocent men. Going to his father’s defense, he insists, viewed from the premises established by the Nazis (and which, like it or not, had replaced filial devotion, which now appears as a privileged value, not a spontaneous feeling), would not be resistance but a “foolish act”. Part rationalization, perhaps, but part redefinition too, his words reflect one wounded identity, which I call the diminished self, trying to come to terms with memories of the need to act and the simultaneous inability to do so that continue to haunt him today. (p.183)*

In the testimonies given, the memories interrupt one another, they invade each other, they become confused and render the flow of the narrative increasingly chaotic and

difficult to understand. The five memories of the appeared coexist with “common” memory in an attempt to give the narrative fluidity and chronology, an attempt that utterly fails. The different memories that surface in the oral testimonies demand a different set of ears, they compel us to pay attention to the verb tenses employed, they enable us to accompany the witnesses as they traverse back and forth over the territories of their fragmented memories, desperately and futilely trying to piece together, like jumbled jigsaw puzzles, the different versions of the self.

In this context, the idea of a “cure of silence and a concerted amnesia,” confessed to by Jorge Semprún in his effort to be able to go on living, is quite understandable.

## Conclusion

In her book, “Memorial Candles,” Dina Wardi transcribes the words of Mina, a fifty-five-year-old married woman with an adult daughter:

*Nearly forty years have passed since then, and only now can I tell a little of what happened to me during all those months and years. The inability to express these horrors has severely affected my entire existence to this very day. Beneath my emotional apathy are hidden terrible traumatic experiences, human horrors, bodily torture, physical and psychological suffering that cannot be repaired. During dozens of miles of death marches, countless hours of backbreaking labor, from a certain moment a person loses himself. He is abandoned because he has become apathetic. People are not built to live alone, neither when things are bad nor when they are good. When I heard the echo of the shot at my mother, who was marching behind us in that death march, I was stricken dumb. I couldn't utter a sound. For more than a month I was unable to speak. When I returned from the camps no one was able to understand me. I felt a hundred years old, ancient in my soul although my body was only sixteen years old. I no longer had any desire for a spiritual or social life, or for a marital life. Nothing interested me any more. Very slowly we returned to the cycle of ordinary life, but we never came back to ourselves. We did not remain embittered, we did not hate anyone, but we did not want to remember, we only wanted to forget. (p.10-11)*

“We only wanted to forget,” Mina says.

There are those who believe that it was precisely the ability to forget that kept them alive after they appeared. Aharon Appelfeld says:

*All those who remembered were blown away afterwards like sawdust in the wind. Their brooding thoughts drove them insane, their memories drove them insane. Only those who had the ability to forget lived along. All those who possessed excellent memories died.*

I would not venture such an assertion, but I would agree that those who could “forget” were able to recuperate a more complete normalcy in their lives, with less apparent suffering. By “forget” I mean to say that it is a particular and extraordinary kind of forgetting.

### **A different kind of forgetting: when a person forgets one’s self.**

Ordinarily, we forget events, circumstances, painful or insignificant but, nevertheless, specific things. We forget the subject of a discussion, the place where we left something, detailed memories of our childhood, letters we have written, and so on. This would be our common way of forgetting, often linked to the psychoanalytic concept of repression. In the case of the appearance of the Shoah, I believe that it is a very different kind of forgetting, one that has to do with a question of identity.

*Who was I?* Overnight, as we have seen in the preceding pages, the appeared lost all recognizable parameters in their lives, they entered another reality for which they had no tools or preparation. The vast majority perished, overcome by the intensity of what took place, unable to defend themselves, to recuperate or to react effectively. For those that survived, the *sheirit hapeleta* (those that remained alive, the remnants), the return to normalcy was another dramatic event, unexpected, which caught them, once again, poorly prepared.

*After the liberation the survivors left the extermination camps, the hideouts and the forests, and began to wander about. Most of them eventually reached the displaced-persons camps that had been set up in various parts of Europe. Many of them hoped to find lost family members and began to search for them, to ask about them, and to anticipate their arrival. This expectation generally ended in bitter disillusionment. Of their entire extended family, they realized, no one was left but themselves. Their dear ones had indeed perished and they would never see them again. This disillusionment brought with it a sense of unbearable loneliness, which was soon accompanied by the realization that they had lost not only their families but also their homeland. The knowledge that they would never return to their birthplace, and that their houses and communities had been destroyed, was no less harsh a blow than the loss of their families. Only psychic emptiness could continue to protect them from being flooded with feelings of loneliness that threatened their very existence. (P.20)*

Not only did they confront this bitter and profound sense of loneliness along with hundreds of thousands of other people who, just like them, were wandering and searching for a place in the world, but also, and perhaps more importantly, they faced the need to harmonize and reconcile the recuperation of the normal self, as it was before the Shoah – accustomed to social rules and predictable behaviors – with the self of the Shoah, the two so often and strangely opposed to each other.

The questions, “Why me?” or, “How is it possible that I...?” which the appeared ask themselves ad infinitum, respond directly to the questions, “who was I when I lived through those things, when I bore those indignities?” and, “how is it possible that this self that I was

during the Shoah is the same self that I am now?” The testimony given by Mina is very clear in this respect as she recreates one of those terrible moments that inhabit the memories of the appeared, the moment in which she heard the gunshot that ended her mother’s life, and all she could do was remain silent. She recreates the moment many years later, in a safe place, living a calm and predictable life, but at that moment during the death march, what else could she have done? Could she have thrown herself against the assassin? Could she have thrown herself in the way of the bullet and died? To overcome the inertia, the terror, the sense of helplessness and to just scream? There were many who did, of course, but they are not the ones who survived, as that was not compatible behavior with the circumstances of life during the Shoah. For anyone who is familiar with the arbitrariness and the ferocity of the Nazi officers during this period of retreat, the extreme weakness of the prisoners on the forced death marches, such questions as, “Why didn’t they do something?” are questions that cannot be formulated. Nonetheless, the appeared ask themselves these questions, over and over again, without ever being able to integrate who they are now with who they were then.

Still, if they wish to go on with their lives, they have to do something in answer to these questions, something that will help them to go on living. Society in this respect is not of much help as it is unaware of its own unawareness. They have been shut off. In celebrations and speeches, the Shoah is spoken of in terms of the six million murdered Jews and the handful of resistors: the dead-victims and the heroes, but there is no place provided for the victim-survivors, as if nothing good could be said of them, as if they had been tainted by a suspicious dye and, by contrast with the heroes, were morally inferior, as if the fact that they could do no more than remain silent had taken from Mina not only heroism, but also the dignity of a person who lives her life correctly.

The appeared have forgotten nothing of what they lived through during the Shoah. But they must live their lives as if nothing had happened, they must leap over the “gap” because if they carry it with them in their daily lives, if it becomes part of their routine, their identity itself is imperiled.

This is a unique kind of forgetting, a forgetting that is incumbent on the victim-survivors. They are not forgetting a specific event, a gesture, a person, or a painful experience. They have to forget an infinity of events, people and circumstances that they lived through during the Shoah. If not, they could seriously jeopardize the image they have of themselves, by sustaining these two very different, contradictory and incompatible selves. They must forget who they were, their actions, thoughts and feelings. I had a conversation with Berl K., a 77-year-old survivor, in which he spoke about what the ghetto was like in the beginning. This is part of what he said:

He was 22 years old, he and his 21-year-old girlfriend, Dora, had only each other. He loved his girlfriend. His voice grew distant, as often happens in the testimonies of the appeared, and it seemed as if he was both here and there, the past takes such a strong hold that it becomes the present. They were in hiding along with some other people. Because he had made a lot of non-Jewish friends before, he was able to obtain food for all of them. Hidden, frightened, unable to bathe or take care of their necessities, Dora and he discovered the possibility of speaking of love, of promising to get away together, of sharing their lives and having children. One day he set out in search of food, as he did everyday, and when he returned he found the hiding place empty. I listened, motionless, as he spoke, not wishing to disturb him, his pain was so intense, but in the moment that he relived his return to the

hiding place and discovered that there was no one left, that his darling Dora was gone, my eyes filled with tears and I had to close them, thinking, “No! How horrible! Poor man...!”

A month later, he called me and said: “You must come urgently, I need to tell you something.”

“You were right to close your eyes. I have been unable to sleep since that day, I need to explain something to you.” I asked him, “What was I right about?” “To hold me responsible, that’s what I tell myself everyday since the end of the war. How could I have left her? How could I not have realized that our hiding-place was dangerous and that they could discover us? Why did I take all the money with me and not leave her any?” And without letting me say a word he told me the entire story again, in the same way as before, like a litany, recreating, reliving every minute, every step, every one of the things he had done well until that moment and that had enabled him and Dora to stay alive... “I don’t accuse you of anything,” I told him during a pause. “On the contrary, I not only don’t think you’re guilty of anything, but I don’t understand why you don’t see that they did this to you, that they are the guilty ones, they broke you down to the point that you don’t even see how you were forced to be. What are you guilty of, being alive when Dora isn’t?”

And at this moment, like a waterfall, the names of all those who had perished came gushing out and he didn’t stop until he had mentioned every one. He had never told this story before, except to his wife, who was with us during the entire conversation. None of his children knew this story.

## “A Doll’s House”

When this book was already finished, this letter fell into my hands and I can’t resist including it here. It appeared in the July 1998 issue of “The Voice of Israel” in Buenos Aires. In it, Isaiah Kremer says that the daughter of the author found it, a little after her mother died, between the pages of “A Doll’s House,” by Ibsen, and that she was submitting it with her permission for publication.

*Letter to my daughter:*

*I leave you these pages inside this book that I know you will look through someday without knowing that its title is the same one that brought disgrace upon my life. I will tell you part of this story now since I didn’t have the courage to do it while looking you in the eye. I have the number K.A. 32975 tattooed on my arm, the number of the Kazetler (prisoner) I have been for so long. I never spoke to you about it and you learned to never ask; knowing that you would revive the pain, you refrained from asking and I thank you. But now I can tell you because, if you are reading this, I no longer have the obligation to protect this memory against its being forgotten.*

*My childhood in Berlin was beautiful: long hikes, many hours seated at the piano with the music of the great masters and a future that promised to be wonderful. My parents and siblings loved me and my youthful appearance provoked admiration in the young men, among whom I had my choice for a good man with whom to form a marriage. In 1939 it all collapsed. I won’t go*

*into details, with which you are surely familiar after having read what other survivors have written. I can hardly remember how it all fell to pieces. My parents didn't want to, or perhaps couldn't, escape and tried not to worry us. So, I would still get together with my Jewish girlfriends at midday at the house of one or another, gathered around the piano and oblivious to the outside world. Then began the great tragedy. Rapping on the door, shouting, the fearsome SS came crashing in shouting 'farfluchte Juden' (stinking Jews) and 'Juden Jure' (Jewish whores) and they took us to a truck where, with obscene jokes, guffaws and groping, they made us get in and they took us to a barrack. Once there, they put us with some other girls who were just as terrified as we were. One 'Aufzeerin' (assistant) came to speak to us but, in spite of our screams and cries, she left without listening to us.*

*At night we were assaulted by the Gestapo officials who, without the least consideration, outraged all of us savagely and brutally: beatings, screaming, blood, laughing, alcohol, humiliation, pain, there are so many things that happened to us that night, poor victims, that out of shame I can't describe any more. That was our sexual initiation. The next morning, aching, bleeding and denigrated, we were taken to the central plaza where the 'Kapo' described our future: be "agreeable" with the soldiers, take care of the general cleaning, and a number of other things I prefer to forget; I only retain the image of the 'Kapo' beating us with her stick and taking us to the soldier who tattooed us with the number that would become our shame and dishonor. We were moved into barracks with lots of beds in each, separated one from another by thin partitions. Every afternoon contingents of soldiers arrived in search of the 'Juden Jure.' We had to obey them and show them gratitude for the honor they were paying us. Vicious orders, disgusting odors, degradations that I can't bring myself to tell you, all this we suffered in order to survive.*

*One of my companions couldn't take the living hell, she ran terrified towards the peripheral barbed wire. When she touched it she received a terrific electrical shock, but they pulled her away still alive. They didn't want to miss the opportunity to punish her. We were all taken to the plaza to watch as they hung the rebel who didn't value the "honor" of providing pleasure to the glorious warriors of the Reich. For several days her corpse hung on the scaffold as a lesson for the prisoners. We knew nothing of our parents and families, we only knew that we had to be "ready" for the innumerable afternoon visits. On one occasion, a soldier complained that I hadn't satisfied all his pleasure-needs and the 'Aufzeerin' beat me and took me to the central plaza. I thought it was the end and I believe I resigned myself to that fact. When the 'Kapo' gave me 25 lashes, I thought I would die, but thanks to the caring of my companions, I survived, but not without terrible pains and scars. They hardly waited for my injuries to heal before they returned me to the "life of pleasure" in the doll's house. The 'Kapo' monitored our periods and when they occurred we were given some disgusting rags. If someone didn't get her period, she was given to the doctors in the laboratory. We didn't know if that was good or bad until a prisoner told us about the experiments carried out on mothers and daughters which inevitably ended in death after terrible suffering. From that moment on we prayed we wouldn't get pregnant and dragged off to the*

*“laboratories of experimentation.” As we were “pleasure dolls,” we were fed better than other prisoners and each of us had a mattress soaked with urine and other stains where we could sleep in the mornings. But nothing could get us out of the afternoon degradation in which we had to ‘give pleasure’ to the soldiers who were then questioned by the ‘Kapo’ about our performance.*

*I cannot describe our life to you in detail, modesty prevents me. But I want to leave a testimony regarding the doll’s houses, it seems the least I can do as a tribute to the girls who died in those places. I know that other survivors don’t speak about these events because it is so denigrating, but who was denigrated most? Those of us who were obliged to be victims, or the “valiant” Nazi soldiers who, snickering and joking, vomited their filth all over us?*

*As the war continued, they would change the “meat” of the ‘juden jure,’ and so we learned about the concentration and extermination camps. According to where the battle fronts lay, we were transported to different barracks since the soldiers always had need of us. Few of us remained from the original group. We were having to take extreme measures in order to appear pretty and healthy; from pricking a finger and using the blood to color our cheeks, to improvising home dyes to hide our premature gray hairs, everything was valid in order to get through the selection that separated the living from the dead.*

*I would like you to try to understand me, dear daughter. We had no name, no dignity, no honor; our pain exacerbated the instincts of our masters, the blood and the bruises only heightened their levels of excitation. And that is how we had to live, and that is why I don’t want to get together with other survivors, because what happened to me was unworthy. Surely, to let myself die would have been better, but my instinct to survive drove me to act the way I did, with false laughter, fake orgasms, lying caresses. I know it was immoral, don’t judge me badly for it, I couldn’t find the courage to confront a dignified death, may God forgive me. It is hard for me to tell you this but you are a woman and although you will not suffer these horrors, thank God, I want you to understand something about the horrors I lived through and the reason for my silences in response to your first questions. I survived. I suffered many hardships I had to endure. I will not go into the details that I don’t wish to remember nor wish you to ever know about, interminable forced marches, the camps, murders, until the end of the war.*

*I never mentioned the “doll’s house” to anyone. I think your generation is unaware of its existence. We don’t have reunions for former dolls. In fact, at one of your elementary school parties my eyes connected with those of another former doll. We recognized each other but we looked away and kept our eyes down so as not to revive the memory of our degradation.*

*After the war, I met your father in a Displaced Persons Camp. We united our suffering, perhaps without love but with great respect for one another. Out of that union you were born and I could give birth to my own daughter, of my own blood and from my own people, who were, despite the degradation they suffered, still more honorable than their oppressors.*

*This is what I wanted you to know, my dear daughter. Perhaps I should have told you sometime before, but try to understand the shame and my embarrassment for what I had to live through. When I compare my lot with that*

*of my brothers and sisters, it seems that I have been fortunate. Was I fortunate?  
Not one night of my life goes by that I don't dream of awakening alone,  
bleeding in a filthy bed in the barrack called the "doll's house."*

The Hebrew word that is commonly used in reference to the survivors is *sherit ha pleita*, "the remnants", or "those who remained with life". Perhaps I am overly susceptible, but I prefer not to think of myself as a daughter of "remnants". I am aware that the word "appeared" is only applicable to the years immediately following the war; therefore – although I don't really like the idea – it seems appropriate to form a combination of the words "victims" and "survivors"; Lawrence Langer uses the words "former victims".

"Splitting hairs", some readers may think: this issue of the right word, as will be seen below, is one of the issues that must be considered when considering the Shoah.

Jorge Semprún, "L'écriture ou la vie," Editions Gallimard, 1994. The Spanish translation, "La escritura o la vida," Tusquets, Barcelona, mayo 1995, offers a translation in which the French word, "revenant" (returnee?) is translated to "aparecido," hence the English word, "appeared," which I have indirectly borrowed from Semprún.

The English translation, "Literature or Life," Penguin Books USA Inc., 1997: p. 89, offers this translation of the pertinent passage (employing the French word, *revenant*): "We are not survivors, but ghosts, revenants. . . . One can only express this abstractly, of course. Or in passing, lightly, offhandedly. . . . Or while laughing with other ghosts. . . ."

In addition to the obvious allusion to the aspect of ghosts, of apparitions, the word "appeared" embodies a painfully immediate significance for Argentines, taking into account our dubious honor of having introduced the word "disappeared" to the world as a synonym for state terrorism. Here also, subsequent to what occurred during the period of military dictatorship known as "The Process," subsequent to the torture and disappearances whose total number of victims may never be ascertained, here also, there are appeared persons, those who "came back from Death". How many people were arrested, "chupadas" (sucked up), how many were temporarily disappeared, or went into hiding or into exile, or changed their identities, how many of these people remained alive? Except for the clear distinction between this experience and the unique phenomenon of the Shoah, would these persons who appeared, came back from Death, after The Process share certain characteristics with those who appeared, came back from Death, after the Shoah? Would something of our experience as children of the appeared, something like the shadows in which we grew up, have also darkened the infancy of the children of the appeared following The Process?

There could be many others, such as: profession, social and learning levels, being part of political or religious movements, gender, psychological characteristics, physical appearance, etc.

Segev Tom: *The Seventh Million*, Ed. Hill and Wang, New York, 1994.

After the publication of this work, in its original Spanish edition, I learned that the Argentine experience was similar to that of other countries.

In Poland, with the greatest concentration of Jews in Europe, the Polish government stopped subsidizing Jewish schools due, in part, to the interest in "Polish-izing" national minorities. Jewish schools as a result became more expensive, which meant that poor Jews had to send their children to Polish schools.

From "*shtetl*" (Yiddish): village, small town

*Grine* (Yiddish) often "greener" in English: greens, equivalent to "gringo" in Argentina, and applied to immigrants.

Adrian Furnham & Stephen Bochner, *Culture Shock*, Methuen, New York, 1986.

In fact, as will be seen further on, it may not be appropriate to say that we were "ignorant". Vaguely, we knew but, at the same time and in a way that was equally vague, we knew that we were not supposed to know.

In truth, some children of survivors vehemently complained that their parents never ceased to speak about "that." They didn't want to hear or be told anything about it. They preferred to be left in peace – they didn't know what to do with this intrusive and disturbing information. This reveals another aspect of the difficulty of the situation: to speak out was considered bad, and not to speak out was also considered bad... Perhaps what was happening was that there simply wasn't any manner of broaching the subject. Perhaps this is one of our missions: to discover such a manner.

Segev, Tom, op.cit. p. 45

Semprun, op. cit., page 134

op.cit.

Yishuv (Hebrew): this was the way the Jewish community was named in Palestine before the creation of the State of Israel.

I heard that today, the Hebrew word *savon* means coward. This shows how the idea of the alleged shameful behaviour of the victims now permeates Israeli culture.

*Judenrat* (German), plural *Judenräte*: The Jewish Council. The conduct of its members is one of the great and painful issues of the Shoah. Little is known about it and even less is understood. Some were accomplices to the perpetrators, but others were members of the resistance. They ruthlessly carried out what the Nazis had mastered: to confront the victims with ethical dilemmas that were incompatible with the rules of civilization and morality. The *Judenrat* took care of certain administrative aspects of Jewish daily life (the distribution of rations, health care, work, housing, etc.). They also collected taxes and, in later stages, had to fulfill quotas for persons to be "transported," that is, to choose who would live and would die.

Published in *Nuestra Memoria*, magazine of the *Fundacion Memoria del Holocausto*, No. 1, December 1994, page 20.

Op.cit.

I wonder how and to what degree these questions/suspicions resemble those asked about the appeared of The Process in Argentina between 1976 and 1982.

Op.cit.

Helen Epstein: *Children of the Holocaust*, Penguin Books, New York 1988

Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies. The ruins of memory*. Yale University Press, 1991 (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award). He also wrote: *Versions of survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*; *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature*; *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*; *Admitting the Holocaust*. Edited: *Art from the Ashes: a Holocaust Antology*.

A troubling point in this respect is that it is very uncommon for the appeared to blame the Nazi system: torturous thoughts are self-reproaches that hold one's own conduct up for judgement without taking into account the context that rendered free-will impossible. Torturous thoughts submit the appeared to the perverse idea, so well manipulated by the Nazi propaganda apparatus, of their own guilt.

Mario Muchnik, *Mundo Judio* (Editorial Lumen, Buenos Aires, 1984) page 48: "...Racial differences are found in certain animal species, such as dogs and horses, among which, in addition to differences of bone structure, there are cellular differences of a genetic nature, that is, differences in the genes that form the nucleus of the cells that are active in the reproductive mechanism. In human beings there are no such differences. Physical differences hide, in human beings, a surprising genetic equality: genetically, there tend to be fewer differences between a white person and a black person, than between two blacks or two whites."

Op.cit.

Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat*, pages 152-167.

