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Author examines Holocaust trauma in a new generation

Inspired by her relatives' differing responses — resilience and suicide — Allison Nazarian looks at survivors' grandchildren

BY MATT LEBOVIC | February 27, 2013, 11:55 pm |

Fifteen years in the making, journalist Allison Nazarian's "The 3G Legacy" examines the lives of more than 100 grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.

One of the first books to focus on third-generation — or "3G" — survivors, Nazarian's project treads familiar ground for the Florida-based mother of two teenagers.

A 3G herself, Nazarian grew up in a household "obsessed" with the Holocaust. For decades, she observed her mother cope with mental illness tied to the memory of family members murdered by the Nazis.

"My mother was the only child of two survivors, and she was so affected by the Holocaust that she could never come out of its shadow," the 41-year-old Nazarian told The Times of Israel. "Her whole life was finding out secrets that she took to be strikes against her."

Nazarian remembers her own "very Jewish" childhood, with Jewish day school, summer trips to Israel and her always-present maternal [grandmother](#), or Bubby, Polish-born Paula Dash.

A survivor of the Lodz Ghetto, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, Dash — nee Garfinkel — gave birth to Nazarian's mother in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp before moving to the US in 1951. She named her daughter Lily, after her mother murdered at Auschwitz.

Permeating both conversations and silence in Nazarian's childhood home, the genocide was "the other member of the family," the author says. Nazarian watched Lily cope with clinical depression and says she saw how the slaughter could ruin lives a generation after it ended.

During Nazarian's college years, the Holocaust received unprecedented attention around the world. The film "Schindler's List" captivated the grandchildren of survivors, just as the miniseries "Holocaust" had captivated their parents — and millions of Germans — in 1978.

The crumbling of Soviet rule opened new archives and research opportunities in Eastern Europe, and thousands of survivors wanted people to hear what happened to their families during WWII. Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation filmed 52,000 survivor testimonies by 1999, and many 3Gs learned "what really happened" for the first time, on their VCRs.

Nazarian recalls watching her grandmother's video testimony and observing her Bubby become a late-in-life activist for survivors, speaking at the White House and across the US.

Paula and Lily — mother and daughter — both lived in the absence of murdered family members. Paula seemed to escape the Holocaust, but her daughter — Nazarian's mother — was unable to free herself.

Learning from both women, Nazarian knew there was a story to tell about the "double burden and blessing" of being a 3G.

She envisioned the book in 1997 as a journalism graduate student at Columbia University. Nazarian developed the project in Prof. Samuel Freedman's book seminar class, deciding on a memoir-style account of the Holocaust's role in three generations of her family.

Upon completing her degree, she put the 3G project on hold to focus on raising two children with her husband at the time.

"I did not feel up to the task of writing a 3G book," Nazarian said. "It felt too burdensome. Also, I realized the book could not just be in my own voice and about my own story. I wanted to find other 3Gs and do something more universal, but that was too much to handle at the time."

Soon after Nazarian completed her degree, her mother committed suicide. The namesake of her murdered grandmother, Lily Blankstein was 51.

Blankstein had visited Poland with her survivor mother — Nazarian's Bubby Paula — in the early '90s. The midlife encounter catalyzed half a decade of declining mental health, uncharacteristic "adventures" and — ultimately — her death at 51 from an overdose of prescription medication.

Focused on her family and other writing projects, Nazarian kept the 3G book on the back burner for 14 years. She thought about the Holocaust's destructive role in her mother's life and introduced her own children — 4Gs — to their family's history.

Around the time Nazarian's children were old enough to learn about the Holocaust — in 2007 — her beloved Bubby Paula died.

The loss of her grandmother and chance encounters with other survivor grandchildren prompted Nazarian to return to her long-abandoned 3G project as a cathartic next step.

Initially by word of mouth, she found 3Gs who seemed to "own" and derive empowerment from

the Holocaust. From Nazarian's perspective, survivor grandchildren saw themselves not as victims, but as "the memory keepers of our era."

The author of a self-help book called "Love Your Mess," Nazarian identified with her new 3G peers and the journey between shame and pride.

"For years, I saw the Holocaust as something debilitating to my mother and so many other people," Nazarian said. "Then I met all these 3Gs who see it as a responsibility, and not a burden, and as a badge of honor. I saw I could make the Holocaust a part of me that fits me, and not something that somebody else put on me."

Interviewing survivor grandchildren from North America, Europe and Israel, Nazarian found most of her 3Gs through Facebook. The author also visited several cities to witness the proliferation of 3G social groups, outreach organizations and Holocaust-related activities.

"The dynamic within the 3G groups is positive, and people are getting together with pride," Nazarian said. "The '2G' generation of my mother — the survivors' children — was a different dynamic. There was a lot more shame and bickering."

Many of Nazarian's 3Gs reported feeling traumatized or powerless about the Holocaust, especially before adulthood. Other 3Gs connected the Holocaust with recurring nightmares, relationship difficulties and body-related disorders — for themselves and their families.

The concept of "inherited trauma" in the lives of survivor children and grandchildren attracts researchers in the US and Israel, and the author spent many hours discussing it with 3Gs.

Some studies identify trauma "transmission" from a survivor to his or her descendants, including via genetics, socialization and interpersonal relations. Other studies refute so-called "tertiary traumatization," claiming trauma cannot affect people who were not there.

For Nazarian, no studies are needed to validate what she finds in herself and many of the 3Gs she interviewed.

"The topic of inherited trauma brought the conversation with people to a different level each time," Nazarian said. "It is a real thing. People knew exactly what I was talking about and explained it in their own families. A massive trauma that occurred in your family can permeate everything."

'I met all these 3Gs who see [the Holocaust] as a responsibility, and not a burden, and as a badge of

A large portion of the book's 3Gs work in "helping" professions, and most take pride in being Jewish. Many 3Gs practice "their own brand of Judaism," balancing what their grandparents "would be OK with" and what resonates with them, Nazarian said.

The importance of "marrying Jewish" and raising children

honor'

aware of the past figured prominently in many interviews, often without Nazarian bringing them up.

“A lot of people mentioned their grandparents telling them to marry someone Jewish, and they never questioned it,” Nazarian said.

The author spoke with some 3Gs who — like herself — are raising adolescents.

Some 3G parents try to shield their children from the Holocaust’s gruesome details, while others use those details to teach compassion and proactive living, Nazarian said. Identifying with both mindsets, the author wants her sons to “really feel what happened,” but without the Holocaust dominating their lives.

Almost all 3Gs expressed wanting to do something “positive” with their families’ legacies.

“My generation is empowered, and we have all we need to communicate and make change and connect with others,” Nazarian said. “Growing up, our grandparents might have appeared helpless to us.”

For Nazarian, “The 3G Legacy” has deep roots in both her Holocaust-obsessed childhood and her more recent, turbulent midlife. Researching the book allowed her to identify with other 3Gs and clarify her relationship with the past.

“The 3Gs want to know that their own lives do not have to be lived in reaction to the past,” Nazarian said. “They are the last generation of Jews who will have had firsthand relationships with survivors of the Holocaust. What our grandparents taught us lives on, and it matters.”

Nazarian is currently looking for a publisher, and hopes her book will complement Helen Epstein’s influential 1979 work about her mother’s generation, “Children of the Holocaust.”

“My book is probably more for my mother than my grandmother,” Nazarian said. “My grandmother made her own way and was able to do something positive for herself with the experience. My mom was not able to do that. The Holocaust and its aftermath contributed to her not being able to live a normal life.”