See "Excremental Assault" by Terrence des Pres, in the appendix at the end of this book.

Segev, op.cit.

Segev, Op.cit.

In "Her Face in the Mirror. Jewish Women on Mothers and Daughters, Faye Moskowitz ed., Beacon Press, 1994, Boston, (p. 142-3)

Segev, Op.cit.

Langer, op.cit.

Grossman David: *See Under: Love*, Picador, London 1991.

*Appel*. German. This was the word used in the concentration camps for the roll call that took place twice daily and at which time those in charge had the opportunity to vent their sadistic impulses and to arbitrarily decide which prisoners should die.

Polish (*aktion* in German, *raid* in English). This was an organized action with the objective of removing Jews from their homes and hiding places in order to relocate them – to work or death camps – or simply to execute them without further delay.

Op.cit.

op.cit.

Dina Wardi: *Memorial Candles. Children of the Holocaust*. Tavistock/Routledge, London & New York, 1992.

Aharon Appelfeld: *The Skin and the Shirt*, Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1971, cited by Dina Wardi, op.cit.

Wardi, op.cit.

## The Children of Victim-Survivors: The Next Generation

What effect has our parents' need to forget produced on our lives?

*For years it lay in an iron box buried so deep inside me that I was never sure just what it was. I knew I carried slippery, combustible things more secret than secret and more dangerous than any shadow or ghost. Ghosts had shape and name. What lay inside my iron box had none. Whatever lived inside me was so potent that words crumbled before they could describe. Sometimes I thought I carried a terrible bomb.*

*....Sometimes I felt my iron box contained a tomb.*

*....I built my iron box carefully, the way we were taught in school that nuclear reactors were built. I conceived lead walls around the dangerous parts, concentric circles of water channels and air ducts that would soften and contain any kind of explosion. I enclosed it all with metal casing and buried the box far away from my brain towards the small of my back, in the part of my body that seem least alive. (H. Epstein, p. 9-13)*

### Helen Epstein and her book

*To begin with a quote from Helen Epstein has a special significance. Epstein is an independent journalist who, at the age of 29, undertook a project that was at first an investigative report on children of victim-survivors of the Shoah based on a*

*selection of interviews. It was a revolutionary enterprise in 1977; at the time, the topic, as such, hardly existed.*

The following is an excerpt from the beginning of the second chapter:

*I had talked with other children of survivors before. Three of my closest childhood friends belonged to that quiet, invisible community, that peer group without a sign. After school, my friend Evelyn and I will often take our homework into Central Park and study Latin together, bound by a tacit affinity that we did not understand. Evelyn's parents, like mine, had insisted that she study Latin. They spoke English with thick accents. They had fled Vienna just as my parents had fled Prague. They read the newspapers as avidly as my own parents. Seemingly innocuous headline could plunge them into an hour-long debate. Like me, Evelyn did not have grandparents or any family besides her mother and father. Like my friend Jimmy, whose family had also fled Vienna, Evelyn never spoke about family or history or how her parents came to be living in New York City. But when I visited them, I felt at home. There was an intensity there, a kind of fierceness about living that was absent from the more casual, easy going atmosphere of other homes. There was mystery of great consequence.*

*At my friend Mary's house, that mystery was sharpened by sadness. Her parents came from Poland and when they were alone they spoke Iddish instead of German. They owned the small house in which they lived on West End Ave and they rarely left it. Once Mary told me that they were afraid it would burn down or be looted if they left. I accepted that without question, as if it were a natural consideration. Neither did I wonder why they had given their only child a Christian name. All of our parents, the ones who had come to America after the war, were eccentric in my eyes. They were not like Americans and we children were not like other American children. The fact was so obvious it did not require discussion and Mary, like Jimmy and Evelyn, never ventured to speculate on why that should be so. Friends, like family, are quick to shield each other from pain and although we all knew that a great deal of pain pervaded the households in which we were raised, we never addressed it by name.*

*At twenty nine, I had decided to address it. (p.15-16)*

In nineteen chapters, she relates her own life-story, the stories of her mother and father, how they lived through the Shoah and later arrived in the United States, as well as her own child's-eye-view as link between two geographies, two lives and two cultures (Dina Wardi had still not proposed her metaphor of "memorial candles," which I will comment on below). Epstein interviews children of victim-survivors in the United States, Canada, and Israel and, as she says, discovers herself reflected repeatedly as if in different mirrors, with different facets, but always with the same melody in the background. This is also what happens to those of us who have read her book. Published in 1979, the book was the genesis for meetings of children of victim-survivors, at the time, the so-called "second generation of the Holocaust."

The publication of “Children of the Holocaust” produced and – for children of victim-survivors who read the book today – it still produces, two basic results.

On one hand, it established a community; suddenly one felt and thought: “It happens to them also? It wasn’t only me?” and one could insert the infinite experiences of one’s own history and childhood into a new context offering reassurance and understanding. Reassurance because we can recognize ourselves in others and we can ascribe to our own experiences, sentiments and difficulties a certain degree of normality: if these things do not only happen to us, then there is something that transcends us and in which we can find a sense of community and belonging.

On the other hand, Helen Epstein cast light on a portion of our reality that had been cloaked in darkness, she researched it and gave it a name so that, from that moment on, it existed. Like so many “obvious” things (gender differences in sexuality, for instance, or gender differences in viewing the world, or the concept of the unconscious – until Freud pointed it out – which are all evident examples of our blindness before the obvious), the category of “children of victim-survivors” did not exist as such. The “obvious” can produce blind-spots (one does not see that one does not see); the obvious is invisible. Helen Epstein brought it out into visibility.

Together, with the contributions made by so many others over the years, I hope we can open the iron box and see what is inside and what effects have been produced in the lives of the children of victim-survivors.

### **The childhood of children of the appeared.**

It is very difficult to retrieve the thoughts we had as children. Knowledge we acquire later as adults obscures those memories. What dreams and fantasies did we entertain? What were the questions, the hypotheses, the explanations? To shed some light upon these issues, I refer to the talents of a writer who has successfully “returned” through his imagination to that world which, for many of us, is lost.

David Grossman elegantly recreates the manner in which Momik, the 9-year-old only-child of a married couple of victim-survivors, tries to understand the things he hears, the “secret code of There.” He feels compelled to include these things in his account of his experiences and life in Israel.

*When we examine the screaming in the light of day, it turns out to be quite simple. It was like this, there was a war in that kingdom, and Papa was the Emperor and also the chief warrior, a commando fighter. One of his friends (his lieutenant?) was called Sondar. This strange name may have been his name in the underground, like in the days of the Etzel and Lehi. They all lived in a big camp with a complicated name. There they were trained to go on daring missions, which were so secret even today you have to keep mum about them. Also there were some trains around, but that part isn’t so clear. Maybe those trains are like the ones his secret brother Bill tell him about, the trains attacked by savage Indians. Everything is so mixed up. And there were also these big campaigns in Papa’s kingdom called Aktionen, and sometimes (probably to make the people feel proud) they would have really incredible parades, like we have on Independence Day. Left, right, left, right, Papa screams in his sleep, Links recht, he screams in the German language Bella will*

*positively not translate to Momik, till he practically shouts at her and she gets angry and tells him it means left, right, to the left, to the right. Is that it, Momik wonders, then why didn't she want to translate it? Mama wakes up at night from Papa's screaming and she pokes him and shakes him, and cries, Un, Tuvia, sha, be still, the child can hear you, Over There is gone, it's the middle of the night, a klag zal im trefin, you'll wake the boy, Tuvia! ( p 28)*

## **Memorial candles: children of the appeared**

Dina Wardi, Italian psychotherapist, survivor/appeared of the Shoah, lives in Israel today. She speaks about those of us who were born after the war:

*.....One and a half million children were murdered during the Holocaust. After the liberation, the birth of new children became the symbol of victory. The generation of 1946 reached this world half-alive and half-dead, born of parents filled with confusion and internal contradictions. The babies that were born had the power to shine some light through the chaos... Perhaps they could give meaning to their parents' empty lives. They would be the compensation and the substitutes for the beloved family members who had died.*

And then she adds:

*... The children have clear views of the special role for which they were designated, even before they were born... I call this role, "memorial candles." It includes the personal history of the parents during the Holocaust, as well as their attempts to mend the broken ties with their extended families and communities... The parent-survivors speak very little with their children about what happened to them... Without providing them with the necessary information, they bestow upon their "memorial candles" the task of filling the void of their hearts and mending the broken (hidden) pieces of the family mosaic...*

Candles symbolize both life and death, they are a metaphor for our experiences: our hopes and anxieties, the losses and discoveries in our lives, the lights and shadows.

### **Categories of families of the appeared**

Yail Danieli, co-founder and director of the Group Project for Holocaust Survivors and Their Children, worked with 75 survivors whose ages varied from 37 to 74 years old, and close to 300 children of survivors from 17 to 33 years old. She proposes four family categories:

1) "Victim" families. That is, those appeared who see themselves submitted to a state of victimization, impotence and the inability to react. The family environment is

characterized by depression, distrust, and fear of the outside world, all of which establishes a strong symbiotic relationship between parents and children. Issues of money and success are central, as well as not permitting oneself to be seen as a target, that is, keeping a low profile. These are families that prohibit defensive or aggressive behavior toward the outside world. The parents, especially the mothers, tend to harbor exaggerated fears concerning their children and hence are overprotective. They are almost compulsively preoccupied with physical survival: food is a central issue in their lives. Another feature is extreme anxiety over the safety of both people and possessions; this may lead to compulsive behavior, such as frequent opening and closing of doors. Total distrust of anyone who does not pertain to the immediate family is a message that is communicated to the children.

One of the most serious problems confronted by members of this type of family involves confronting feelings of aggression and rage. As a survival tactic, parents learned during the Shoah to suppress expressions of this kind, which, at that time, not only endangered one's own life but also the lives of those nearby.

In these families, the habitual repression of anger is complemented by eruptions of violence that are difficult to control, often directed at the children when they "misbehave." Certain stock phrases are often used by parents in these families, such as "You act like Hitler," "You're worse than the Nazis," or "Even Eichmann was better than you."

Children in these families develop a strong identification with the suffering and pain of their parents and acquire a special sensitivity toward other individuals and society in general. Many choose to be involved in activities related to the protection or provision of aid to needy people and, generally, their performance is exemplary: children from families that see themselves as "victims" are very capable of confronting the challenge of helping others, so long as the challenge does not include helping themselves.

2) "*Fighter*" families. These are families in which the parents were involved in some kind of organized resistance to the Nazis and who, after the war, maintained attitudes very contrary to those of the "victim" Jews. Not only those who fought are included in this group, but all those who took responsibility for themselves and for others in the ghettos as well as in the camps. They see themselves as active and able to make decisions. This characteristic saved many of them, but we should not forget that many others perished due to bad luck and arbitrariness. In spite of what "fighters" may believe, their style of behavior was not a guarantee of survival during the Shoah.

The home atmosphere is very different from that of "victim" families. Hospitality and cheerfulness are rules of the household. Everything must be in order. Everyone must behave pleasantly. Depression, sadness and weakness are firmly discouraged. Achievement and constant activity are stimulated and promoted, pride and self-determination are considered the pillars of daily life. Making an effort and accepting challenges are behaviors that are rewarded, half-heartedness, apathy and indifference are punished. Aggressive behavior toward the outside world is applauded and the children are prepared to fight against all threats and aggressors. Their slogans could very well be along the lines of, "Stand on your own two feet and win!" "Frighten your opponents if you wish but never let them know that you yourself are afraid!" and "Never give in and never give up, no matter what!"

Problems are not tolerated and must be resolved quickly and efficiently. Everyone must maintain absolute control over their lives. Honor and courage are most important: "Humiliation and oppression - never!"

*Everything was always okey. Both Father and Mother worked. They were both very active and ambitious. Father achieved a very important public position. Many people would come to him to ask for advice or support. But I really don't remember any expressions of feeling in our house. No one shouted, no one got angry, no one cried, we did not kiss or hug each other, everything was simply okay. I can't remember crying in front of my parents or at all. Even when we came home after my father's funeral, the first thing my mother said was, "The last thing I need is that you should start crying now", So obviously I didn't cry. She didn't cry, and neither did I.*

*In school I was always very active, always on committees, always responsible and organizing. When I was seven I was chosen to recite something at an Independence Day ceremony in front of the whole school. I remember that I felt very excited and afraid inside, but no one say this. I didn't say anything to my mother or father, as they would not have understood. They took it for granted that I had to stand there on the platform, in front of everyone, and do what I had been asked in the best possible way. I realize now that I also took it for granted.*

*All those years I was always outstanding. In class I always had to be the best pupil. In the officers' course (in the army) I felt under pressure to reach first place, to be the outstanding cadet. At the university – a brilliant student, and now responsible public work. Again I'm in the limelight. I never let myself stop and examine what I am doing to see if it's really what I want, or to find out what I really feel about all sorts of pressure driving me, or some sort of drive, that decided everything for me. But I'm not at all sure if this power is my own. I never felt that I really had the opportunity to choose or to consider different courses of action. (p.128)*

*"Fighter" parents present their children with an impossible image to emulate, one that is highly idealized and mythical. Most of the children know very little about what really happened to their parents during the Shoah, what they actually did to save themselves and others.*

3) "Numb" families are often those in which both parents were the sole survivors of their individual families, which, prior to the war, may have included a wife/husband and children. The unspoken rule in these families is "don't make waves." The parents seem to be in a perpetual state of shock and resignation. What happened during the Shoah is rarely mentioned. They are protective families, the parents protect each other and their children, and vice versa, in a climate characterized by pervasive indifference and estrangement. These families are similar to "victim" families but they are more apathetic, with feelings and reactions that are so deeply buried that they seem unable to respond to even minimal stimulation. They are frequently very isolated from social and community contact. It is probably within this group that the greatest quantity of persons suffering from physical symptoms of varying degrees of severity may be found.

4) Families of "those who made it" are those in which survivors have decided that their own successful lives will be the definitive proof of victory over the Nazis. This is the

group that is most adapted to the reality of their new country, whose members are highly ambitious and often achieve great social and political status, fame, and/or wealth. In these families, where a primary objective is to gain recognition for the family name, at least one of the children has been stimulated to follow this same path. Some members of this group have dedicated much of their careers, fortunes and political status to the objective of commemorating and recognizing the Jewish experience during the Shoah.

*Children of the appeared who are most active in the effort to rediscover their history pertain, in large measure, to the first two groups, the “victims” and the “fighters.” Those from “numb” families, due to their extreme isolation and disaffection, appear indifferent to the issue of the Shoah. This may also be observed in members of families “who made it,” albeit for different reasons. In these families, it is not necessary to confront the issue of the Shoah, it is an experience that has been overcome, their lives are proof of the triumph over the Nazis.*

## **In addition to Danieli’s four categories**

It seems reasonable to suppose that the type of life one was exposed to during the Shoah determines, to a high degree, pertinence to one of these categories. For example, members of the “fighter” families had generally been partisans or members of some resistance group, whereas members of “victim” or “numb” families had generally been in the camps.

These categories, established by Danieli, illustrate the difficulty we face in trying to identify some kind of syndrome for children of victim-survivors. The same observations that were made of the appeared are now pertinent to their children. As children of the appeared, what we seem to have in common is precisely the fact that we are children of the appeared. Which confers upon us certain characteristics that do not constitute a syndrome.

There are many additional differences to consider.

The age of our parents during the Shoah. Their social backgrounds. Their social and family structures. Whether they lived in rural or urban areas. Whether they belonged to Jewish communities that were integrated into the social fabric of their origin countries or whether they maintained a more closed cultural identity. Whether they were political militants or had cultural interests. In this context, Raoul Hillberg has said:

*Yet survival was not altogether random, and survivors who describe themselves as the few are not a sample of the many who died. In sheer physical terms, the veterans of camps, hideouts, and partisan units had two attributes. They were relatively young, concentrated in the age group from the teens to the thirties, and that is to say that those who were middle-aged were even fewer. They also had to be in good health at the start of the ordeal. Ghettos, let alone camps, marshes, and woods, were all prescriptions for illness, and anyone who was already burdened with a malady or disability usually had an insurmountable problem.*

*Social characteristics, although not as determinative as one’s physical condition, were also important. The same advantages that favored people in ghettos, hiding or escape, also furthered ultimate survival. “We were scraping the bottom of our dwindling resources”, states a survivor who was still in*

*hiding in a Polish town during 1944. He did not have to add that he had some resources to begin with. The Jewish physicians and carpenters were similarly able to prolong their existence, if not in freedom, then in a ghetto, and if not in a ghetto, then in a camp.*

*Most critical, however, was the psychological profile of the survivors. In this respect, they differed completely from the great mass of their fellow victims. The contrast may be glimpsed in three important traits: realism, rapid decision making, and tenacious holding on to life.*

*It was not common in the Jewish community to be realistic to the extent of observing one's environment soberly and drawing one's conclusions independently. It was not usual to be suspicious of explanations or assurances that demanded absolute trust in authority. Rudolf Vrba, who had already escaped from an internment camp in Slovakia and had been caught at the border of Hungary, was on a deportation train with Jewish families who had been promised "re-settlement". When the train halted at Maydanek-Lublin, where he was pulled off with men aged sixteen to forty-five, he decided that from this moment, he would "trust nobody". The realistic person did not rationalize steps into the unknown as benign. During a roundup in the Kaunas Ghetto in 1944, a woman, Liuba Daniel, "forbade" her husband to report. He did anyway and died. She survived.*

*Presence of mind, coupled with the ability to make decisions instantly, was another rare characteristic. One woman, Mitzi Abeles, repeatedly escaped from pursuers who were within yards of her, at one point jumping in a nightshirt from a window in Zagreb, Croatia. Errikos Sevillias, the Greek Jew in Auschwitz who ascribed his survival to incomprehensible fate, recalls a barracks selection in which he gave himself a poor chance of survival, because he had become emaciated. "In the instant", he writes, that "I saw the guard look elsewhere, I jumped and landed on the other side of the barrier" where the strong had already been separated from the weak. The decision makers always took risks. Not always were their actions prompted by the appearance of a danger; sometimes they responded to an opportunity. When the teenager Isaac Rudnicki in the Swienciany Ghetto was assigned to work in a German weapons room, he removed two firearms and hid them in the ghetto. His family was petrified. He eventually became a partisan and after his liberation fought in Israel's wars, rising in rank to Brigadier General with a new name: Yitzhad Arad.*

*The third component of the survivor's personality pattern was an absolute determination to live. One aspect of this tenacity was adaptability to the inflictions of indignity, pain, cold, heat and hunger. When Rudolf Vrba was transferred from Lublin to Auschwitz, he met two Poles, both of whom suggested laughingly that he should run for the wire—the guard would shoot and end things quickly. Vrba angry, answered: "I'll be alive when you two are dead!" They died in fact a month later of typhus. Vrba, resolute, ate everything, "even if the bread contained sawdust, and the tea looked like sewer water". Sevillias, much older than Vrba, was already over forty. His stamina was nevertheless exceptional. When the Soviet army liberated him, he weighed thirty-two kilograms, or seventy pounds. But he was alive.*

*Sevillias, Vrba, Abeles, Daniel, and Arad are unusual people even among survivors. They epitomize the qualities that make survival possible in the most extreme situations. At the same time, they personify most clearly an essential truth that applied to everyone who surmounted the odds. They were lucky after they had tried to save themselves. (p188 to 191)*

In this attempt to somehow categorize the appeared, I think it is useful to recall the different categories already proposed in the previous chapter, “The Categories of Suffering,” with respect to where and how victims survived the Shoah:

- Those who experienced the camps: whether or not they were in the camps, what kinds of camps, performing what kinds of activities, were they part of some kind of Sonderkommando, did they have a protector, were they part of a death march.
- Those who hid: in forests, in private homes, in barns, etc.
- Those who changed their identities.
- Those who escaped to Russia.

Within any of these categories, we should consider that they may have been compelled at some moment to serve the Nazis in some way, to trade with them, prostitute themselves, any of a number of actions that may have left an indelible stain on the memory. Esther P., a Hungarian victim-survivor, says:

My cousin, Dotti, was a beauty. She had Aryan documents. She worked as a waitress in a bar. A Nazi officer fell in love with her and promised to save her. He took her to his apartment, a tiny small place with a living room and one bedroom in the center of Budapest. Dotti never told him that she was married. She and her husband built a hiding place for him beneath the bed, the only place where there was enough space. It wasn't a matter of many years, only a few months until the end of the war, but that's how they got through it, with her on top of the bed with her Nazi lover, and him underneath the bed, listening. They had a daughter to whom Dotti could never bring herself to tell the truth. After Dotti's death, the daughter began to ask questions about how things were, how they had survived, and I told her. Dotti died without knowing not only that her daughter didn't accuse her of anything, but that she admired her more than ever, as well as her father, for their strength and determination to live.

I do not know how life has been after the war for former members of the Judenräte, the Jewish police, or the Kapos in the camps – or their families. I suppose it must be very difficult for them and their children to come to terms with the past. The Canadian filmmaker, Irene Lilienheim Angelico, made a video in which she explores her condition as a daughter of victim-survivors, beginning with her becoming conscious of her condition and culminating with the making of the video; there are interviews with other children of victim-survivors, a trip to Israel in 1981 for the first of several meetings, a trip to Germany, where both her parents were born, and a visit to Dachau, where her father was a prisoner. There are also interviews with children of perpetrators; in one of these interviews, a son of a Nazi officer who was active in the camp at Birkenau camp tells us:

For you, this quest, this investigation, unites you and your parents in the past, you reconstruct family continuity. For us it is the exact opposite, to know

the things that my father did distances me from him, I cannot reconcile the image I have of the man I love so much with the monster he was during the war, it is a rift that cannot be resolved.

It is clear that we are confronted by a conglomeration of people and situations that is impossible to catalogue as a whole. When we speak of the appeared, or their children, and all of these categories, we should also wonder about: who they were before, what their interests were, how old they were during the Shoah, where and how they lived through it, how many members of their family survived, if they witnessed the death of any family members, if they carried out any actions of which they might possibly be proud, or, conversely, if they can only recall humiliating situations... all in all, I would say that Danieli's proposal of only four categories is insufficient.

Nonetheless, there are certain characteristics that children of the appeared have in common.

## The Miracle

Nathalie Zajde, a French psychotherapist, says:

*Children of survivors generally have the sharp sensation of an accidental, almost mythological origin to their lives. They all believe that they could very well not have been born or that the constitution of their families could have been very different. Like all people who have lived through the emigration experience at an early age, the basis of their existence has not acquired the level of certainty familiar to a person for whom the external world corresponds to the interior world. In a recurrent manner, they imagine another family: they cannot avoid imagining how life might have been if the Shoah had never happened. They pore over aged photographs and dream of the faces of family members they never knew; they pronounce ancient names, Hebrew and Yiddish names, strangers from among the numerous phantasmagoric members of bygone families. The children of survivors born after the war are profoundly convinced that they are "miracles." They desperately search for meaning in their history, a reason for their existence. (Enfant de survivants. La transmission du traumatisme chez les enfants des Juifs survivantes de l'extermination nazie, Edition Odile Jacob, Paris, 1995)*

This notion of accidental birth is not always noted or expressed in those words, but it is supported by the solid proof of the Shoah. Just as the appeared generally attribute their survival to chance and continue to this day wondering about how and why, it is a logical consequence that their children also feel that their very existence was a matter of chance: if events had followed a more logical path, they would not have been born. Logic leads to two conclusions: one, that the Shoah should never have happened, in which case their parents would not be who they are and, two, that because the Shoah did, in fact, happen, their parents had no way to survive, their destiny, given the circumstances, was sure death. In neither of these cases would we, the children, be here today.

In broad terms, of course, this sentiment might be felt by all humanity. Most everyone will recognize that, in a way, there is something random about their having been

born. If we were to consider the thousands of alternatives that led up to the birth of any one of us, the cumulus of accidents and coincidences that finally converged on our individual lives so that we could be who we are today. But this sentiment that is common to all of us acquires a malignant character, a toxic nature if you wish, for children of the appeared. Chance occurrences in the lives of the average person are the chances of life, foreseeable in a sense, that are part of the normal flow of life. The experience of the Jews during the Shoah was a profound alteration in the normal flow of life, a radical subversion of the norms of social and family co-habitation, a “gap” in the existential logic, something irrational and without a name. For children of the appeared, the idea of what “could have been” acquires a sinister and prohibited aura, the thought itself carries the threat of reviving horrific ghosts.

## Some common characteristics of the second generation

Apart from Dina Wardi’s apt metaphor to unify us and gives us purpose, “memorial candles,” there are not many common characteristics to be found among us, the children of the appeared. There are many differences. We seem to follow similar parameters to those followed by our parents who never actually formed a social “collective” of so-called survivors. Still, that is how they were seen by the rest of the community, especially at the start of the immigration. Nonetheless, little by little, thanks in large part to the efforts they made to lead normal lives, to live like everyone else, they began to forget about their condition.

Nor did they want to identify themselves, to see themselves as victim-survivors, such that the subject was not central to social engagements; except when they were with other victim-survivors, there was a prevailing decision to remain silent, to pretend to have forgotten.

They entered social groups in pursuit of specific professional interests, communities of shared origin (from the same village, the same country), political ideologies, socio-economic levels. Among the appeared there emerged a myriad of differences, personal differences of origin, class, interests, all of which prevented the formation of a social collective. The condition of being a victim-survivor was simply insufficient.

Perhaps it is difficult for us also, the children, to establish a social collective. Our pertinence to this group, “children of victim-survivors,” albeit concrete, does not seem sufficient to dissolve the multitude of individual differences among us (cultural, social, economic, ideological, political, etc.). Nonetheless, we have been able to identify some points of concurrence in the observable data, some of which, especially the first, correspond to all immigrants.

*Countries and languages.* The majority of the appeared came from central Europe, from what was then Poland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Romania and, to a lesser degree, France, Belgium, Italy, Yugoslavia and others. For the vast majority, then, Yiddish was one of the languages the families spoke at home, although

many families spoke the language of the origin country (due to the wave of secularization imposed on Jewish communities in Central Europe between the two world wars particularly in Poland, Hungary and Germany). In other homes, in the homes of our schoolmates, the language of the host country was spoken.

Many of us have been the linguistic link between our parents and this new place.

Translators, interpreters, adapters to a new reality, couriers of a culture.

Eva Hoffman, a Polish writer born in 1946 and daughter of victim-survivors, immigrated with her family to Canada in 1959. Her lucid and stirring book relates her emergence from a deep culture shock and what she learned from it. Here, on page 120, she says:

*For my birthday, Penny gives me a diary, complete with a little lock and key to keep what I write from the eye of all intruders. It is that little lock –the visible symbol of the privacy in which the diary is meant to exist- that creates my dilemma. If I am indeed to write something entirely for myself, in what language do I write? Several times, I open the diary and close it again. I can't decide. Writing in Polish at this point would be a little like resorting to Latin or ancient Greek –an eccentric thing to do in a diary, in which you're supposed to set down your most immediate experiences and unpremeditated thoughts in the most unmediated language. Polish is becoming a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past. But writing for nobody's eyes in English? That's like doing a school exercise, or performing in front of yourself, a slightly perverse act of self-voyeurism.*

*Because I have to choose something, I finally choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self. As a result, the diary becomes surely one of the more impersonal exercises of that sort produced by an adolescent girl. These are no sentimental effusions of rejected love, eruptions of familial anger, or consoling broodings about death. English is not the language of such emotions. Instead, I set down my reflections on the ugliness of wrestling; on the elegance of Mozart, and on how Dostoyevsky puts me in mind of El Greco. I write down thoughts. I Write.*

*There is a certain pathos to this naïve snobbery, for the diary is an earnest attempt to create a part of my persona that I imagine I would have grown into in Polish. In the solitude of this most private act, I write, in my public language, in order to update what might have been my other self. The diary is about me and not about me at all. But on one level, it allows me to make the first jump. I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self. Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self –my English self- becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives. It exists mores easily in the abstract sphere of thoughts and observations than in the world. For a while, this impersonal self, this cultural negative capability, becomes the truest thing about me. When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing –an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. This language is beginning to invent another me. However, I discover something odd. It seems that when I write (or, for that matter, think) in English, I am unable to use the word "I". I*

*do not go so far as the schizophrenic “she” –but I am driven, as by a compulsion, to the double, the siamese-twin you”. ( p120-1)*

Our parents could scarcely share in our schooling. They could not help us with our homework or even be sure that we had done it well. They did not know anything about local History heroes (like, in Argentina, Sarmiento, San Martín or Belgrano) and they learned the national anthem along with their children but, even that, only with great difficulty, hardly understanding the speeches the Principal gave at patriotic assemblies. For some of us, it was embarrassing to have foreign parents, for others, it was something to boast about. No one was indifferent about it.

- *The food.* Not only in language but also in other areas were there differences that set our families apart, such as in music and food. Although everyone brought with them recipes from their countries of origin, there was a shared lack of knowledge concerning the foods of this new land. In our homes, initially at least, we did not buy such things as *dulce de batata* (candied sweet potato), *dulce de membrillo* (candied quince), *dulce de leche* (a kind of caramel syrup), nor did we know the local way to prepare barbecue-style beef, sausages, and organ meats; we didn't drink *mate* tea, prepare *empanadas* or eat shellfish. Many of us remember the ceremony of drinking tea in a glass with a lump of sugar or a candy under the tongue and the commentaries our mothers would make, marveling over the sundry meats, fish, vegetables and fruits displayed in the markets.

*Which was the Homeland?* There was (is?) a certain sense of statelessness, or of pertaining to more than one country, which, in the end was all the same thing.

Many of the appeared renounced their birthplace, their village or city of origin. They denied having come from that place. Nonetheless, their memories, their nostalgia, the images that leapt to mind, whether summoned or not, all were linked to that other land.

Later came nationalization in the new country, Argentine citizenship, the procedures, witnesses, notaries public, lawyers, hearings and, finally, the Argentine national document and passport which replaced temporary papers stamped “special for foreigners.”

There was always the possibility of soliciting Israeli citizenship simply by deciding to live in Israel, thanks to the “Law of Return.”

Which was the homeland? Which place was considered home? How could this place be reconciled with history, with the memories, with the experiences, with all that determines the sentiment we call “homeland?” This was a common retort of the anti-Semites: “Go to Israel.” Nonetheless, for many, even when the existence of the State of Israel was recognized as essential, it still wasn't part of their experience to call Israel their homeland, particularly without knowing for certain what this term meant: was it their country of origin? Was it Argentina? Was it Israel? Did it have to be one or another? Could it be one and another?

*Previous life.* Many of us know very little about our parents' and their families' lives prior to their immigration; the education and activities of our grandparents, names of members of the family, birth dates, distant relatives, mysterious family ties. For many, it has never been clear how the family used to be, how many there were, what their names were, where they lived, the different generations, the good times and the bad. The life that preceded the gap tends to remain cloaked in a kind of darkness with actors who evade the light, who can not be distinguished or differentiated. Some of our mothers and fathers had

other families before the Shoah, another wife or husband, other children; some shared this knowledge with their families after the Shoah, others have carefully guarded the painful secret they believe it better not to remember. One consequence of all this, for example, has been that few of us know the medical history of our ancestors: diabetes, arthritis, alcoholism, cardiovascular diseases, arteriosclerosis, dementia, rheumatism, obesity, etc.

- *Photographs*. There can be found photographs of the past in few homes of the appeared. The majority were unable to keep such testimonies of what once was, of the people they once were, their families, their homes, their dreams, their childhood. Most of us have learned to live without those photographs of the past as if it were something natural, without asking questions, knowing without having been told that to ask about the lost photographs could only open wounds that might never close. Loose threads always dangled as if from the rafters of the past, working their way through the unchecked cracks of nostalgia and, then, something would be mentioned, a disparate fragment, loose often incomprehensible pieces of a puzzle. With neither photographs nor objects that spoke to us of the past, we grew accustomed to filling in these shadowy spaces with the ghosts of our imagination. The existence or absence of photographs, like all objects that one carries along through life, is just one element that differentiates us from other immigrants who, in general, are able to carry such things with them, “things” that speak to them, as well as to their descendants, of “that other time and place.”

*Yoel is about forty, the son of two survivor parents. His mother lost her husband and her two daughters and her entire extended family in the Holocaust. In most of the group sessions Yoel sat silent and closed. In one session he related the following in a flat, choked voice:*

*“In the picture album we had in our house since I was a child there were pictures of two little girls, about eight and ten years old, I think they were my mother’s children. I never asked her explicitly and she never told me anything. Forty years... Even now I’m not sure that I want to, or can, really talk to her about it... I don’t know anything, not their names or what happened to them. She never mentions them at all...” (Wardi. P. 101)*

*Caring*. In conversations with children of the appeared, the issue of responsibility for our parents often comes up. Not always recognized when we were children, today as adults we understand that we felt a certain need to care for our parents, to respect what we perceived as a tense fragility on their part that we weren’t supposed to disturb (this could very well be a characteristic specific to children of survivors of the Shoah). This care was provided by not asking questions, by not bringing up those topics that we knew to be sensitive and painful, by not pressuring them to open doors they had decided to keep shut, by not confronting them with sorrows, with those memories they had made such an effort to leave behind, with the losses they needed to forget in order to live again as human beings. We were unwitting accomplices in a game of amnesia.

Grossman says of Momik (page 18):

*.... and he’s the only one in the whole wide world who can do it, because who else can save Mama and Papa from their fears and silences and krechtes, and the curse, which was even worse after Grandfather Anshel turned up and*

*made them remember all the things they were trying so hard to forget and not tell anyone.*

*...and suddenly Momik felt strangely sad, and he got up and went over to old Grandfather, and hugged him tight, and felt how warm he was, like an oven, and Grandfather stopped talking to himself, and for maybe half a minute he was quiet, and kept his face and hands still, and sort of listened to what was going on inside, but he could never stop talking for very long.*

In addition, a form of caring could involve the idea that our parents depended on us to somehow provide restitution for their losses. I defer again to the words Grossman composes for Momik (pages 23-24):

*... Momik has to use imaginary things and hints and hunches and the talking that stops the minute he walks into the room, that's how it was when Mama and Papa sat talking with Idka and Shimmik about the compensation money from Germany, and Papa said angrili, Take a man like me, for instance, who lost a child Over There, which is why Momik isn't so sure it's only imaginary, and sometimes when he's really feeling low, it makes him so happy just to think how glad they'll be the day they can finally tell Mama and Papa that he's the boy they gave away to the hunter, it will be exactly like Joseph and his brothers. But sometimes he imagines it a different way, that he's the boy who lost his twin brother, because Momik has this feeling that he used to have a Siamese twin, and when they were born, they were cut in two like in Believe It or Not: "300 astonishing cases that shook the world", and maybe someday they'll meet and be joined together again (if they want).*

Another form of caring was the effort we made to respect the unspoken expectation that we should be normal and happy, just like all the other children, proof that the attempt at returning to normal life had been successful, that this time they had done things well, that they needed not accuse themselves of anything nor seek forgiveness.

Thus David Grossman describes the sentiments of the children:

*Sometimes they come into the room at night and stand next to his bed. They just want to take one last look at him before they start with the nightmares. That's when Momik strains every muscle to look as if he's asleep, to look like a healthy, happy boy, just as cheerful as he can be, always smiling, even in his sleep, ai-li-liu-luli, we have the most hilarious dreams around here, and sometimes he has a really Einsteiny idea, like when he pretends to be talking in his sleep and says, Kick it to me, Joe, we're going to win this game Danny, and thinks like that to make them happy and once on a really horrible day when grandfather wanted to go outside after supper and they have had to lock him up in this room and he started hollering and Mama cried, well, that horrible day Momik pretended to be asleep and he sang then the national anthem and got so carried away he wet his bed and all to make them understand they didn't have to get so upset, they didn't have to waste their fears on him or anything, they ought to be saving their strength for the really important things like supper, and their dreams and all the silences, and then*

*just as he was finally falling asleep he heard as if in the distance or maybe he was dreaming already, Hanna Zeitrin calling God to come already, and also the quiet yowling of the cat who was going crazy in the cellar, and Momik promised to try even harder from now on. (p.51)*

I believe that the following issues go beyond the common experience of immigrants and describe essential aspects of our lives as children of victim-survivors of the Shoah.

- *Guilt*. During our childhood, there was a vague sensation, which today we call guilt, that things were not quite right, that our parents had suffered something terrible, that they had lived through unmentionable experiences, that they had been submitted to privations that went beyond what was humanly tolerable or imaginable. What were insignificant commentaries in other families could inspire mute terror in our's. "Don't leave food on your plate, you have no idea what hunger really is," were words that raised the lids on Pandora's boxes that few of us were inclined to peer into but which, nonetheless, inspired feelings of guilt due to abundance, due to living well, as if we were thus indebted to someone for something. "What are you complaining about? You have everything!" were comments that left us paralyzed: to complain, to want, were sentiments that were prohibited to us. We were supposed to be content, to eat everything, to be excellent students, to be healthy and, above all, not to cause problems and to be thankful at all times for the gift of life, of having our parents near us, our beds, a roof over our heads, food and clothing.

In the testimony of Deborah Schwartz, daughter of survivors, told to Helen Epstein, she says:

*When I did something bad, my mother would say, "How can you dare not respect me? How can you talk back? I wish I had my mother here". Whenever she reprimanded us, she brought it up to give extra force to what she was saying, to impress it upon us. And you know something –it made an impression on me. What can you answer? There's nothing to say. If I wanted to spend the night at a girl friend's house and my mother didn't want me to, or if I wanted to go to the movies and she said no, I felt I had no right to object. The degree of your suffering has no relation to the degree of suffering that she experienced. I don't think she did it to make me feel guilty. I think she really believed: "How can you consider this thing so important that you're willing to talk back to me?" you know?*

*I knew. Of course I knew. Almost every child of survivors I had spoken to had described the same pattern of behavior that was superimposed on family arguments. Whether the dispute concerned dinner, new shoes, a sleepover date, college, marriage or travel, talk would shift from the question at hand and become a question of relative suffering. "How can you cause me pain?" our parents asked, implicitly or explicitly. "How can you add to our suffering?" Some children of survivors I spoke with were simply baffled by this logic. "I didn't know what to think" one young doctor told me. "I mean, I hadn't done anything to them. I wasn't a German". Other children responded with an anger that grew until they could barely talk to their parents. "It was emotional blackmail –pure and simple", said a young dance company manager. "Everything they did, their bad temper, their nerves, their judgments – everything was justifiable because of the war. I was always accused of being*

*ungrateful. I always felt that they wanted me to feel guilty and I refused to. Why should I feel guilty or ungrateful?" (p. 309-310)*

- *The forbidden questions.* We asked and wondered about questions, sometimes in a torturous and obsessive way. Questions about the experience itself, what was it like, the hunger, the fear, the loneliness, the absences, the losses, the injustice, the helplessness. Some of us used these painful experiences, the suffering we heard about, to imagine that we too had to endure suffering in similar ways, that we too had to suffer a little. Others dreamed of revenge, vindication, getting back at the Nazis, at the German people in general, getting back at the Polish, the Ukrainians, the French, those who had brutalized our parents, those who had stolen, humiliated and caused shame. We knew of the atrocious, unbearable hunger and thirst, the extreme shortages, descriptions that were sometimes incoherent and lacking in specific details of chronology and geography but were nonetheless unfailingly sinister. Camps, hiding places, death, persecution, change, displacement, habitually confusing and troubling information: what was it like?

When?

Where?

For how long?

With whom?

What did they do to you?

What did you do?

And the cold?

And the fear?

Did you steal?

Did you kill?

Did you lie?

Didn't you say anything?

Was there anything worse?

- *The geography.* Questions of places, movements and locations were not always clear. A large part of the area from which the appeared originated underwent successive geopolitical negotiations among the hegemonic states (Russia, Germany, Austria). At a given moment, a certain population could have been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, then Poland, then Germany, then Russia, and then, finally, the Ukraine. When the appeared refer to their homes and other places, according to the period they are speaking about, the name of the country may change. This can generate any number of confusions such that, often, we are not sure where the town or city referred to was located. It is also true that when our parents were children, when they went to public school (those that did), they may not have been very sure themselves of where in the world they were nor where the rest of the world lay. The world tended to have more complex borders at that time.

The events lived through during the Shoah, the relocations, the traumatic moments, even the events following liberation and the camps for displaced persons, the searching and wandering, have led to remembered itineraries that are not very clear in the minds of the children. Nor is the often torturous route followed by our parents toward their eventual destinations: the visas they obtained, bought or negotiated, the passages booked via Paraguay or Bolivia, because Argentina did not admit Jews, their illegal status for the first few years, the uncertainty... Many of us consider the date of entrance into Argentina as a

second birth of the family, the first registered chronological piece of data, documented, demonstrable and part of our memories. At that moment, our official history began.

- *The distribution of roles among siblings.* Among the children of the appeared that we have approached, that we have observed and wondered about, there seems to be a curious polarity between siblings. While one sibling takes charge, shouldering the weight of the questions, the interest, the need to know and to investigate, the other sibling, almost invariably, remains on the fringe, disinterested sometimes to the point of incomprehension or rejection. We do not know why this happens in this way, it is still a subject for study without explanation. We have considered a number of hypotheses. Often, it is the stronger of the siblings that takes charge, and the weaker remains free of the burden. The more sensitive assumes the weight of the past and leaves the other to look toward the future. The elder sibling is heir to maintaining family tradition, although sometimes this role falls to the younger. When the siblings are male and female, it is usually the sister that engages with the history of the parents. It has been suggested that there is a dramatic stage set in the case of the appeared, with the two children as actors: one searching the past, striving to understand, to know, to accept, to take charge, while the other shuts his eyes, looking to the future, trying to forget the past, as if indifferent to what happened or, perhaps, as if the past never happened. We know that, in order to go on living, the appeared themselves had to play this type of pendular game between two positions, that they grew increasingly quiet about the past, burying and relegating to the rear of the shoe the tiny stone that accompanies their ambling through life.

Are these roles assigned? We don't know.

Dina Wardi says (page 32):

*Since one of the children in the family has accepted the role of "memorial candle" upon himself, his siblings are liberated, at least on a conscious level, from the emotional burden weighing down the family from the period of traumatization during the Holocaust. This finding is similar to those of Meissner (1970) and others, who investigated problem families and their division of roles. The behavior patterns created in such families between the parents and the scapegoated child are quite different from those between the parents and their other children. Thus the other children are less involved in the family problem and are not so caught up in the emotional thicket as to be unable to separate themselves from the intensive dependency in the mother-father-child triangle.*

- *Family Relatives.* A common circumstance for children of the appeared is the nearly total absence of blood relatives. Such words as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins had very little relation to our daily reality. Occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, births, deaths and other events that usually bring relatives together, found our families alone. These family "vacancies" were often filled by other *grine*, other immigrants and appeared persons, and this new family would unite around the common desire to leave the horror behind.

This lack of blood relatives was like a concrete presence. For long years many of our parents searched for their relatives. Letters to the Red Cross, insistent questions posed to other appeared persons, constant searching constituted the context of our childhood. For

many of us, the reunion of our parents with lost relatives is an indelible and troubling memory. Brothers, cousins, mothers, fathers, children, nieces, nephews and friends. Many continue their search even to this day. Fifty years later there are still occasional reunions. The hope, our hope, is still open and alive.

- *Judaism*. In this context, the appeared followed divergent paths. Some reestablished community-living while others rejected it. For the former, this signified active community participation while, for the latter, this implied militant denial. Some continued to “believe,” others became irrevocably agnostic and skeptical. Some insisted upon their children’s complete integration into the local community, in secular schools well-removed from anything Jewish. This, in fact, generated problems during the period of Perón due to a practice of discriminating between Jews and Christians in the school systems: the Christians had “religion” classes and the Jews had to attend “morality” classes. As much as they might have wished, even here they could not be equal to the rest, they were obliged to choose an attitude: would they declare themselves to be Jews or would they insist in their attempt at integration? And if they declared themselves as Jews, what would the consequences be? What would be better? What should they do?

*David, born in France in 1948, lived with a family that had lost all its extended family members during the Shoah and had retained none of the traditional Jewish rituals. He bitterly reproaches his family for not having passed on the language and, more generally, a richer, more defined Jewish culture and sense of identity. He feels excluded from knowledge that has remained locked away in the preceding generation.*

*“That is to say, I have vindicated myself as a Jew. I converted. On March 29, 1985, I was in the Rivoli-Beaubourg at the Jewish Film Festival; the bomb-attack that took place led to my true conversion. I was vindicated as a Jew and yet I could not bring myself to display it like a tattoo on my forehead. After that bomb-attack, I went to see my therapist and I could not lie down on the divan, I insisted that we remain face-to-face and only then did I burst into tears and feel prepared to wear the star of David on my forehead or anywhere else.”*

*For many children of survivors, Jewish identity is a fragile identity that knows no other sustenance than Anti-semitism and struggle (Nathalie Zajde, p. 24 and 32).*

- *The names*. Just as some people in the Jewish community chose a more active militancy and others did not, in the choice of names some followed in the tradition of the *ashkenazi* (20), opting for the names of deceased ancestors; in of our families, this also included the names of children, brothers and sisters, not just parents or grandparents. Many among us, through our names, have brought back to life lost loved ones, some never even properly mourned for.

Y. Gampel says:

*A child does not choose his name, nor his parents, nor his body. When he enters the world he finds a place of love or of hate, he is a result of longing or a mistake, he is given space or live or he fills a vacuum.*

*Our given name accompanies us. It constitutes our human essence. It is enough to utter a few phonemes, to say a few syllables, almost without meaning, and their mere utterance arouses love or hate, happy or sad memories, confusion or clarity –all related to the person bearing this name.*

*Y. Gampel: Aspects of intergenerational transmission, Sihot, 2, 27-31, cited by Dina Wardi, op.cit, p. 97)*

Momik was given various names:

*His full name, it should be mentioned, was Sholomo Efraim Neuman, in So-and-so's and So-and-so's memory. They'd have liked to give him a hundred names. Grandma Henny did it all the time. She would call him Mordechai Leibele and Shepsele and Mendel and Anshel and Shulem and Chumak and Sholomo Haim, and that's how Momik got to know who they all were, Mendel who run off to Russia to be a communist nebuch, and disappeared, and Shulam the iddishist who sailed for America and the ship sank, .....and little Anshel, the delicate one, who wondered how he would ever get through the winter, .... there he sits in his sailor suit, with his hair parted in the middle looking so serious with his big eyeglasses; Goodness me, Grandma klapped her hands, you look just like him. She told him all about them long long ago, in the days when she could still remember and they thought he was too young to understand, but once when Mama saw that his eyes weren't staring blankly anymore she told Grandma Henny to stop right away, and she also hid the book with the amazing pictures (she probably sent it to aunt Idka). And now Momik is trying as hard as he can to remember what was in the pictures and the stories.*

Sometimes the names were the same, more often they were similar but more appropriate to the new reality. Perhaps the attempt to disguise Jewish origins was not always deliberate, but often *aggionamento*, or updating of names revealed a form of *dejewification* (Leah might become Liliana, Esther becomes Estela, Abraham becomes Alberto, Samuel becomes Manuel). In other families, in contrast, the choice of names for the children witnessed a decision to begin a new life, to definitively leave the past behind, to begin again; names were selected that were new to the families and that evoked memories of no one.

In the selection of our names, we see displayed the two options with respect to attitudes toward the past: memory and testimony, when we have been given the name of a dead relative; void and absence of history, when the name is new.

- *Hatred, paranoia and anti-Semitism*. We were constantly reminded of the latent but ever present anti-Semitism among non-Jews, which generated a more or less evident air of paranoia, often opposed by the children who felt that the fears and susceptibilities of our parents were exaggerated. They never missed an opportunity to remind us that “there” it had been the same way at first, that often one didn't notice but whenever the situation permitted, those who had supposedly been friends, neighbors, employees, patrons, colleagues, would denounce, betray, rob and appropriate possessions and homes. Their hatred toward these people, Polish and Ukrainians in general, seemed greater than the

hatred they felt towards the Nazis, perhaps because it was more personal. We did not wholly give credit to the caution our parents exercised in dealing with the gentiles around us. Argentine anti-Semitism is more hypocritical compared to how it was in Central Europe, propriety does not permit its public display, it is kept guarded and only shared among equals. And it exerts an unchecked influence in the form of obstacles set up to protect the “purity” of the group, a certain “style of life” entailing country clubs, summer resorts, institutions, etc.)

### **Psychotherapy.**

The children of the appeared, as a subject, has been approached in many different ways. There are those who propose that psychotherapy is the best approach for resolving the problems suffered; there are also those who say that group encounters are sufficient, as a form of workshop or reflection group. Certainly, psychotherapy has always been applied in group form and there is general agreement that establishing a sense of fellowship, or siblinghood, is the most conducive approach for obtaining fruitful results.

*Peer-groups or other group membership afford an opportunity to return to the system of belonging, to set the mechanisms of affiliation into motion, to bring out the ethnic aspect of the self and thus to reinsert the person into a coherent system of thought and words regarding the self.*

*... The group is a setting for a unique and rich interchange. Its complexity and multiplicity permits an extraordinarily interactive and intrapsychic dynamic.*

*... Overall, it is through the relationship established within the group, between the individual and the group of pertinence, that the individual is able to transform himself, to move forward and reenter a logical system of signification, to inhabit this system and use it to give meaning to his psychological sufferings, his personal drama. (Zajde, pages 162-3).*

This type of clinical work and experience has mostly been carried out in the United States and Israel, in addition to the aforementioned work by Nathalie Zadjé of France. This makes sense given that these are the countries in which there are the greatest numbers of appeared and their children.

### **Dina Wardi's Therapy.**

The most solid conceptualization of the psychotherapeutic approach is that of Dina Wardi in her aforementioned work, “Memorial Candles.” Born in Italy, she carries out her work in Israel. Since 1973, she has worked intensely with children of victim-survivors of the Shoah, in both individual as well as group settings.

Her clinical work has passed through various stages, pursuant to the progress of her patients.

1) In the beginning, she says that, like their parents, the children find themselves unable to speak about their feelings or to openly express them. Many of the first sessions are spent in silence and they assume a passive condition. They rarely speak spontaneously, answering only direct questions. The mood of the group is tense, hostile and laden with suspicion. A common theme that comes up in the first sessions is that of death. The

emergence of this theme is usually related to a current event in participants' lives (a funeral, an accident, an operation) and it is contradicted by a strong need to deny the theme in their own lives.

In this initial stage, the members of the group are confused and frequently mix their internal and external experiences, reality with fantasy, the past with the present. It would appear as if they were dramatizing in the group the situation or mood experienced in the family setting.

Only after many months can they share and discuss with the group their responses toward death in their individual histories, the emotions that have lain hidden for long years, that have been kept secret.

2) At this point, the members of the group have generally spoken about some of their parents' experiences during the Shoah and, in the cases of both the children of "victims" and the children of "fighters," they confront the same conflict between the need to identify with their humiliated parent and the rage and hostility they feel towards him or her. This conflict, which has existed since childhood, appears at this stage together with feelings of shame and anguish. Given that they still cannot establish the connection between the significance of the effects of the traumas suffered by their parents in the Shoah, and the feelings and images that they themselves have carried with them since childhood, they cannot tolerate the degree and intensity of emotion that they are experiencing in the group and thus they prefer to persist in their denial of it.

3) The feeling of emotional isolation that characterized previous states now gives way to the expression of deep and strong emotions. The process of reconstructing identity here is central and is based on three phases: the phase of identification with the parents, the phase of pertinence to the family and community continuum, and the phase of liberation from assigned roles. Coldness and distance are transformed into warmth and emotional exchanges, with expressions of support, understanding, closeness and identification. They can now confront feelings of pain that were suppressed for so long, and they can begin the process of mourning that their parents were unable to fulfill. They begin to feel towards their dead relatives as if they had been real, they imagine them as they were when they were alive, with physical bodies, with hopes, fears, as part of the family continuum. At the same time, the pain of their deaths becomes a new kind of pain, the pain of mourning.

Wardi proposes specific themes that she observes as common to all children of the appeared:

- identification with death, a theme that clearly appears in the first stage of psychotherapy.
- identification with the aggressor, as the counterpart to the attitude of submission and acceptance experienced as humiliation during the Shoah; once again, I refer to Grossman's Momik for assistance:

*And to tell the truth, there are days when Momik sits in the cellar half awake and half asleep and he envies the Beast. Yes, he envies it for being so strong that it never suffers from pity, and that it can sleep soundly at night even after all those things it did, and that it even seems to enjoy being cruel...*

- problems of self-esteem that the children perceive in their parents and assume as their own, feelings of shame and suspicion that have been part of their lives up

to the present and are now held up for re-examination to determine the extent to which they have threatened their own self-esteem; these are the questions that are most disturbing and which remain difficult to formulate: How did my parents manage to survive? Did they have to pay a price to the Nazis? What was the price? Do they think about their dead family members? Do they feel guilty about what happened? Were they cowards or exposed to great danger? There are two central themes that gnaw at the children of the appeared: on one hand, pain, torture and humiliation, and on the other hand, sexuality.

- sexual identity, this issue involves questions by the children with respect to the difficulty they experience in assuming a sexual identity. We know that there were victim-survivors who were submitted to sexual abuse and humiliation as well as bearing witness to it. If the parents were adolescents during the Shoah, the questions often revolve around the process of sexual maturation, of how sexual desire was channeled, with whom and where. There are also questions regarding whether sexuality was used in some way as payment in return for survival. One characteristic described by Wardi is the difficulty children of survivors have in integrating affective relationships involving commitments, the avoidance of intimacy and emotional closeness.

*The search for history.* At this stage, when the “memorial candle” process of liberation is well underway, the experience of the parents during the Shoah acquires the characteristics of real events, as subjects begin to ask questions that were previously unthinkable. What happened exactly? What was life in the camps like? Where was my mother on this particular day? How did my grandmother and grandfather die? Existing taboos begin to be broken down, speech becomes possible. They begin to include their siblings in conversations, to include those who had been excluded from the “memorial candles,” such that these steps begin to pave the way for approaches, perhaps the first approaches ever, between family members. Wardi says that it is not unusual for the process of removing family roles to conclude in a search for family roots.

*The encounter with the parents’ roots, with the places their families had lived in for generations, whether it occurs in reality or only in the imagination, may well calm the souls of the survivors’ children at this stage and fill up the empty spaces in their inner world. During the course of therapy the “memorial candles” often compare themselves to uprooted trees. This association is undoubtedly a direct result of their having grown up without a family history. Now the hearts are filled with the need to find the missing links in the family chain. The journey to the past, if it fits the emotional needs of the survivors’ children, may free them of stress and help them consolidate and integrate their identity. (p. 237)*

### **Second-generation of survivors groups**

There have been various attempts at forming groups in recent years. Some of these groups had only a few meetings, others persisted for longer periods of time. Among the

latter is the group we formed in 1995 as part of the Holocaust Memory Foundation in Buenos Aires. In addition to offering a space for brother- and sisterhood for other children of survivors, we have attempted to confront other issues of concern. In fact, many of the issues that have brought me to these current reflections have a direct relation to conversations and workshops carried out in the Foundation. Some of these workshops were the following.

- "Constructing our testimonies"
- "What we were told by our parents"
- "Why it is so difficult to speak about the Shoah"
- "Breaking the silence"
- "Meeting with survivors: What we could not ask, what we could tell"

### **International Meetings**

Periodically, meetings for victim-survivors of the Shoah and their descendents are organized. In all of them, similar events will take place. There are the kinds of activities that are common to all such meetings, and then there are some that are more specific to distinct subgroups (victim-survivors, children of victim-survivors, and *Kindertransport*, that is, those who were among the thousands of children who were sent out of Germany to England). I participated in a meeting in October, 1996 in New Jersey. I think it could be interesting to share a list of the topics that came up because they appeared spontaneously and dependent upon the participants. The victim-survivors who were present were necessarily those who had been children during the Shoah, that is, between 60 and 70 years old; there were very few over 70.

The topics open to all participants were:

- "Our parents..." (as shown, with ellipsis)
- "Let's share the ways we learned to heal our pain"
- "Child survivors growing older"
- "Conversation between the generations"
- "What I have learned from my survivor partner/parent"
- "Intermarriages in families of child survivors"
- "Holocaust education"
- "Creating images with the sound of music"

The workshops for survivors were:

- "What we do and don't remember" (subdivided according to age)
- "After the war, did it all end?"
- "Surviving under Christian cover"
- "facing today with yesterday's baggage"
- "Art workshop"

The workshops for children of survivors were:

- ""Whose pain am I feeling?"
- "Freeing myself from guilt, pain, etc."
- "Struggling with intimacy in relationships"
- "My parents are survivors, now I am a parent too"
- "Separating from and dealing with our aging parents"
- "Jewish identity and continuity as the second generation"

When the personal stories began, all with enormous differences among them, we were nonetheless firmly and increasingly aware of an essential brother- and sisterhood, of an invisible bond, one that we had all been longing for. From the beginning and all through the various activities, we discovered differences and similarities among us that we are now learning to recognize in ourselves in Buenos Aires.

Our parents' ages, our ages, and the resulting differences between us.

In these international meetings, differences and similarities were apparent among the participants that are similar to those we encounter in our own environment.

*The differences.* Those who reaffirmed their Judaism and those who denied or rejected it. Serious differences became apparent between the North Americans and Canadians, who were the majority, and the others: Europeans, Latin Americans and, especially, those who lived in countries of the former Soviet Union. The Jewish communities in North America and Canada have enjoyed almost complete freedom of development and have solidly and firmly established themselves; the victim-survivors who settled down in the heart of these communities have had very different experiences from those of us who settled in Argentina, Greece or France, places in which one was not Jewish in such an open and exposed manner. The most extreme pole in this respect was represented by those who were from countries of the former Soviet Union, where they had to conceal their pertinence to the Jewish community and today, as they told us, they are thirsty for knowledge of what it is to be Jewish, what the traditions are and what the history is.

Those who were in the camps, those who hid, those who changed their identity, the children of mixed marriages, the children of non-Jews who were in camps or who suffered the same horrors and said that only among Jews did they feel "among family," that is, among the only people who could understand.

The stories of the migrations, the differences, depending on whether one lived in a Jewish neighborhood or not, involving social, scholastic and family pressures, submitting to them or rejecting them outright.

The parents who spoke –always in a limited, fragmentary and breaking manner – and those who remained silent. Those who spoke of their childhood and those who never mentioned it. Those who spoke of the years of the Shoah and those who appeared to have begun new lives after their immigration to the new country. Those who kept photographs, those who did not even have that.

The children who were given names of the dead, those who were given new names, those who have the old names but don't know to whom they correspond. The old surnames, the new surnames.

Those who knew they were Jews, those who discovered it only when they were adults.

*The similarities.* We all share the same sensation of responsibility, of carrying a message and, for some, of a certain doubt. Doubt about one's lost family members, about the suffering of one's parents, about not having fulfilled their expectations. The suffering of the parents, the impossibility of asking concrete questions.

Grossman says:

*...Momik knew Bella came from Over There, a place you weren't supposed to talk about too much, only think about in your heart and sigh with a drawn-out krechtz, oyyyy, the way they always do, but Bella is different from the others somehow and Momik heard some really important things from her about it, and even though she wasn't supposed to reveal any secrets, she did drop hints about her parents' home Over There, and it was from her that Momik first heard about the Nazi Beast.*

*The truth is, in the beginning Momik thought Bella meant some imaginary monster or a huge dinosaur that once lived in the world which everyone was afraid of now. But he didn't dare ask anyone who or what. (p.13)*

The imagination, the repeated and creative attempts to suffer as they did, to try to understand in flesh and blood how it was. Some said that they felt a need to be pardoned for the good life they led, others said they needed to suffer in order to identify with their parents, in order to have the right to belong to the family. One member of the group, a recognized and successful Canadian publicist, told the following story, staring at the floor:

*...The only thing my dad used to tell me about, was hunger. There are some things that I don't know very well. I don't know, for instance, in which places he had been before his arrival to the camp, but I do know as if it had happened to me, each and every one of his hunger experiences. "Eat it all", he used to say, and I had to fight with my mom so that she would not serve me a full plate. And I will tell you something that nobody knows, not even my wife: in my current house, it is me who's in charge of taking out the garbage every night, and when I go outside with the bag I cannot resist myself and I open it to see if there is food... and if I find some, I eat it up.*

The journalist, Helen Epstein, tells of similar experiences:

*I had been told from the time I was small that I and the rest of the children I grew up with had not the slightest idea of what suffering was. We knew it second-hand, my parents said, and when they looked at the lives my brothers and I led, they weren't even sure about that. We had almost everything we wanted; we seemed oblivious to the possibilities of hunger, loss or imprisonment. Our lives were easy, and while my parents worked hard to make them that way, they could not help but remind us by their very presence and attitudes, that we their children enjoyed opportunities that they had irrevocably lost.*

*Whenever I felt angry at my parents –for saying no, for embarrassing me, for any of the reasons children feel angry at their parents –I swallowed the feeling whole and pushed it down far away. How could I presume to be angry at them? They had enough to contend with.*

*....Like almost all of the children of survivors I had interviewed, I was put off by the insouciance of the middle-class society in which I lived.*

*.... I dreamed of finding ways to suffer, to confront, feel and vanquish pain. (255)*

A page on the Internet.

On the World Wide Web we have access to the page, "Children of Survivors," where it says:

*Welcome... My name is Joey Korn and I am honored to be maintaining the Children of Survivors section of the Cybrary. There are at least 250.000 children of survivors alive in America today, and another 300.000 in Israel. Most in America live in larger cities with higher concentrations of Jewish people. I live in a fairly small city, and my father was the only survivor in the area. My brother, my sister, and I are the only local children of survivors. I have long wanted to meet others, but distance separated us. The Internet changes all that. I am now hearing from other children of survivors from all over the world. We are getting older now and our roles in society are changing. Our parents, if they are still alive, are being prodded more than ever to talk about their experiences, some for the first time in their lives, due to the popularity of Schindler's List, Spielberg's "Survivors of the Shoah" project, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. This is their time. In keeping with the philosophy of the Cybrary, the Children of Survivors section will evolve through the participation of its visitors. We will have areas devoted to the issues that you feel are important. I look forward to hearing from you. Please feel free to make suggestions on the form at the bottom of the page, or email Joey at [JWKorn@aol.com](mailto:JWKorn@aol.com) if you'd like to contribute. We invite your participation; this is your Web page.*

## **In conclusion**

Hopefully, the topics mentioned above, the characteristics described, will be received in the way of a helpful hand extended to other children of survivor-victims who share some of these sufferings, questions and uncertainties. Nonetheless, there are many people to whom these questions may seem, if not distant, then, perhaps, of little interest. As mentioned by other people in this work, we don't know if what we have observed can be generalized. We don't know this because the people we have met and spoken to are children of the appeared who go to reflection groups, who approach other such children in order to share some of their experiences, who seek psychotherapy in order to focus on their condition as children of the appeared. There are many children of the appeared who have not been included. We don't know if that is because none of this is familiar to them, and has no correspondence to their experiences, or if they have decided that the topic does not concern them. I suppose there are some who have not approached others because they never had the opportunity. There will be some who fear disturbing sleeping monsters. Undoubtedly, we know something now about those who have spoken out, with whom we have interacted, those who have written and produced films. I would not say, then, that what has been said above is applicable to all children of the appeared.

All in all, and in spite of it all, we have grown up and here we are. We, the "memorial candles," are made of all this. The flame that we keep burning, like it or not, leads us on this mission that so many of us feel a part of.

*... an almost messianic mission stands out. To concretize the sense of mission, which is very common among “memorial candles” and constitutes part of the interaction between the survivors and their children, Hazan (1987) makes use of a metaphorical comparison with the Israelites who wandered in the desert for forty years. He compares the survivors to the parent generation of freed slaves, the generation that left Egypt and wandered for forty years in the desert, but did not reach the Promised Land. Their children, who were born and grew up in the desert, were indeed born free in the technical sense, but the task of true inner liberation remained on their shoulders.*

Again, the voice of Momik,

*Over There everyone is covered in a very thin layer of glass that keeps them motionless, and you can't touch them, and they're sort of alive but sort of not, and there's only one person in the whole world who can save them and that's Momik. Momik is almost like Dr Herzl, only different. He made a blue and white flag for Over There, and between the two blue stripes he drew an enormous drumstick tied to the back of a Super Mistère and below it he wrote the words 'If so you will, it is no fairy tale', but he knows he doesn't have the least idea yet about what he's supposed to do, and that kind of worries him.*  
(p50)

.....  
*Sometimes as Momik lies on his stomach in ambush, he sees the tall smokestack of the new building they just finished over on Mt. Herzl, which they call Yad Vashem, a funny sort of name, and he pretends it's a ship sailing by, full of illegal immigrants from Over There that nobody wants to take in, like in the days of the British mandate pshakrev, and he's going to have to rescue that ship somehow....* (p55)

The mission could also be the task of finding the words to enable communicating this experience of which we are still victims, this experience that shows that the consequences of an event with the magnitude of the Shoah continue for long after the apparent ending, that the exercise of absolute evil does not end with the signing of an armistice.

And, yet, we grew up, we became persons, we developed, many of us formed families, we have children – the so-called “third generation of the Shoah,” the grandchildren of the appeared. We have raised the flag of normality as our own. We are equal to all, so equal in fact that for a long time, many of us did not think, although we knew, that in our past there was something different, something pending, something that called for searches, questions, disinterment and answers.

Perhaps, today, the age of our children drives us along those rocky paths. We know that we cannot remove the stone that our parents still carry in their shoes. Some of us maintain the dream of a better world for our children and grandchildren, of a humanity with powerful anti-bodies to combat crime, wars, assassinations, injustices, cruelty, and in our

dream, our mission – ambitious? overblown? – we offer living testimony to the consequences, as witnesses.

Perhaps it is no more than an expression of desire, the result of the recent contact with this aspect of our identity. Perhaps much of what happens to us also happens to other people who have not lived these same experiences. Perhaps there is no such specificity as we imagine, nor is our suffering of such great enormity. We are in a moment of discovery, of awakening to a new consciousness. The passage of time, the work of others like us, researchers and historians, will perhaps add some degree of measure to these reflections, a greater dose of objectivity.

In this awakening, we the children of the appeared of the Shoah have, at least, the consolation of meeting together, of speaking about all of this, about what we have lived through as a painful inheritance of humiliation and shame, the sadness that we saw in the depths of our parents' eyes when they thought they were alone, the loneliness of those deeply embedded sufferings among which so many of us grew up.

All this calls out for words today, it calls for community, for brothers and sisters with whom to shed tears, to accept, to discover, to put things in their places and to go on living.

Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust. Conversations with sons and daughters of survivors*, Penguin Books, New York, 1979.  
Epstein, op.cit.

Grossman, *See Under: Love*, op.cit.

Published in *Psicologías Hoy*, Buenos Aires, Octubre 1993.

Yail Danieli (1980): *Families of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust: Some long and short term effects*, in N.Milgram (ed) *Psychological Stress and Adjustment in Time of War and Peace*, Washington DC, Hemisphere Publishing.

Dina Wardi, op.cit.

Raoul Hillberg: *Victims, perpetrators and bystanders*, 17<sup>th</sup> chapter: The Survivor.

Told by her personally to the author.

*Dark Lullabies*, 1994, directed by Irene Lilienheim Angelico and Abbey Jack Neidik, produced by DLI and Studio D, national Film Board of Canada

Zajde Nathalie: *Enfants de survivants. La transmission du traumatisme chez les enfants des Juifs survivantes de l'extermination nazie*, Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1995

Eva Hoffman: *Lost in Translation. A life in a new language*, Penguin Books, New York, 1989.

In Europe, especially in Poland, under the laws of "*jus sanguinis*," Jews were classified as one of the "national minorities," which included all people who, although they may have been born in Polish territory, had not opted explicitly for Polish nationality. It was not common for Jews to solicit Polish nationality; for various reasons, they remained a national minority, like other groups, such as the Ukrainians, Latvians, Bielorrussians, and Lithuanians. In saying, "we are not Polish," the reference is not so much to the reigning anti-Semitism, but to the legal status of Jews at the time. In addition, this was one of the arguments given by anti-Semites to show that Jews really hated the Polish.

Op.Cit.

Op.cit.

Op.cit.

Op.cit.

It remains to be determined how many children of the appeared, and how many Jews that kept their distance from the community and Judaism, were "converted" in Buenos Aires, similarly to David, after the attack on the Jewish Mutual Center, AMIA, on July 18, 1994.

Op.cit.

*Ashkenazy* (hebrew), from *Ashkenaz*, Germany, by extension Jews from Eastern Europe are referred to in this way. *Sephardim* (Jews from Spain) are those Jews that had to leave Spain in 1492 and lived afterwards in Bulgaria, Greece, Holland, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and some countries in the North of Africa.

Yolanda Gampel: *Aspects of Intergenerational Transmission*, *Sihot*, 2, 27-31, cited by Dina Wardi, op.cit, p.97

David Grossman, op.cit.

Nathalie Zajde, op.cit.

op.cit.

Dina Wardi, op.cit.

David Grossman, op.cit.

op.cit.

You can find now (year 2000) a lot of Web sites like this one as well as several mailing lists. If you are interested you can try, for instance, <http://www.shamash.org/> and review some hundreds of lists.

Y. Hazan: *The second generation of the Holocaust, a doubtful concept*, Sihot, 1, 104-8, cited by Dina Wardi, op.cit.

op.cit.

Metaphor borrowed from Eugenia Bekeris' video *The Secret*, Buenos Aires, 1995, based on the homonymous installation.

## Lessons of the Shoah

### **The difficulty in speaking about the Shoah.**

Guiding these reflections is the idea that they are an attempt to comprehend the difficulty involved in conducting a non-rhetorical consideration of the Shoah.

*The human aspect.* In all different circles and at all different levels we find reasons to avoid speaking about it, especially when there is a risk of bringing up some of the human aspects involved. It is much easier for conversation to revolve around aspects that are political, economic, geopolitical, ideological, statistical, whatever is farthest removed from the human experience of having lived through the Shoah. There is little interest in the human side of what occurred, as if that were not the way to tell History since that would be relying on the subjective view, of little interest when extracting general conclusions for the use of the rest of society. This line of reasoning, among others that I will refer to below, has brought about the invisibilization of victim-survivors for almost fifty years, they were here, but it was as if they weren't.

The Shoah was the murdered six million, the dead victims. About one million Jews managed to live but their survival did not seem important enough for them to be able to speak about it. Some tried, albeit with a certain intellectual transcendence, but they were not graced by open ears willing to hear their stories. Not long after the war:

*The survivor had no audience and frequently felt the isolation of someone who cannot be understood. Many memoirs were written, but not for large audiences. Elie Wiesel wrote his story for Jewish readers in Yiddish under the title, "And the World Was Silent." The book was published in Argentina and only later, reduced in size, was it read everywhere under the title, "Night". Primo Levi reports that his memoir was first published in an edition of twenty five hundred copies and that six hundred, on the remainder list, were drowned in a Florentine flood.*

It still wasn't the right time. Some two dozen years would have to pass before the voices of victim-survivors would find interested listeners.

Today, it is these same survivor victims who, with their oral and written testimonies, leave to us living material and additional proof, perhaps the most valuable and transcendent proof of all, of the disgrace to humanity that the horror of the Shoah represents. The victim-survivors speak to us of ingrown memories, of odors – especially bad ones – of dreams and nightmares, of unforgettable losses, of humiliations, of questions

that can never be answered, they live and have lived with memories of unendurable degradation that are equally unendurable to recall, and they have shown, at the same time, a mysterious capacity for recuperation and reconciliation – anguished, discontinuous, and threatening, but reconciliation all the same – of who they are now, with who they must have been in that other past that never seems to have completely ended.

Fortunately, the attitude of some sectors of society has been changing and today, these elderly people who were once so young are being called by some of the television programs, reports are appearing in the graphic media, memoirs are being published, they are being invited to schools and they are desperate to speak wherever there are listeners willing to listen, showing up with their backpack full of bitterness, pain and dignity.

*The danger of hearing what they have to say.* Today, there are listeners willing to listen. The expression of interest is auspicious but it still hasn't reached a point at which we can ask the audience for a response as to what it all reveals about human nature. The audience listens, calmly and comfortably, just so long as the discourse doesn't derail from "bad Nazis / we the victims." Today, people can and want to hear about atrocity and cruelty, sometimes just a dangerous indulgence in the exhibition of evil. But if the victim-survivors have the courage to tell anecdotes referring to uncomfortable and ambiguous situations, involving themselves or others, an electrifying uneasiness spreads through the audience. If the protagonist suggests having done something he now regrets, that he could not have avoided doing, he loses the automatic and calming classification of "innocent," "impotent," "blind lamb," thanks to which those who survived were forgiven. If the "victim" dares to expose his heart as he tells his story and to cast light into the dark corners of his fragile humanity, the public becomes ill-at-ease and prefers not to hear any more. The victim-survivors know this, they have suffered it repeatedly, and so they speak about the things they know people can listen to and perhaps digest without changing anything essential in their concept of human conduct or themselves.

The children of victim-survivors have also been a conditioned public requiring a certain kind of protection, as we saw in Part One, "Reasons for the Silence." This has brought about a flat, bi-dimensional approach to the experience of the parents, without the tri-dimensionality inherent to the conflict of conscience that was confronted by victim-survivors in ethical dilemmas during the Shoah.

*The uniqueness of the experience.* The knowledge we grew up with had a way of functioning as if separate from our lives, we didn't speak about it. We believed – both the appeared and their children – that our experience had been unique. Since we, children of survivors, didn't share information, experiences or questions with anyone, we absurdly believed that our experience was ours alone and, at the same time, that the experience of our upbringing could be generalized to all of the Shoah. Until we began to meet in groups, we all had fairly structured ideas of how things had been in that other time and place. Until then, the information had been neatly contained in sealed-off compartments. In fact, the children of parents who had been in the camps, knew next to nothing about others who had been partisans, or had gone into hiding, or had lived through the Shoah under false identities. For each of us, what our parents had lived through during the Shoah was *the* definitive Shoah.

The idea that our experience was unique prevented us from speaking to and learning from others like ourselves. Little by little, we began to absorb the notion that it was a common experience and then to gain a wider vision, enabling us to see deeper into the complexity of the topic.

The moment of confrontation with others like ourselves revealed the many faces of the Shoah. And in those faces, surprisingly, and in spite of so many differences, we always find something of ourselves. We never cease to see ourselves in the stories of others, especially when we recognize that many aspects of our childhood were repeated in the childhood of these others.

*The need to communicate.* Once we had a more complete view of the situation, having shed certain old views like old baggage (the ideas presented in the chapter, “Children of Victim Survivors”), we wanted to show it, to share it. However, first with family members, then with friends, we encountered reluctant listeners, both tacitly and explicitly, with respect to what we had to say. The reactions were suspiciously similar to those encountered by our parents upon their return to life. Our next question was, then, why are there so few people willing to listen? Is no one interested? Can it be that the topic produces such uneasiness in people? We were convinced that our research could produce benefits for everyone, that what we were learning about the Shoah, the possibilities and consequences, could and should be used to prevent, understand and combat this type of phenomenon.

*Is what we can learn, at the same time, what prevents us from reflection?* In this spirit, I undertook my reflections, my bibliographical research and my conversations. In what follows, I will present my discoveries and thoughts with respect to the Shoah, a topic that is difficult to approach for so many reasons. I also suspect that the reasons the Shoah is a difficult topic to deal with are also the lessons we can extract and learn from it. We neither can nor want to hear about the Shoah because it is a mirror that reveals aspects of our own humanity that we may prefer not to acknowledge. Ignorance of these aspects, however, is what led us to have a false image of ourselves, our citadels and our certainties, and has left us poorly protected for certain circumstances. If we don’t know ourselves and our possibilities, we will be even more poorly prepared to protect ourselves in exceptional circumstances

Let us begin with the Shoah.

### **The Shoah in the social imaginary: facing the unbearable.**

When we speak of the Shoah, or the “Holocaust,” as it has mistakenly come to be known, people envision the stock images of camps (particularly one: Auschwitz and the Birkenau train detention area, with the famous perspective of the railway line and the symmetrical construction in the background), crematorium ovens and chimneys, emaciated bodies, gas chambers and showers, the Warsaw ghetto and uprising, the abstract statistic of “six million,” and some old people’s faces who speak with heavy accents and problems of syntax and tell of horrible things in an emphatic and emotional way.

It is not just the average person who refers to these superficial images and notions. Many Jews – many more than previously thought – and many children of survivors share these same images. I recall these moving lines from the dialogue between Eiji Okada and

Emmanuelle Riva in “Hiroshima mon amour” by Alain Resnais (1959), when he says to her: “Tu ne sais rien d’Hiroshima” (You know nothing of Hiroshima). I borrow the line and say: “We know nothing of the Shoah.”

Steven Spielberg deserves credit for telling another version, less superficial than the popular one, stirring up the mud a bit and portraying some of the ambiguity. Until his film, the Shoah had been a story told by Hollywood in which the Nazis – without any context, explanation, reflection, consideration of anti-Semitism or the corrosive actions of the Catholic church over centuries, or references to ethical dilemmas – did horrible sadistic things to a few miserable, innocent, almost foolish Jews dressed in black, emerging from medieval ghettos and marching to their deaths, as the sadly celebrated phrase goes, “like sheep to the slaughter,” putting up no resistance, just the passivity of martyrs. Lawrence

Langer (cited earlier in relation to the five forms of memory) refers to the television series, “Holocaust” as one example among several of how North American culture presents things in a way that calms the consciences of people and lets them sleep peacefully through the night after turning off the TV set. He believes that the telling of what really happened, and the reasons for it, has been a failure. He says:

*The failure of “Holocaust” is a failure of imagination. The vision which plunges us into the lower abysses of atrocity is not there. We do not know what it was like, in the Warsaw ghetto and elsewhere, to have been reduced to eating dogs, cats, horses, insects and even, in rare unpublicized instances, human flesh. We do not know what the human being suffered during days and nights in sealed boxcars, starving, confused, desperate, sharing one’s crowded space with frozen corpses. We do not know of the endless roll calls in Auschwitz, often in subfreezing temperature, when men and women simply collapsed and died for exhaustion. We have abundant examples of husbands and wives clinging together in adverse conditions, but we never glimpse –as I mentioned earlier- mothers abandoning children or fathers and sons throttling each other for a piece of bread. We see well young groomed and sanitized men and women filling into the gas chamber, but what does this convey of the terror and despair that overwhelmed millions of victims as they recognized the final moment of their degradation and their powerlessness to respond? Perhaps art will never be able to duplicate the absolute horror of such atrocities: but if it cannot re-create at least a limited authentic image of that horror –and “Holocaust” does not- then audiences will remain as deceived about the “worst” as young Anne Frank’s lingering words of the essential goodness of human nature deceive us about the “best”. (p.175)*

It might be said that this type of approach has the merit of beginning to address the Shoah. This may be so, but along with it and due to the power of the North American film and television industries, these images have contaminated perspectives on the Shoah with a tranquilizing suffusion of mildly provocative, rosy-colored messages only meant to encourage the public to continue consuming their products. Of course, no one enjoys the

bitter taste of skepticism directed at humanity, especially when it sprouts from the entrails of the Shoah, when the truth brings us close enough to smell its stench.

Langer wonders if Gerald Green, the author of the book, and the producers could have done better. He says (page 176):

*Consider this brief portrait of two human beings, about to die in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, recorded by Salmen Lewental in a diary exhumed from the ashes after the war:*

*A mother was sitting with her daughter, they both spoke in Polish. She sat helplessly, spoke so softly that she could hardly be heard. She was clasping the head of her daughter with her hands and hugging her tightly. She spoke: "In an hour we shall die. What a tragedy. My dearest, my last hope will die with you". She sat.... immersed in thought, with wide open, dimmed eyes...After some minutes she came to and continued to speak. "On account of you my pain is so great that I am dying when I think of it". She led down her stiff arms and her*

*daughter's head sank down upon her mother's knees. A shiver passed through the body of the young girl, she called desperately "Mamma!" and she spoke no more, those were her last words. Perhaps "last words" like these are not dramatic;*

*certainly, they are not commercial; undoubtedly, they are not American. But they are authentic, and they are what the Holocaust was all about. The upbeat ending of "Holocaust", minimizing the negative impact of all that has gone before, typifies the absence of insight and the externalization of horror that makes the entire production meretricious in its confrontation with disaster: wormwood and gall are mollified by aromatic spices from the Orient. To leave an audience of millions with an image like the one mother and daughter bereft of hope, of life, of speech, would have been too dark –too dark altogether.*

Diffusion of the topic of the Shoah has run the usual course through popular culture in our society. Elie Wiesel has called it "Shoah business." Its digitized and manipulated diffusion is managed according to the needs and dictates of the mass media, whether in film, theater, or publicity events. Like so many other phenomena, the Shoah that was has lost immediacy and, thus, complexity and the possibility to be approached and understood. This is one of the reasons people in general can achieve at best a superficial, mystified and, sometimes, mistaken view of the essential issues that need to be understood about the Shoah, issues that render it a powerful schoolroom for all humanity.

### **Examples of what is not generally known.**

It was not known – and is still little-known – that whereas there were six death camps, there were hundreds of camps in occupied territory, especially in Poland. That there were different kinds of camps with different degrees of brutality. Extermination camps, work camps, concentration camps, mixed camps. Many people confuse ghettos with camps, thinking they are one and the same thing. What is more, ghetto is a word that is erroneously married to another word, that is, the "Warsaw Ghetto," as if this had been the only ghetto in

Poland; nonetheless, the ghettos were much more numerous than the camps, in every large and medium city there was one, and each one had its own peculiarities, each one responding in its own way to the orders that emanated from the Nazi command. The Jewish councils (the organisms that managed life in the ghettos at all levels – sanitation, work, housing, economics, policing – and whose members were generally chosen by the Nazis, who obliged them to obey their orders or their families would be murdered), or the *Judenräte*, as they were called in German, were not all the same nor did they all have to confront the same circumstances with the same kinds of supervisors. The convenient generalization usually applied to them is that they served as accomplices to the Nazis and that they deserve all the scorn and disdain they get. This overlooks the ethical dilemma that tortured many of the honest council members who tried to respond to the dictates of what they perceived as their social responsibility.

People have no idea that among the victim-survivors, those who come from the death camps are the rarest; the vast majority was never in the camps, they lived through the horror of the Shoah in various ways, which only recently, thanks to personal testimonies, are beginning to be known. It is also little known that around one million Jews survived.

The banalization of the Shoah affects other, less central, issues, that have remained in darkness or have been distorted. For example, the rich and intense social, cultural and

political life led by Jews in Central Europe before the war that disappeared, perhaps forever, with the Shoah. A child of the appeared one day found a photograph showing his father walking along a street in a city together with another young man, both dressed in suits with ties, patent-leather shoes, well-cut overcoats with fur collars, gloves and hats; he had a metal cigarette holder in his hand and an apparently gold watch was visible on his wrist, very much in the style of the big city and of the times. He was enormously surprised because he thought that his father, like all the Jews he was used to seeing in the movies, had lived in a hut, dressed in black and had no idea about social progress; his father had already died. He could never ask him about his previous life, his favorite books and plays, his loves, dreams, politics or passion for soccer; his father, like so many, had never told him anything, he had never shown him that photograph; thus, the only thing the son had left were the images of the Jews in the *schtetlaj* (villages).

#### **The children of the appeared and society**

We children of victim-survivors form part of society. Like anyone else we receive daily information which is the source of our general culture. Unless someone devotes himself to the study of a specific topic, in this hyper-informed and over-stimulated world, one cannot avoid knowing things through media such as television, newspapers, film, and novels; such that we all know a little about everything but, in reality, we know almost nothing about anything. For the children of victim-survivors, however, some of what was transmitted in the home didn't quite coincide with the cinematographic simplification that was supposed to be the Shoah. As we have seen in the preceding pages, the children learned to keep quiet, not to ask questions, to act as if they weren't aware of anything extraordinary, and thus they lived – and still live today – with the idea that things aren't clear, that their parents don't coincide with the way Jews are shown during the Shoah, and they don't know how to respond to this.

Appeared persons who were not in the camps don't fit the typical image of the Nazi victim; in their homes, neither Auschwitz nor Warsaw were common topics, gas chambers and uprisings were all but unknown. But the popularity of such topics led these victim-survivors to discover yet another reason for their silence: "What do we have to speak about if we weren't even in the camps...? We didn't suffer the camps," and their suffering was thus disqualified, even in the eyes of their own children.

### **Collective memory and personal memory**

There is a collective and necessary memory, the Memory of the Monument, the declarative and discursive memory. This is the memory exercised up to now with respect to the Shoah. Only recently, as personal histories are being told, does the other memory emerge, the personal memory. The exercise of personal memory brings the topic of the Shoah and the words and experiences of survivor-victims together, to be taken into account and gradually integrated into our culture.

Israel commemorates Holocaust Remembrance Day (Iom HaShoah) one week before the Day of Remembrance (Iom Hazicaron), of mourning, and ends with the revelry of Israel's Independence Day (Iom Hatzmaut), celebrating the birth of the nation. The two events have adhered one to the other in such a way that the pain and anguish of the one is promptly alleviated and drowned out by the explosions of fireworks, singing and dancing of the other. In Argentina, on Holocaust Remembrance Day (Iom HaShoah), year after year, we hear the same speeches, the same pretentious addresses, void of content, of "never more," the same

memory, on the one hand, of the six million dead, and on the other hand, veneration for the adolescents who raised arms against the Nazis in different revolts. And beside them, beside the murdered victims and heroes? Nothing. The void. The victim-survivors and their experiences and their damaged humanity remain invisible.

Why can't we speak about what really happened?

Why this oscillation between seeing ourselves in one moment as a people of impotent, passive and submissive victims, and, in another moment, as a people of daring, valiant and defiant soldiers?

Where do the common people fit in?

Where does the true history of the Shoah fit in? The history that can still be told by the surviving victims, that history that speaks to us of situations that are impossible to imagine because they attack what we believe to be natural.

Is it a troubling collective shame that determines our attitude in these celebrations, the manner in which we approach the topic?

### **Mystification**

We are often presented with a dangerous simplification that establishes only two possible categories: the dead victims and the heroes. It is in this context that the use and glorification of the Warsaw uprising is understandable; it is used for compensation, the mystique of the "lambs on their way to slaughter" is offset by the mystique of the "hero who charges dearly for his life."

Mystification is the process through which situations are confused, reality is distorted, the lines between fact and fiction all but disappear. Mystification requires extreme simplification and deceptive divisions (the good / the bad, black / white). To think of the Shoah in terms of victims and heroes, fighters and quitters, reveals a profound ignorance of the Shoah. A careful and earnest approach does not permit such trivialization.

#### **Armed resistance and daily resistance**

It is only fitting that the young people who decided to fight should be honored. If we understand the context in which they acted, we see that it was almost incredible that they found the courage, the strength and, at times, the recklessness and determination to go through with it. However, we have to recognize that they were few; among the multitudes, the hungry without training, hope or strength enough even to stand up, the centers of resistance were minimal. In speaking of resistance, a distinction must be made if what we mean by the term is specifically armed resistance. However, if we broaden the term, if we change our view somewhat, if we consider the context and its possibilities, we discover an infinite number of undefined, spontaneous acts of resistance, acts that should be seen from a perspective that enlightens us with regard to the dynamic forces and procedures at work during the Shoah. The fact that, for example, performing theater or giving a concert, instructing classes or secretly publishing, were all among the thousand-and-one daily acts of heroism such as caring for a plant or trying to maintain personal hygiene; these are all

behaviors that, seen from today's perspective, may seem insignificant and hardly worthy of being classified as resistance at all. When women were prohibited from using make-up in the ghetto, any woman who dared to add a touch of color to her mouth ran the risk of death; some

women decided to take such risks, perhaps out of frustration and rage, which, viewed today, appears as an absurd and insignificant form of rebellion and resistance.

In the appendix to Des Pres, we see behavior that today may seem trivial – to keep oneself as clean as possible – which acquires, due to the context in which it occurred, characteristics not only of being an act of resistance, but also of constituting an ethical declaration of principles and dignity.

However, when one thinks of “resistance,” one generally thinks almost exclusively of “armed resistance,” of confrontations. Armed resistance existed, it was incredible and heroic, but it was insufficient. The enemy was so superior in number, physical strength, resources, and organization that the young Jews had few opportunities for fighting. They grasped at each and every opportunity but that was insufficient to offset the acquiescence of those around them, which came to be seen as deliberate, self-centered and shameful. The limited armed response by the debilitated and downtrodden Jews clearly speaks to us of the abject conditions in which they lived. If they did nothing more, it is because they were unable to do more. The lack of response does not reflect poorly on the Jews or on their humanity; on the contrary, it demonstrates new limits regarding what it means to be human, the restrictions, the fragility, the painful vulnerability, all of which the Nazis, with their implacable machinery, shamelessly brought to light and used to their advantage.

*Are we good or are we evil?* One of the topics the Shoah confronts us with is this eternal question: is man born good but turned evil by society? Or, is man born evil and

turned good by society? The question itself implies two contradictory possibilities: individual and society, on one hand, and good and evil, on the other hand. It is a dissociative, exclusive and binary code with only two extreme and pure alternatives. Notwithstanding, the Shoah threatens to dissolve this code inasmuch as one of the lessons we can draw from this human experience is that we are both things at once, good and evil, we are born both good and evil, society can protect us or murder us, society can contain us or stimulate behaviors in us that we would not believe ourselves capable of performing.

### **Two psycho-social experiments: Milgram and Zimbardo**

Two laboratory experiments merit description here, owing largely to the harsh conclusions they draw. Like testimonies given by victim-survivors of the Shoah, both of these experiments disrupt the ideas and convictions we hold to be true about ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, the vulnerabilities of our beliefs. They throw into question the very nature of our individual and social being.

*Stanley Milgram and Obedience to Authority.* This is one of the most widely known laboratory experiments of its kind. It was conducted by Stanley Milgram and his team in the Department of Psychology at Yale University during the years 1960-63.

*The Nazi extermination of European Jews is the most extreme instance of abhorrent immoral acts carried out by thousands of people in the same obedience. Yet in lesser degree this type of thing is constantly recurring: ordinary*

*citizens are ordered to destroy other people, and they do so because they consider it their duty to obey orders. Thus, obedience to authority, long praised as a virtue, takes on a new aspect when it serves a malevolent cause; far from appearing as a virtue, it is transformed into a heinous sin . Or is it?*

.....

*In order to take a close look at the act of obeying, I set up a simple experiment at Yale University. .... A person comes to a psychological laboratory and is told to carry out a series of acts that come increasingly into conflict with conscience. The main question is how far the participant will comply with the experimenter's instructions before refusing to carry out the actions required of him.*

*But the reader needs to know a little more detail about the experiment. Two people come to a psychology laboratory to take part in a study of memory and learning. One of them is designated as a "teacher" and the other a "learner". The experimenter explains that the study is concerned with the effects of punishment on learning. The learner is conducted into a room, seated in a chair, his arms strapped to prevent excessive movement, and an electrode attached to his wrist. He is told that he is to learn a list of word pairs; whenever he makes an error, he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.*

*The real focus of the experiment is the teacher. After watching the learner being strapped into place, he is taken into the main experimental room and seated before an impressive shock generator. Its main feature is a horizontal line of thirty switches, ranging from 15 volts to 450 volts, in 15-volt increments. There are also verbal designations which range from SLIGHT SHOCK to DANGER-SEVERE SHOCK. The teacher is told that he is to administer the learning test to the man in the other room. When the learner responds correctly, the teacher moves on to the next item; when the other man gives an incorrect answer, the teacher is to give him an electric shock. He is to start at the lowest shock level (15 volts) and increase the level each time the man makes an error, going through 30 volts, 45 volts, and so on.*

*The "teacher" is a genuinely naïve subject who has come to the laboratory to participate in an experiment. The learner, or victim, is an actor who actually receives no shock at all. The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim. At what point will the subject refuse to obey the experimenter?*

*Conflict arises when the man receiving the shock begins to indicate that he is experiencing discomfort. At 75 volts, the "learner" grunts. At 120 volts he complains verbally; at 150 he demands to be released from the experiment. His protests continue as the shocks escalate, growing increasingly vehement and emotional. At 285 volts his response can only be described as an agonized scream.*

*Observers of the experiment agree that its gripping quality is somewhat obscured in print. For the subject, the situation is not a game; conflict is intense and obvious. On one hand, the manifest suffering of the learner presses him to quit.*

*On the other, the experimenter, a legitimate authority to whom the subject feels some commitment, enjoins him to continue. Each time the subject hesitates to administer shock, the experimenter orders him to continue. To extricate himself from the situation, the subject must make a clear break with authority. The aim of*

*this investigation was to find when and how people would defy authority in the face of a clear moral imperative. (p 2-3-4)*

The results went far beyond any previous assumptions. By an overwhelming majority, subjects not only consented to participate in the experiment, but they carried it out despite the obvious pain exhibited by the victim. The experimenter calmed the "teacher" by assuring him that the pain was temporary, reversible and, if necessary, by taking responsibility for the entire experiment. Some "teachers" continued reading the list of words and administering shocks even when the "student" appeared to have fainted and no longer responded. The harsh conclusion of this study is that, given the right conditions (a respectable and prestigious university environment, the chance to participate in a scientific experiment that might contribute to a scientific discovery for the good of humanity, the presence of a supervisor as stimulus as well as to take responsibility for the outcome) the

average person will overcome his conflicts of conscience and accede to participate in the application of torture.

The interpretation of the experiment presents a number of problems involving people in general and our participation in and/or reaction to different situations. The book was published in 1975 but, remarkably, has yet to be translated into Spanish, perhaps another sign of the social rejection generated by this kind of material, so contrary to the beliefs we hold concerning ourselves. I don't intend to argue the relevance of this experiment, only to briefly share its troubling results. I do recommend reading the complete text of the experiment for all those interested, and valiant, readers.

*Philip Zimbardo and the simulated prison.* The other experiment yielding results that disrupt the ideas and convictions we have about ourselves, as well as complementing Milgram's experiment, is one that took place at the University of Stanford, carried out by a team directed by Prof. Philip Zimbardo. The following is the account of the experiment published in the Naval Research Review, 30:

***Introduction.*** *Some psychological studies produce very surprising results for the researchers and the participants. Sometimes the results are so striking that they challenge our explanations of human behaviour and human motivation. One such study is the Milgram study described earlier in this chapter. Another one is the work of Zimbardo and his associates.*

*The central question in the study concerns how much of our behaviour is structured by the social roles that we occupy. One of the famous 'soundbites' from Shakespeare is, "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players" (As You Like It). The 'life is drama' metaphor is developed in role theory and the work of, among other, Erving Goffman. This approach to human behaviour and experience suggests that we are what we play, and a limited sense of selfhood and identity is shaped by the demands of the situation we are in.*

***The study.*** *Twenty-four subjects were selected from an initial pool of 75 respondents to a newspaper advertisement which had asked for male volunteers to participate in a psychological study of prison life. The volunteers completed a questionnaire and interview to screen subjects, and the selected people were described as 'normal' healthy male college students who were predominantly middle class and White. The simulated prison was created in the basement of the Psychology Department at Stanford University. It was made up of three cells (each 6ft x 9ft) with three prisoners to a cell. A broom cupboard (2ft x 2ft x 7ft) was converted into a 'solitary confinement room'. Several rooms in an adjacent wing of the building were used as guards' rooms, interview rooms and a bedroom for the 'warden' (Zimbardo). There was also a small enclosed room used as a 'prison yard' in which there was an observation window behind which was video equipment, and room for several observers.*

*The subjects were randomly assigned their roles of either 'prisoner' or 'guard', and signed contracts on that basis. The contract offered \$15 a day and guaranteed basic living needs, though it was made explicit to the prisoners that*

*some basic civil rights (for example, privacy) would be suspended. The prisoners were given no information about what to expect and no instructions on how to behave. The guards were told to "maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning" (p. 6), though they were explicitly prohibited from using physical aggression.*

*The prisoner subjects remained in the mock-prison 24 hours a day for the duration of the study. Nine were arbitrarily assigned three to each cell and the remaining three were on stand-by at home. The 'guard' subjects worked on three-man eight-hour shifts, and went home after their shifts.*

*Both sets of subjects were given uniforms to promote feelings of anonymity. The guards uniform (plain khaki shirt and trousers, whistle, baton, and reflecting sun glasses) was intended to convey a military attitude and to give symbols of power. The prisoners uniform (loose fitting smock, number on front and back, no underwear, light chain and lock around ankle, rubber sandals and a cap made from nylon stocking) was intended to be uncomfortable, humiliating and to create symbols of subservience and dependence.*

Zimbardo obtained the help of the local police department to unexpectedly 'arrest' the 'prisoner' subjects. A police officer charged them with suspicion of burglary or armed robbery, advised them of their rights, handcuffed them, thoroughly searched them (often in full view of the neighbours!) and drove them to the police station. Here they had their fingerprints and picture taken and were put in a detention cell. They were then blindfolded and driven to the 'mock prison'. During the induction period the arresting officers did not tell the subjects that this was part of the study. When they arrived at the 'mock-prison', the prisoner-subjects were stripped, deloused, made to stand alone and naked in the 'yard' and then given their uniform and cell and told to remain silent.

The prisoners were then greeted by the warden who read them the rules which had to be memorised. After this they were referred to only by their number. The prisoners were to be given three meals a day, allowed three supervised toilet visits, two hours privilege time for reading and letter writing, two visiting periods a week, exercise periods, and film rights. They were also required to conduct work assignments and line up for a 'count' on each new guard shift. The initial purpose of the count was to check that all the prisoners were present, and to test their knowledge of the rules and their I.D. numbers. The first counts took around 10 minutes but as conditions in the prison deteriorated, they increased in length until some lasted for several hours.

**Results.** The prison had a much more dramatic effect on all the players in the drama than had been anticipated. The mood of the prisoners and guards became increasingly negative. The prison was internalised by prisoners and guards and they adopted very contrasting behaviours, which were appropriate for their respective roles. Five prisoners were released early due to extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety, and the simulation was brought to an end after six days rather than the projected 14 days.

One question that arises from simulations is 'were the behaviours shown by the subjects merely some very good acting or had the situation become real to them?' One answer to this comes from the private conversation of prisoners which were monitored by the researchers. These conversations were 90 per cent on the prison, which shows that even when they were able to get out of their mental prisons they actually reinforced the experience. The prisoners also adopted the guards' negative attitude towards them, and referred to each other in deprecating ways. When the prisoners were introduced to a priest, they referred to themselves by number, asked for a lawyer to help get them out, and asked for immediate bail and a parole board.

Guard aggression showed a steady increase throughout the study, even after resistance had ceased. They attempted to 'hide' one prisoner in the broom cupboard overnight because the experimenters were being 'too soft'.

The most dramatic demonstration of the reality of the prison came with the mock parole board. The five remaining prisoners were asked by Zimbardo in turn whether they would forfeit the money they had earned as a prisoner if

*they could be paroled (released from the study). Three of the five said 'yes', which meant they were effectively terminating their contract to take part in the study. Yet when they were told to return to their cells while it was considered they did so rather than just walk out*

**Discussion.** *Zimbardo suggested that the reason for the deterioration in guard behaviour was power. The guards were able to exert control over the lives of other human beings and they did not have to justify their displays of power as they would have to in their daily lives. After day one, all prisoner rights became redefined as privileges, and all privileges were cancelled. Zimbardo describes the social deterioration of the prisoners as the pathological prisoner syndrome. To start with the prisoners rebelled against their conditions, but every attempt was undermined by the guards, and social cohesion collapsed among the prisoners. Half of the prisoners responded by becoming sick, and eventually had to be released before the study was finally brought to a conclusion. For those who remained, the model prisoner reaction that developed was passivity, dependence, and flattened affect (emotions). Zimbardo suggested that there were a number of processes that contributed to the deterioration of the prisoners including:*

*(a) The loss of personal identity;*

*(b) The arbitrary control exerted by the guards. This made the prisoner's lives increasingly unpredictable and their treatment increasingly unfair. Their behaviour showed the signs of learned helplessness (see the study by Seligman & Maier, 1967, Chapter 5 of this volume);*

*8 Dependency and emasculation. The guards created a dependency in the prisoners which emasculated them to the extent that when the prisoners were debriefed they suggested that they had been assigned to be prisoners because they were smaller than the guards. In fact, there was no difference in average height between the prisoners and the guards, and the perceived difference was a response to the prisoners' perceptions of themselves and their power.*

*What does all this mean? Zimbardo describes it as a simulation of prison life, but that is not quite the case. None of the subjects had any experience of prison life before the study, and their roles were played from the social perceptions of how prison life should be. It is, in fact, a simulation of what we expect prison life to be, rather than what it is. However, the study still gives a powerful demonstration of the effect of social roles, and also the power of the social psychological experiment to make us behave in ways we did not think possible (see Orne, 1963, Chapter 21 of this volume).*

*Not altogether surprisingly, there were numerous ethical objections to the study, though like Milgram, Zimbardo made a robust defence (Zimbardo, 1973 and MacDermott 1993). He argued that the studies provide special insight into human behaviour and experience, and illuminate 'a dark side'. His personal criticism of the study concerns his own role as both researcher and warden. He became as trapped in his warden role as the other players in the simulation, and that prevented him responding appropriately as the lead*

*researcher. It is also important to note that the study received the approval of the American Navy (who sponsored the research), the Psychology Department at Stanford, and also the University Committee of Human Experimentation before it was carried out.*

*None had predicted the outcome, but then why should they? If researchers already knew what was going to happen in their research then there would not be much point in carrying it out.*

The experiments summarized here, with their troubling (to say the least) conclusions, give us much to think about. They hold up for inspection some of our most deeply-rooted convictions. Are we as in control of ourselves as we like to believe? To what degree does our need to pertain to a group determine certain elements of our behavior? To what extent can we resist social pressures? How often per day do we question our responsibilities? How many theories or prejudices do we apply in our daily lives? Are we prevented from committing certain crimes by our personal convictions against them, or out of fear of discovery and punishment? How much of our declared respect for the rights and differences of others etc., do we truly exercise in our normal lives with our families and friends?

If healthy young men, who participate voluntarily in an experiment from which they can withdraw whenever they wish, experience “passivity, dependence and a decrease in affection,” according to Zimbardo in his report, as a “typical reaction” when they play the role of prisoners, then the behavior of the Jews in the camps should not still be described disdainfully with the shameful phrase, “like lambs to the slaughter.” We find ourselves obliged to consider something else; first, certain doubts now arise as to what we would have done in their place, such that the “voluntary” march of the “silly” lambs acquires a new complexion and, in fact, it seems perfectly feasible that given the situation and the context, nothing else could have been done. “What do you mean, nothing else could have been done? There’s always something else!” an irate and indignant voice rises up from deep within our bodies, a voice that insists upon our status as rational and free beings, lords over our ability to choose. These experiments speak to us of things we do not wish to hear, they tell us that we don’t always have the capacity to take action, they tell us that we may be impotent in the face of certain situations or contexts, they rob us of the illusion that we can control our destinies.

#### **Identification with the aggressor: the dilemma**

There are still other aspects of the Shoah experience, even darker aspects than are usually mentioned, aspects that are almost impossible to speak about. For example, the question of Jews who were, to varying degrees, collaborators: how do we feel about those who were members of the Jewish police in the ghettos, whose cruelty often surpassed even that of the Nazis? Or the members of the Jewish Councils who were voluntary and enthusiastic accomplices? And how do we feel about the Jews who gave free rein to their most sadistic impulses, who identified with the aggressor and the anti-Semite and not only informed on and betrayed but also killed Jews with their own hands? And the robberies of Jews by other Jews? And the trafficking of influence? And the corruption? Little is known about all of this because all that can be known is what has been spoken about by the victims

or the accusers that blame them for these most unforgivable crimes. The “collaborators” who are still alive keep low profiles, fearing, also with good reason, social repudiation.

In addition, little is known because this is one of those things we tend not to want to know about, we are confronted with a new kind of pain, a pain before which we feel stripped bare. The sense of “collective responsibility” is common to many Jews and is part of the legacy of centuries of anti-Semitism. Owing to this legacy, the “Jewish collective,” that is, every Jew, feels somehow responsible for the actions of other Jews, particularly when something bad is done. It is difficult to clear away the elements of such feelings when the confrontation is between the non-Jewish and the Jewish worlds. But it is even more difficult when the confrontation is within the Jewish world. How does “collective responsibility” function relative to the Jews who behaved like Nazis? Is there no point at which evidence of some loyalty to the group can be dredged up? Is anything possible? Is everything possible?

Identification with the aggressor is a behavior we all know as human beings, it forms part of our life experience, though not to such extreme degrees of iniquity. Perhaps some day we will be able to penetrate the dark recesses of the Shoah experience.

#### **Identification with the survivor**

What were the limits of what we refer to as ethics? What were the parameters? What were the possibilities? How can ethics be applied when the conditions for life, for mere survival, have changed? Is it more or less ethical to go on living in spite of everything? In spite of what, and how much? And what is the relation between the desire to live and the tolerance of unspeakable degradation?

The stories told by victim-survivors, if indeed we have listened to them attentively – if we have reflected upon their implications – confront us with one of the most perplexing of all questions: What would I have done in their place?

For people who are not very familiar with the Shoah, who know only certain statistics and general descriptions of what happened, it is easy to respond to this question. Most people suppose that they would have spontaneously acted out the role of heroes, that they would never have permitted the deaths of their parents, that they would have resisted their child’s being torn from their arms, thrown to the ground and trampled to death, that they would have desperately sought and found a way to fight back against the Nazis, to sabotage their apparatus, to never deliver their bodies in order to save themselves or others, always with a clear idea of what to do and how best to do it. These are the pure of spirit, honest and decent, who then become cruel and implacable judges. The fact is that they have never been in situations of such a disjunctive nature, they have no idea of the real circumstances – nor do they wish to know – the shortages, the absence of possibility, they view the Shoah through eyes accustomed to normality, and the picture makes no sense. It is difficult for people here to appreciate the experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo, perhaps they are too easily dismissed with the oft-expressed attitude, it’s just some more of that “yanqui” nonsense. It is frightening, very frightening, to wonder about the following questions today:

What would I have done in their place?

How long would I have lasted?

How much humiliation would I have tolerated before taking my own life? Would I have been able to kill myself?

Would I have been able to kill a son or daughter to avoid their being tortured?

Would I have what it takes to bribe a Nazi?

Could I have stolen?

What would I have been able to force myself to eat in order to avoid starvation?

What would I have done in their place? This is the question. The question itself is horrendous and even remains unasked. We cannot imagine ourselves in such circumstances, so removed from anything we know or have ever experienced, a life of days, weeks, months, years without the possibility for reflection, prediction, anticipation, or making decisions about even the smallest things in life, arbitrarily subjected to an omnipotent and unpredictable other and being forced to perform actions that we never imagined or believed ourselves capable of. The question of “what would I have done?” can not even be properly formulated.

**The answer.** And if we do indeed dare to formulate the question to ourselves, then comes the worst: the intolerable nature of the supposed answer and the realization that we don't know our own limits, our thresholds of tolerance or the strength of our convictions.

If there is anything human beings cannot bear, it is *not knowing*. The void of ignorance must be filled quickly with an explanation, a theory, a supposition, a religious belief, a justification, something, anything to liberate us from the anguish of not knowing. And if we pose the question to ourselves, “what would I have done?” and we attempt to formulate a sincere response, we find ourselves submerged in naked, bewildered silence.

The answer is that we don't know. We would like to think of ourselves as we are now, under any and all circumstances, and that no one could make us think or act differently or change the parameters we know and feel comfortable with. But one of the lessons of the Shoah is that, when thrust into such an extremely limited situation, we are no longer who we were in normal life, the abnormality of the situation finds us unprepared and unprotected, without adequate training or certainty of what to do or how to respond.

In the testimonies of the appeared, it is common to hear thoughtful expressions of surprise when certain unexpected forms of behavior are described, such as “I don't know how it occurred to me to do such a thing,” or, “I don't know where I found the strength for that,” or, “If I had to do it now, surely I wouldn't dare.”

The answer, or more accurately, the impossibility of an answer, is not only unpopular, it is also unbearable. It subverts all we were taught. It attacks the basic constructs of what it means to us to be human, an idea that is intrinsically linked to the triumph of reason over instinct, free-will over emotion, society over the individual, ethics over necessity, reflection over action. When we differentiate ourselves from what is considered “animal” – unjustly understood as inferior – we refer to these categories. Of course this leads once again to a mystification of what is “animal.” Curiously, in the animal kingdom, the idea of an animal destroying others of its species outside of the context of self-defense or hunger is non-existent, except in the case of certain birds, for example doves that kill themselves if they are enclosed in excessively small spaces. Hitler initiated the invasion of European territories alleging the need for “vital space” for the Germans. Like the doves, ironically, our symbol of peace.

However, when we speak of what is “animal,” we tend to refer to what is instinctive, irrational, emotional, related to primary necessities (hunger, fighting, fleeing and sex) and the lack of words or thoughts.

The Shoah provides us with a harsh lesson on how easy it is for us to “devolve into animals,” with what speed we can lose our “human” qualities. It reveals our fragility, our vulnerability and the relative simplicity of our degradation. The Shoah reveals how unprepared we are to defend ourselves when the rules of the game are changed. And it reveals the true nature of “human strength” that cannot be broken despite the unflinching scientific efforts of the Nazis; the intended devolution was not effectuated.

The central issues of the Shoah, the issues that are constantly present in the memories of the victim-survivors, those linked to guilt, responsibility, humiliation, shameful behavior, these are issues that still stir up pain and are difficult to confront frankly and directly. We sidestep them, we refer to them euphemistically, covering them over with words that ease our consciences. It is unbearable for us to see ourselves, even minimally, in that mirror. Langer points out the importance of language:

*The role of language in this search –a subtext of many of these essays- illustrates how easy it is to change the impact of a disastrous event simply by reminding it. When we speak of the survivor instead of the victim and of martyrdom instead of murder, regard being gassed as a pattern for dying with dignity, or evoke the redemptive rather than the grievous power of memory, we draw on an arsenal of words that urges us to build verbal fences between the atrocities of camps and ghettos and what we are mentally willing –or able- to face.*

*In p. 5 he says:*

*Commenting on the disbelief with which Aleksander Solzhenitsyn’s revelations in his Gulag’s Archipelago volumes were greeted –chiefly, that Stalin had left 60 million casualties in his wake- Russian poet Joseph Brodsky reflected: “I have a theory of why these things don’t seep through, and that is a theory about self preservation, mental self preservation. Western man, by and large, is the most natural man, and he cherishes his mental comfort. It is almost impossible for him to admit disturbing evidence”. A world in which relatively small number of men can cause the death of so many millions while screaming their crimes and remaining themselves unpunished and unrepentant –for the most part, even after their defeat- is a world deprived of ethical force, one in which power supplants human concern, and indifference to suffering prevails over practical compassion.*

### **Lessons of the extermination camps and political totalitarianism**

Tzvetan Todorov, in his book, “Face à la limite” (Facing the Extreme), undertakes an exhaustive analysis of life in the Nazi extermination camps and the Soviet gulags, considering them to be logical results of totalitarian political systems. He examines both the prisoners and the perpetrators (p. 261):

The degree of suffering in the camps surpasses any in recent human memory; it testifies to a deep-rooted illness suffered by the world of before, the world responsible for the emergence of these institutions. In order to prevent any such recurrence, it is necessary

to examine the lessons of the camps and to try to understand the profound causes of their existence.

In order to prevent the lesson of the camps from being lost, we must overcome a dual-form of resistance: 1) resistance by those who justify the camps and wish to deny the lessons there are to be learned from them, and 2) resistance by those who believe that the event was unique, unrepeatable and unnecessary to discuss; they erect a monument and freeze it in the past.

*The memory of the camps must serve as an instrument of information to enable us to judge and analyze the present (p. 264).*

I will now summarize, as succinctly as possible, the ideas I view as being most important in Todorov's book.

In his analysis of prisoner behavior in the face of extreme situations, Todorov considers it relevant to carefully examine the virtues and vices exhibited in this behavior. He differentiates between what he calls heroic virtues and daily virtues. Heroic virtues appear to have been rare in the camps; they are those that involve abstractions such as the homeland and humanity; they are extraordinary qualities; the hero takes action without considering his own death, thinking only of excellence and perfection. The author says that, although there were examples of heroic conduct, because of their scarcity, he decided to concentrate his work in the description of daily virtues, as these were the most important in driving prisoners forward.

*The daily virtues.* They may be observed in daily behaviors in connection with concrete situations (obtaining food, encouraging a fellow prisoner, etc.), whose main objective was the action itself without pretensions of gaining anything related to intellectual abstractions or constructions. There are three types: dignity, caring and spiritual activity.

- a) **Dignity**, a virtue that reveals a prisoner's relationship to himself; it is the most powerful driving force behind his will to live. Two basic conducts sustain a person's dignity:
  - the exercise of free will (in the form of resisting an order, committing suicide as an affirmation of free will, the transformation of an act of submission into one of free-will, singing a song, etc.)
  - respect for oneself (keeping oneself clean, caring about others, not suffering unnecessary humiliation)
- b) **Caring**, a virtue that reveals the way in which a prisoner relates to other prisoners like himself, a personal me-you relationship. The most simple and important act is that of sharing food with another person. In the dynamics of the camps, prisoners are rare who do not have some such experience in their history in which they were cared for by another prisoner. Caring behavior must be examined from a variety of perspectives.
  - *The agents, those who cared for others. "They can be found in every social and professional category, although they are often rare. There were also kapos or Blockaltesete who were concerned for their subordinates. Or watchmen and prison-guards who allowed good to triumph over "duty" (page 83). Naturally, among friends, acquaintances and people from the same villages, there was mutual caring and helping, although it is in the relationships between family members, whose paradigm is the mother-child relationship, that such behavior was most frequent. In*

this respect, Todorov comments that it is not surprising that more women survived than men given that women, in contrast to men, are trained in the exercise of caring for others.

- *The limits of the concept.* Caring is differentiated from solidarity because it is not a moral act, it cannot be assumed automatically, it is, rather, an individual and voluntary act directed at one person, not because the person belongs to any particular group but just due to circumstance. It is also differentiated from charity or pity, which are given to everyone, to anonymous beings, giving rise to an asymmetry between those who give and those who receive, with the additional ingredient of humiliation in the case of the latter. Nor is it a sacrifice, an act without reciprocity, through which one person becomes poorer while in the act of caring for another one becomes richer.
  - The effects. Acts of caring produce an immediate satisfaction for both the provider and the beneficiary; on one hand, a concrete necessity is attended to and, on the other hand, both maintain their humanity.
- c) **Spiritual activities.** These are ethical or intellectual actions whose objective has to do with the search for beauty or intellectual solace (playing music, reciting poetry or books, drawing, making ornaments) or are related to understanding and knowing about the world (the decision of many prisoners to tell the stories of what they lived through so that the world would know; the effort to remember and record as much as possible was the driving force for the survival of many). These are activities directed at a group of people, the relationship is me-them, activities whose only end was to sustain the will to live.

Daily virtues were always directed at concrete and particular people. They are subjective and obey a morality of sympathy rather than the morality of principles. Daily virtues are differentiated from kindness and goodness in that they are not guided by these abstractions. Someone who exercises daily virtue is not interested in the exercise of good as an anonymous entity, but rather considers the action to be something concrete and effective and directed at someone in particular, for the sheer fact of doing something, and, consequently, feeling well.

**The irruption of evil.** Todorov also attempts to understand the conduct of the perpetrators, to probe this irruption of evil. Considering the cases he has studied, he says that traditional explanations do not account for what happened. According to Todorov, we cannot understand the behavior of the perpetrators from a pathological perspective because only 5 to 10 per cent of them may be considered to have been sadists; nor can we consider it as a phenomenon of returning to primitive instincts, for two reasons: first, because in the animal world there is no torture or extermination and, second, because the perpetrators did not betray the social contract inasmuch as they complied with laws and obeyed orders; nor can we explain it as fanatical idealism given that they were a minority, that is, the majority consisted in obedient, conformist bureaucrats who were only interested in their personal well-being. Todorov concludes that, rather than focusing on individuals or psychology, we should direct our attention more towards the socio-political level. He goes on to question what conditions must be necessary in a society for the committing of such crimes to be possible. In his view, this could only happen in a totalitarian society such as that of the Nazis, who could exercise powerful control over the moral conduct of the individual. Todorov characterizes totalitarian societies according to the following:

- 1) designation of the enemy as an internal agent, as all those who oppose State designs, “an enemy among us” that must be eliminated;
- 2) negation of the universality of the concepts of good and evil, which go on to become defined by, and property of, the State;
- 3) the State aspires to absolute control over the social life of the individual, there is no place to hide or take refuge, total submission is required.

The above-mentioned characteristics have powerful behavioral consequences:

- 1) once the enemy is defined, hostility towards him is commended;
- 2) individual responsibility is alleviated because it becomes domain of the State; this enables individuals to concentrate on procedures and lose sight of the ends;
- 3) behavior becomes docile and there is passive submission to orders.

Totalitarian States also exercise a powerful control over their victims, who have also become submissive. All those who are defined as “internal enemies” see themselves as solitary and impotent in the face of a vastly superior force. Todorov considers it highly inappropriate to invoke Jewish tradition or the ghetto mentality for understanding the absence of mass rebellion. He feels that such an uprising would be impossible under a totalitarian regime, which crushes all forms of organized opposition and resistance.

Once a totalitarian system is installed, a subtle slipping process begins, a progressive change in the thresholds of tolerance, the population is converted into a criminal accomplice, gradually adopting a “see-no-evil attitude.”

**The daily vices.** There emerge, then, what Todorov calls daily vices, which are developed by the agents of evil. He describes three:

1) **fragmentation** or discontinuity in personality or in life as one of the consequences of living in a totalitarian system; this assumes different forms and levels.

- **first form:** an incoherence in behavior that alternates between good and evil; this is a common characteristic among perpetrators. The same individual that tortured and killed, could also make a humane gesture to a victim.

- **second form:** this is more systematic and feeds off two daily virtues which do not occur simultaneously – caring and spiritual activity; the same individual that killed could love music and art and be moved by their expression.

- **third form:** this is a discontinuity between the public and private spheres which appears to play a kind of primordial role in totalitarian regimes (an executioner in the extermination camps and a loving husband at home).

The fragmentation of their lives was absolutely necessary so that pity would not hinder their “work” and also to preserve a satisfactory private life. There had to be a complete rupture between the principles that reigned in each of the two spheres. Todorov thinks that the theory held by some historians that this characteristic is unique to Germany is unsustainable because it can also be found in the conduct of Russian perpetrators. He believes that it is a question of how totalitarian systems influence the behavior of people, generating sealed-off internal compartments and partitions. In a totalitarian system where the State defines what is good and what is bad, individuals only have to concern themselves with their tools, with doing what they know how to do best; everyone minds his own business, turns a blind eye to the neighbor since no one has an overview of the entire situation, no one knows the superior State designs; compartmentalization and bureaucracy lead to the absence of a feeling of responsibility, moral conscience is suspended and, if everyone does his job and minds his own business, the crimes are easier to commit.

2) **depersonalization**, focused on in three sections:

- **dehumanization of the victims**, the totalitarian system views individuals as instruments; Todorov considers this to be the principal vice in the evil of totalitarianism. The transformation of persons into non-persons involves various techniques: victims are stripped because, without clothing, they become less human, they must live with their excrement, they are deprived of their names, they are given numbers, they are not referred to as “persons” but as “pieces,” or “cargo,” they are never confronted face-to-face, all eye-contact is avoided.

- **submission of the guards**, the same process of dehumanization but applied to the perpetrators. Inasmuch as their over-riding duty is obedience, to carry out orders, they readily accept being converted into tools. Totalitarian systems are characterized by their dependence upon blind obedience and train every individual to see himself as a cog in an immense machine. Obedience diminishes responsibility and leads to a powerful moral transformation: he who merely obeys is no longer a person.

- **the perpetrators**, those who give the orders, who see themselves as technocrats, they kill not out of hate but as part of their job; they protect themselves behind the dehumanization of the victims. Todorov reminds us that Eichmann, during his trial, defined himself as an idealist because he preferred ideas to human beings. The perpetrators, those who acceded to the construction of the totalitarian system, actively avoided applying personal judgement to the fundamentals of the orders they gave and received under the logic that “the ends justify the means.”

3) **the enjoyment of power**

- **power over others** is a particular case of instrumentation and depersonalization. Totalitarian systems permit indulgence in the enjoyment of power to its maximum intensity. The other, the victim, is an instrument for heightening power, the notion of self-importance, submission, dependence, the knowledge of having another at one’s mercy offers sure satisfaction of the thirst for power that is so highly stimulated by totalitarian regimes. There were no limits on its indulgence in the camps, the guards became drunk on power, they were supermen. The *kapos* pertained to a grayer area, as Primo Levi has said: oppressors and oppressed, hence their zeal for demonstrating their power; for good reason they were generally recruited among the common criminals.

**The saviors.** Todorov also refers to saviors as one of the groups that sustained a possible form of resistance. For the population in general, there appeared to be only two possible options: imitating the enemy, that is, responding to evil with evil, or resignation, that is, accepting that all resistance was useless. Some people opted for other routes, one of which was non-violent and was the option chosen by the saviors, whose conduct is situated midway between heroic acts and daily virtues.

**Characteristics of the saviors.** In contrast to the heroes, who fight for principles, abstractions, not for concrete persons, for saviors, life had maximum value, they did not seek martyrdom, they only took calculated risks; they did not take action for abstractions but for persons; they did not see themselves as exceptional people, nor as protagonists of tales of glory. In contrast to the daily virtues, caring was often offered to strangers, foreigners and, especially in Polish territory, the entire family was thus exposed to danger.

The savior has the courage and generosity of the hero and the interest in the well-being of others as follows from the logic of caring, one of the daily virtues.

The savior is neither passive nor resigned, he believes in the strength of free-will, in taking action because he believes there is always something that can be done.

The saviors are few, given that they are exceptional people, although it would be almost impossible to find in them – just as in the case of the perpetrators – any particular feature that distinguishes them from common people.

They are not conformists. They see themselves as outsiders, people who resist obedience, they respect laws but also the exercising of a clear and critical conscience.

They are not enamored of principles. They tend toward universalization because they are disposed to help strangers, but also toward individualization, given that their actions are directed at concrete persons.

Although there were some saviors who took up their work in return for economic compensation, this was not the case by and large; in general, in the act itself, they felt both gratified and compensated.

Eva Fogelman says:

*These men, women, and children who risked their lives to save others were flesh-and-blood human beings with strengths and faults. Yet they saw people who were different from them and responded, not to these differences, but to their similarities. While most people saw Jews as pariahs, rescuers saw them as human beings. This humanistarian response sprang from a core of firmly held inner values. These values, which included an acceptance of people who were different, were unwavering and immutable. And central to these beliefs was the conviction that what an individual did, or fail to do, mattered. They recognized that for many Jews the choice made by a bystander could mean life or death.*  
(p.6)

Raquel Hodara says that the subject of the saviors has not been sufficiently researched. She attributes this to three main reasons:

1) an ideological objection: if the subject is given too much attention it could lead to a distortion in the proportions of perpetrators to saviors as well as generating the idea that there were many of them or, at least, a significant number; in fact, they were a very small number of people, 0.1% would be a very generous estimate;

2) a subjective objection: the subject as such could open old wounds for people who were profoundly affected and who believe – and need to believe – there were no saviors;

3) an existential objection: to recognize the existence of saviors who placed their own lives, and the lives of their children, in danger in order to save some complete strangers raises the question, “would I have done the same thing?”

Just as the Shoah teaches us that we can no longer say that there are some things human beings are incapable of doing to other human beings, the existence of saviors suggests that the impossible also exists, that one can always do something.

**The unique situation of Poland.** Professor Hodara reminds us that the situation in Poland was different from that of other occupied countries. On one hand, because the largest concentration of Jews was in Poland and, on the other hand, due to the way the Germans treated the Polish people. The SS authority exercised terror and cruelty over the people of Poland, who they looked down upon. The Polish people suffered terribly during the war. In the first weeks, 10 thousand Polish leaders were executed. In all, the Nazis killed between 1 and 2 million Poles, 2.5 were driven into forced labor, the rest were placed on rations and treated with extreme cruelty. Of all the territories under Nazi occupation,

only in Poland was helping Jews punishable, on the spot, by summary execution not only of the person who gave aid but also of the person's entire family. Those were not auspicious conditions for the actions of saviors. Nonetheless, it should be noted that they existed, though rare.

It is difficult to establish how many saviors there were in Poland. This is due, in part, to the fact that some were unfortunately discovered and killed; there are many who, due to Polish anti-Semitism that is still active today, prefer not to discuss their deeds of rescue or protection on behalf of Jews; in addition, there are some survivors who are reluctant to speak out. After 1943, the Polish organization, Żegota, supported by the Polish government-in-exile, was able to save some ten thousand Jews.

The reference to saviors, according to Raquel Hodara, includes those who hid Jews, but not necessarily those who brought them food, carried messages for them, or helped them to escape. Scholars calculate that for every Jew that was saved, at least 10 Poles participated. From compiled testimonies, it is estimated that the initiative originated with the person who was saved in 65% of the cases.

**The barriers.** Raquel Hodara reminds us that the act of rescuing someone was extremely difficult and almost unimaginable, all the odds were against succeeding. Hodara recognizes four principal barriers that saviors had to overcome:

- location: the city was always simpler than the countryside; it was more anonymous, but establishing adequate facilities was complicated and there was the constant fear of discovery by neighbors or acquaintances;

- food: under conditions of strict rationing, obtaining additional food was a daily feat;

- sociology: the social environment consisted in people who had been raised on deep-seated anti-Semitism; saviors and victims were surrounded by people who, one way or another, justified what was happening;

- psychology (a consequence of the preceding): people had been educated to hate the Jews.

Once these barriers had been overcome, day-to-day living presented constant cohabitational problems. For example, the question of what to do in the case of illness on the part of a Jew in hiding, or how to resolve the problem of burial in the case of a death, or how to deal with such problems as disagreements between a family member and a Jew in hiding, or disagreements between the Jews themselves. Thus, in addition to the difficulty of the context itself - the concrete barriers faced in the act of offering salvation - there were also the thousand-and-one conflicts to be resolved in questions of daily life. Each of these difficulties brought to the surface the ever-present question of, "What am I doing? They might kill us at any moment..."

Both the saved and the saviors had characteristics worth taking a moment to consider.

*The saved (the Jews).* Hardly anyone had planned beforehand for their rescue, they were unprepared and had to improvise.

- It has been estimated that around 30% of the Jews that were hidden had financial resources.

- Among those that survived by falsifying their identities, it was not enough just to provide documents that established Polish citizenship, they also needed personality characteristics that supported their invented biographies such as correct behavior in church, prayer, and new family relations.

- Physical appearance was also important given that the more they appeared as Poles, the better their chances at survival became. Professor Hodara mentions that there was an association of Catholic doctors that operated on noses in order to have a more “Aryan” appearance. However, it was easier to save women than men due to the practice of circumcision.

*The saviors.* Of the known cases of rescue and salvation, certain characteristics of the saviors emerge that outline the requirements for overcoming the enormous difficulties involved.

Social characteristics:

- They pertained to all different social classes and cultural levels
- Marriage to Jewish spouses was not a determining factor
- Single women had more compassion for children

Psychological characteristics:

- The objective or subjective degree of danger did not seem important to the saviors

- They did not accept official reports as the truth, but they did take the trouble to interpret them

- They had the firm conviction that they could maintain control over situations
- They were concerned for the well-being of others

Education:

- They were disciplined but not rigid, they had not been beaten
- They believed in equity, all people deserve the same opportunities
- They exercised individual responsibility
- They exercised freedom of belief, independent of the opinions of others
- They maintained their belief in the brotherhood of all human beings

Previous activities:

- Half of all saviors participated in clandestine anti-Nazi movements
- 60% of all saviors had performed altruistic acts before the war

As Eva Fogelman says in the title of her book, what was necessary was conscience and courage – two conditions that were not always very spontaneous or as present as we might suppose.

### **The Shoah as lesson**

The Shoah, laboratory of some of the darker aspects in human nature, offers us certain possibilities for learning about ourselves, what we can expect of ourselves and others like us and, perhaps, what aspects we should develop and reinforce in order to create a better society.

Todorov suggests that there are four lessons to be extracted from the harsh experiences suffered by victims in the camps:

1) *The rise of evil.* Evil consists in denying someone his/her human rights. Evil exists and has always been the same, there have been no mutations. Perhaps this century, with its fragmentation of the world and depersonalization of human relations, has enabled evil to rear up so monstrously. The world of human beings has been invaded by a technological mentality that seems to distance it further and further from what it is to be human.

2) *The Triviality of good.* Good also exists and continues to be practiced. There were simple examples of kindness in the camps, reflexive acts that revealed, in Rousseau’s

words, pity in action, from which all social virtues derive. To feel pity seems natural, though we might not all feel it in the same way. It is natural but not instinctive, it is a voluntary gesture, free. But let us not forget that egoism and convenience are also natural.

3) *Gendered values*. To the masculine universe are attributed values related to work, public life, principles and grand objectives; to the feminine universe, the private sphere, interpersonal relations, empathy and pity. Western society tends to regard masculine qualities very highly, as the “true” qualities, and to disregard feminine qualities, those that lean towards the daily virtues.

4) *The phenomenon of the just*. It’s enough to say that they have been far too few.

Todorov concludes somberly saying that the bystanders, in general, let things happen; they knew, they could have helped others in different moments, but they didn’t, although each person’s case was unique. “The pain of another left us cold, if alleviating it meant giving up our own tranquility” (page 161).

Teaching in times of peace, to care for our loved ones, and in difficult times, to find the force within us to open our group of pertinence, beyond the normal limits, and recognize other people as our brothers though they may be strangers.

It is easier for us to say that the victims were human beings than it is for us to say the same about their executioners. The agents of evil were common people. It is difficult for us to accept this. It is more comfortable to think that evil exists at some distance from ourselves, not within, but without, that we have nothing in common with such monsters.

The eternal question still resonates: is man good or evil? Todorov believes human beings are both, that both egoism and altruism are innate.

Raquel Hodara agrees that the Shoah can teach us certain lessons unlike any other event, lessons having to do with human relations, relations among people as well as with the State.

*Obedience*. Here the problem arises of what to do when confronted with an order, the question of responsibility and morality; to know when to obey and when not to. We may recall, in this context, that the only written legal code in the second person is the Ten Commandments, a personal contract that transcends any order.

*Human Rights*. Another lesson that may be learnt through the experience of the Shoah is that, before the murdering begins, civil rights are denied and, in general, human rights are restricted; thus, a target is set up where, later, the arrows will fly.

*Ethics*. Ethics become an issue when a point of intersection is discovered between one person and another who is viewed as being somehow different.

*Ideologies of Salvation*. The Shoah poignantly reveals the danger of a political ideology that defines itself as absolute, sacrosanct and true. We are alerted against the threat of all such fundamentalism.

Professor Hodara summarizes the three most important lessons of the Shoah as:

- the importance of individual responsibility and the development of critical thought capabilities

- the recognition that not all that is legal is legitimate

- the non-sanctification of any political ideology.

Considering what we have seen thus far, four participant groups may be identified: the perpetrators, the victims, the bystanders and the outside world. Much may be learnt from each:

- from the perpetrators: the grade and extent to which human beings will commit themselves to a policy of extermination that is irrational, cruel and unjustifiable by any ethical standard (religious, moral, etc.); the importance of totalitarian political systems in the generation and enabling of such behavior; a review of the concept of obedience at all levels, especially in education, to stimulate critical judgement, freedom of thought and individual responsibility; to promote appreciation for the “feminine” values related to the ethics of caring and solidarity.

- from the victims: the point at which there is a break from culture, education and the norms of social behavior, beyond which peaceful, human coexistence degrades and descends into “animalistic,” thoughtless behavior; to use these experiences as subject matter for study and comprehension at all levels of education (for example, the excellent television production, “The Wave”) so that we may learn more of the truth about ourselves and what we can do to defend against our weaknesses and, perhaps, if anything similar to the Shoah should ever occur again, to discover more and better internal and external resources for prevention and/or resistance.

- the bystanders: a great number of people who remained silent, at various points of proximity to the victims (friends, neighbors, citizens, governments, etc.) who saw but did not act; some were terrified, while others in Germany, Poland, the Ukraine, Hungary and Romania were convinced that what was happening was good. The indifference of members of society who were not directly implicated is one of the most remarkable aspects of the experience. In addition to convenience, as Todorov says, indifference can be viewed as resignation. This is a great danger that is even worse today due to a generalized climate of skepticism and distrust of institutions and the political class. People seem to feel that there is no sense in taking action because we appear to be in the grips of forces so much greater than ourselves that we can do nothing to stop them (generalized corruption, organized crime, etc.)

- the world context: the complicit silence of the allies, other countries and the church is the same silence we maintain today with respect to certain events that are, to some degree, similar to the Shoah.

The Shoah confronted its participants with dilemmas that humanity had never confronted before. Today, the same Shoah confronts us and all of humanity with the dilemma of how to recognize our very essence in all its contours and deepest recesses.

### **Redefining Ourselves as Human Beings**

Just remembering the Shoah is not enough. If, by remembering, we mean the dangerous simplification that we were all merely witnesses to the scenario of “Bad Nazis / Jewish lambs to the slaughter.” This is an empty memory, one that evades the essence of this most human experience: we have been witnesses to base evil, within the grasp of evil itself, and have seen the consequences in both the perpetrators and the victims; thus, we are forced toward a redefinition of ourselves. Perhaps the Shoah indeed serves as a lesson that teaches us just how far we can go, a crude lesson on human nature.

To be sure, there were acts of incredible, miraculous heroism. We like hearing about that, we like seeing ourselves reflected in that particular mirror, and we like thinking of

ourselves as brave idealists: fighters, unified, active, generous, omnipotent and triumphant. But there was also humiliation, cowardice, compromise, submission, silence, beatings, passivity, egoism, betrayal, mistakes, carelessness, impotence, and failure.

### **Applying the Lessons in any country**

These are lessons that should be learnt by anyone who has influence over the lives of others. Teachers at all levels, both formal and informal. Journalists throughout the media, politicians, security forces and leaders of groups; doctors, psychotherapists, advisors and clergy.

The lessons of the Shoah could help modify some aspects of our system of education, both in terms of form and content; we might work more on the construction of individuals with a greater ability to think independently. We need to modify standards that are set for generating memorizers and repeaters, and stimulate more thinking, understanding and questioning. We need to stimulate participation at all levels, to have a greater “sense of belonging” that involves each and every one of us (in the street, the neighborhood, the sidewalk, the city...)

Although the learning and conceptualizing of these lessons implies the need to consider abstractions, a comprehensive understanding requires a more human point-of-view, integrating statistics, people, emotions and a sensitivity.

The maintenance of democracy, its optimization and, of course, the general well-being of the population. High levels of unemployment together with desperation, lack of credibility in our leaders, apparent corruption at all levels of government, progressive deterioration in health care and education, all of these lead to the search for magical solutions, for ideologies of salvation, for “good fathers” to “resolve” our problems. The maintenance of democracy, its optimization and the general well-being of the population are no longer just theoretical concepts when we speak of them and think about them in the context of the Shoah. The end does not justify the means. Never. As Argentines, we know the painful consequences of this Nazi program: our armed forces applied it through demented methods of kidnapping, torture, disappearance and the theft of children; they utilized evil to “save” us from evil. Here also the means were the end.

The response of indifference by witnesses and the world-at-large to events during the Shoah reveals the power of convenience as a spontaneous tendency in human beings. It reveals the extent to which we can maintain silence over our moral consciences when we delegate responsibility on others.

It alerts us to the danger of fundamentalism, both political and religious. The different forms of fundamentalism enclose us within a dynamic of “my way is the true way, whoever opposes me is my enemy and deserves to die.” The Shoah teaches us the importance of shifting from the dominion of “the truth” to that of “the opinion.” Whereas the dominion of “the truth” establishes that whoever is not with me is against me, the dominion of “the opinion” permits our recognizing that the other has a right to his view as well.

The Shoah teaches us the fatality of pragmatic discrimination and prejudice. We know that discrimination exists, that it forms part of our learning and understanding processes, we depend upon our ability to differentiate and distinguish. But the Shoah has plainly demonstrated the consequences of acting on the basis of discrimination, denying the right to exist to others who are considered different.

The lessons learned about human nature should not necessarily frighten us; knowing what we are capable of can be a strength, enabling us to better defend ourselves from what we recognize as a danger. The Shoah confronts us with a disturbing but realistic reflection of ourselves. It is not the idealized and rational image that we are accustomed to perceiving on a daily basis, but rather an image that is more complete and complex that includes both good and bad elements, egotistical as well as altruistic tendencies. The Shoah lays bare the hypocrisies and lies of a social education that is meek, myopic and deceptive.

Educators must stimulate the daily virtues and hold them up as the most important of values, training students to reflect on questions of ethics and the dilemmas through which we may view ourselves as human beings, aware of the limits to obedience, hierarchies and the giving of orders.

### **This Frightening World**

I feel frightened by the potential for technological destruction we have achieved and the lack of limits established for its utilization. One of the advantages we can appreciate through maintaining the memory and knowledge of the most disturbing aspects of the Shoah may be that in doing so, we can learn things about our own natures – both individual and social – and the fragility of human solidarity. The Shoah as a school for learning has emerged from the darker side of humanity. So long as those of us who are on this side, the brighter side, fail to learn the lessons of the Shoah, other genocidal criminals will unfortunately continue to extract “precious” lessons from the conduct and organization of the Nazis, as they have done in recent years. Samuel Totten and William Parsons write:

*Will the killing ever stop? Will the scourge of genocide ever be eradicated? Will humanity ever be wise enough to prevent the deaths of potential genocidal victims before they “become yet another set of statistics in the welter of statistics”?*

.....

*How could they not? Daily broadcasts and reams of print journalism issue terrible news about the “ethnic cleansing” that took place in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the recent slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and Tutsi sympathizers by Rwandan government forces and paramilitary extremists; the mass killings perpetrated in Burundi; the intransigence and resurgence of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; the hateful epithets and actions of neo-Nazis in Germany, the United States, and elsewhere; the incremental and insidious destruction of indigenous peoples’ ways of life across the globe; and the ubiquitous deprivation of various peoples’ human rights (which, at times, explode into genocidal actions).*

Are we not at this very moment part of the world that is indifferent to what happens in other places? How much do we know about what is really happening in East Timor? And in Burundi? Bangladesh? Cambodia? Rwanda? Bosnia-Herzegovina? What are we doing for those countries? Which of the religious faiths has declared itself against those genocides and why in those particular situations? Why aren’t there international movements to show that all of humanity opposes all such massacres? Can it possibly be that all of humanity really opposes these massacres, or are those just oft-repeated but empty words? What are

we prepared to do for people we are certain are being murdered, but who belong to cultures we don't know, who live in unfamiliar countries elsewhere on this same planet?

As the editors of the above-mentioned book have said, one thing we can do is not to look the other way. We can learn about and get to know each of these cases and try to understand how to avoid the insidious repetition of past events.

*The message of those who lived through it.* The survivor-victims – and also the survivor-perpetrators – are carriers of this message: essential evil exists, ethics can dissolve into dehumanization; torture, depersonalization, hunger, primary necessities, desperation, all of these can strip human beings of the protection we always believed to be essential. “That was done to us,” the victim-survivors will say quite succinctly. “That,” an entity, “that” not human, “that” which cannot be named, “that” neutral, sexless, unqualified, of “that” I think we should begin to be concerned. “That” which is more prohibited than sex, corruption, or even death, is “that” which we all fear and suspect we could possibly be turned into but we don't ever want to know about it.

Are there hopes? I do not wish for the end of this book to have a skeptical and pessimistic tone. I confess, however, that I do not hold out great hopes. What I have learnt with respect to human beings and their response to possibilities in this society is often disheartening. We don't appear to learn very well, we seem to suffer from a supine stupidity that is absolutely contradictory to our supposed, cherished rationality. Nonetheless, through a crack there seems to filter through a glimmer of hope, the same that encourages me to continue living and to cast this bottle to the sea. Like the lives of my parents. Perhaps, someday, the miracle will take place and we will learn.

The ideas of Humberto Maturana, Chilean biologist and epistemologist, regarding the Shoah come to my aid in this attempt to offer a sense of hope as these pages come to a close. He says:

*Evil is a cultural phenomenon that emerges, not because human beings are innately evil, but because it takes form whenever there is a political, religious or philosophical theory that justifies the negation and submission of the other. The damage we inflict on another in anger does not constitute an act of evil. In such an act, the injury might be violent or fatal, but it is not innately evil, only if we appeal to reason in order to justify the legitimacy of the injury, before ourselves and others, while shutting off our human sensitivity, does this injury become an act of evil. The Holocaust is an act of evil. Its magnitude is overwhelming, incomprehensible and devastating, but as an act of evil it is an act of evil like many others that have been committed in the history of humanity and that we continue to commit daily as we create rational justifications for our negation of the other. (Page 302)*

*... I think Holocausts have occurred many times in the history of humanity since the emergence of material and spiritual appropriation in the patriarchy. The Holocaust of the Jewish people is the most immense and moving for us due to its being so recent and it touches us more because we can see ourselves in it as object and as actors. Was it not perhaps a Holocaust when three million or more women were murdered as witches at the hands of the Inquisition? The appropriation of things, the truth, ideas, is blind before the other and before*

*oneself. So long as we have philosophical theories that rationally justify the appropriation of truth, without reflecting upon its principles and fundamentals, without admitting that they are our creations and not visions of reality, so long as we have religions without reflecting upon them and admitting that they emerge from our spiritual experience and not as revelations of a transcendent truth, there will be Holocausts, large and small, because we cling to the defense of our truths, hiding our desires and, therefore, our responsibility for what we do.*

*Every time that, one way or another, we appropriate a truth and seek a rational justification for our actions on the basis of that truth, we open an avenue toward the Holocaust. If we become lords over the truth, he who is not with us is mistaken in a transcendental way and his error, for us, justifies his destruction without our having to take responsibility for it. Even better, if the other is not with me, his negation and destruction is justified, and the rational justification of the negation of the other exempts the destroyer from responsibility. When this happens there is no place for reflection and the other simply disappears from the human environment, his negation does not touch us and the Holocaust, the absolute negation of the other, is underway.*

*...The only possible way not to fall into this trap of rational negation of the other is through reflection. Reflection enables us to question the possession of truth and leads to the reappearance of the other as a human being just as legitimate as oneself. The fundamental emotion that constitutes what is human throughout our evolutionary history is love; acceptance of the other as a legitimate other with whom to coexist. When we have achieved a capacity for reflection that permits our questioning the idea that we possess the truth, the other appears as human, and love, the most fundamental human emotion, manifests its presence and a possibility opens up for responsible conduct before him or her. We cannot, nor should we, deny our desires, but we can take responsibility for them and thus act responsibly. When this occurs, human harmony is not necessarily achieved in any immediate sense, but it becomes possible, and the way toward the Holocaust closes because a way is opening toward the biology of love. Is it possible that we haven't yet realized that love is the only emotion that enables us to recuperate the harmony, the comfort and the spiritual esthetic of coexistence? (Pages 304-5)*

**The Shoah can be a tombstone or a stepping-stone. It's up to us.**

Raoul Hillberg, op.cit.

Lawrence Langer: *Admitting the Holocaust*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

Op.cit.

Mystification is a concept used by Karl Marx in order to designate the process through which one class – the exploiters – offers false representations to another class – the exploited – presenting forms of exploitation as if they were beneficial. The exploited classes are confused and do not see the exploitation of which they are subjects; they are thankful, submissive and perceive no reasons to rebel. In a broader sense, as an element of confusion and for altering perceptions, mystification has been focused on by various scholars of human behavior, among them Ronald Laing (See “Mystification, confusion and conflict”).

See *Cinco estudios sobre genocidio, (Five studies on Genocide)* by Daniel Feierstein, Acervo Cultural, 1997, where he presents a lucid analysis of the circumstances, dynamics, difficulties, achievements and dilemmas of some resistance groups during the Shoah.

Stanley Milgram: *Obedience to Authority. An experimental overview*, Harper Torchbooks, NY 1975.

*(Haney, C., Banks, W.C. & Zimbardo, P.G. (1973). A STUDY OF PRISONERS AND GUARDS IN A SIMULATED PRISON. Naval Research Review, 30, 4-17. The experience was also published in Zimbardo P.G., Haney C., Banks*

W.C., Jaffe D.M.: "The Psychology of Imprisonment: Privation, Power and Pathology", in Rubin Zelig (ed): *Doing unto Others*, Prentice Hall, 1974.)

op.cit.

Tzvetan Todorov: *Frente al límite*, Digo XXI Editores, México, 1993.

Following publication of Todorov's book, Daniel Goldhagen's extensive essay, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, was published, which attempts to explore the question of how the Shoah was generated and sustained by the German people. He proposes his controversial view, disputed by some historians and scholars, that the complicity of the entire nation was necessary. It is based on exhaustive documentation demonstrating that anti-Semitic ideas and sentiments were deeply embedded in the German commoner's mind. Some historians feel that he does not show, on the level of the common person, how the transition was carried out from exclusionist anti-Semitism to exterminationist anti-Semitism. Although there may have been some circles that had already proposed the idea around 1870, it is not sufficiently demonstrated that these ideas had permeated the rest of society. On the other hand, those who critically judge Goldhagen, insist that the Nazis rationalized their exterminatory conduct as being defensive rather than personal, that they were acting with the same amorality as Nature in destroying whatever is useless or harmful. Furthermore, although it is true that some people certainly wished for the extermination of the Jews, the common man among the 60 million inhabitants of Germany, hated the Jews because they were accused of killing Christ, he resented them because they were accused of being capitalists and exploiters, thus he avoided and distrusted them, but did not consider killing them. Yehuda Bauer, professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and director of the Yad Vashem Research Institution, said: "The book by Goldhagen has been praised by journalists and public figures but I have yet to read a public expression of agreement by any historian. Not one, which represents a rare unanimity. In my university, this book would never have been approved as a doctoral thesis." Nonetheless, Goldhagen's study has the virtue of presenting the issue and inviting us to study it and reflect upon its implications.

Eva Fogelman, *Conscience & Courage*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1995.

Raquel Hodara professor at the First Reflection Meetings at the International School for the study of the Holocaust of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1998, personal class notes.

Op.cit.

S.Totten, W.S.Parsons, I.Charny (Ed): *Century of Genocide. Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*. Garland Publishing Inc., NY, 1997.

Humberto Maturana, *El sentido de lo humano*, Dolmen Ediciones, Santiago de Chile, 1995

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# Recommended reading

Specially recommended reading for a greater understanding of the experiences of children of survivors:

- The classic by Helen Epstein, “Children of the Holocaust,” in addition to being the first to address the issue, this book continues being a valuable mirror where we can see ourselves reflected in different testimonies that this journalist recorded, together with the development of her own story as daughter of survivors.

- The book by the psychologist, Dina Wardi, “Memorial Candles. Children of the Holocaust” is an attempt to understand and conceptualize our experience based on her professional work with children of survivors in Israel.

- The fictionalized and novelized testimonials by: Art Spiegelman (in comic-book form, he relates his personal experience as a child of survivors, interacting with the stories of his parents);

- David Grossman (in this marvelous novel, the first chapter of which I am especially fond, “Momik,” is an eight-year-old boy who we accompany as he experiences doubts, tribulations, fears and confusions in relation to all that he sees, hears and doesn’t understand about the Shoah);

- Eva Hoffman (a testimonial narrative of her adaptation to a new country and the cultural shock she experiences; emotional and highly conceptual), the narrative of Julie Salomon (the voyage of “return” to Poland together with her mother);

- The dazzling work by Jorge Semprún (he puts into words the content and process of his fifty-year silence) and, of course,

- The entire works of Simon Wiesenthal, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, whom require no explanation.

There are three works that I consider indispensable for gaining an understanding of the survivors / appeared:

- The work by Tom Segev, “The Seventh Million. The Israelis and the Holocaust,” in which he illustrates with historical documentation the resistance that was offered to the survivors; although Segev addresses the issue as part of what seems to be an anti-Zionist stand and which might be suspected of political motives that make some of the ideas “a matter of opinion” or questionable, there is still value in his research and strength in the documentation that he provides.

- The work by Terrence Des Pres, "The Survivor. An anatomy of life in the death camps" particularly the chapter, "The excremental assault." I felt the text to be so vital as to include it in its entirety.

- The profound and reflective essay by Lawrence Langer, "Holocaust Testimonies, The Ruins of Memory," based on an exhaustive examination of filmed survivor testimonies which offers a very effective approach to understanding the complexity of memory. Also, the essays collected by Langer in his book, "Admitting the Holocaust," which addresses various issues (chronicles, the relationship between film and literature, issues related to language and social resistance, all in relation to the Shoah).

In order to reflect upon the conditions under which the Shoah was possible, the day-to-day living conditions for both the victims and the perpetrators, and ways in which these facts may serve as lessons for us, the work by Tzvetan Todorov is fundamental, it is a masterful study with which one may agree or disagree, totally or partially, but it still remains valuable as it presents reflections and lessons for something that previously seemed unapproachable and impossible to conceptualize.

For a greater understanding of the saviors or rescuers, I recommend the work by Eva Fogelman, "Conscience & Courage. Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust," from Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1995.

Back cover:

"The Silence of the Appeared" focuses on the Shoah – the Holocaust – from a humanistic, concrete and personal point of view. The book considers the effects of the Shoah and the consequences of those effects both on the victim-survivors and their children, and how it continues to affect their lives today. Now, after fifty years of silence, many Jewish survivors are eager to share testimony on what they lived through during the Nazi occupation of Europe. The question of the silence is a question in the minds of many of their children. The silence pervades all of society: What has been kept silent? What is it that we shouldn't know? What are the reasons for the silence? Why do we always speak about the six million who disappeared and not the one million who appeared afterward? What is an appeared person? How have those who were condemned to death gone on living after they re-appeared? When they wonder over and over again, "Why me?" what is the real question?

Diana Wang poses even more questions in this book: What effects has the Shoah had on the children of survivors? How have they metabolized the things they have known about throughout their lives? How have they dealt with the things they weren't told? Is there such thing as children of survivors syndrome? Are all survivor families the same? How has society responded in general?

Although the topic is the Shoah, the topic is also about human beings and their conduct under certain conditions of degradation and submission; although the book discusses Jews and Nazis, it also has application to other circumstances, to other countries and populations. Based on testimonies and up-to-date bibliography, we are offered a human mirror, a glance at what is personal and subjective.

This book produces an effect that is both troubling and necessary. The hope is that examination of human conduct in extreme situations presented without prejudice or qualification will contribute to the learning process of future generations.