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In my own write: Memory keepers

By JUDY MONTAGU
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Will the 'Third Generation' carry forward the story of the Shoah?

"The big question Holocaust survivors want to know," according to psychologist Eva Fogelman, "is will the Third Generation [their grandchildren] continue to tell of the destruction of European Jewry, or will the story die with us, the survivors?" It took two generations – 40 years – "for the silence to be broken, for psychological denial to erode, and for survivors to have an audience" that was prepared to listen to what happened to them during the Shoah, Fogel wrote in a 2008 article.

Understandably, there is a period during which major traumatic events are just too close and overwhelming for those who lived through them to process and then share – even assuming that other people are ready to hear about them, which was mostly not the case in the years immediately following the Holocaust.

Fogelman noted that it took 40 years after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 before liturgical poems commemorating the loss of that era began to be written.

And, she added – as families all over the Jewish world recounted during their Seders last week – it took 40 years after the Israelites' emergence from Egyptian slavery before God decided that they were spiritually and emotionally fit to enter the Promised Land.

While a study carried out by Haifa University researchers argues that Holocaust trauma signs can be identified even among third-generation grandchildren, for other researchers, the notion that trauma can affect people who didn't directly experience it is no more than "pseudo-science" (leading me to wonder, in a different context, to what extent we Israelis are psychologically changed by the recurring reportage of terror attacks in our small country, even when we are not physically involved.) Debate continues about the extent of the Shoah's psychological impact on the grandchildren of survivors. But most researchers have found that survivors were able to talk about their experiences more easily with their grandchildren than with their children.

THE CHILDREN of Holocaust survivors – the Second Generation (2Gs) – birthed and brought up by parents who emerged, blinking, into the bright light of everyday life while still not freed from the blackness of the

nightmare they had escaped from often became victims themselves of events that occurred before they were born.

“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,” wrote Allison Nazarian in *The 3G Legacy*. The emotional imbalance amid which she grew up later led her, as a journalist, to interview over 100 grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.

Her grandmother was resilient in dealing with the aftermath of her horrific experience; her mother eventually committed suicide.

What Nazarian learned during her meetings with survivor grandchildren was that they saw themselves not as victims, but as “the memory keepers of our era.”

It was important, even vital, for them to know what their grandparents went through, to connect with their family's Shoah history while the living witnesses to it were still alive.

IN A case study of 2Gs and 3Gs, American psychologist Flora Hogman noticed that among the grandchildren she spoke to, there was a sense of pride in – and awe of – the survivors. This awareness of the suffering that their grandparents had endured was part of the fabric of their grandchildren's lives, but it was channeled into a greater consciousness of others' suffering, accompanied by the feeling of belonging to a wider community than their own immediate one, and a desire to educate others about their heritage.

“The second generation grew up at a time when Holocaust survivors were shunned in society,” wrote Fogelman.

But “the grandchildren of survivors grew up at a time when Holocaust survivors had regained their sense of dignity...

We have a transformation from shame to pride in the third generation.”

One hopes that, in Israel, this pride will translate into more funding being made available for impoverished Holocaust survivors while they can still benefit from it.

WITH THE advent of Holocaust Remembrance Day next week, an email forwarded to me by an Israeli cousin who is around my age took on special significance in light of the “big question” which opens this column: Will the Third Generation continue to tell the story of what happened to European Jewry, or will the story fade with the remaining survivors? The email was one written to her family by my cousin's 26-year-old daughter during her recent honeymoon – a month spent motoring through Holland and Italy – and my cousin had found it thoughtful and moving enough to send on to me.

The newly-marrieds had rented their camper in Germany and needed to return it at the end of their trip. When visiting Munich, however, they decided that they couldn't be in Germany without going to the Dachau concentration camp.

“Dachau was very sad and hard for us both,” she wrote home. “I found it much harder than when I was at all those camps in Poland [with her school]. I tried to think about the reason for this because the place itself is very much like a museum, and the surrounding area is very cultivated, while other places in Poland were almost untouched. One would think that would make it a harder experience.

“The only explanation I managed to think of was that it was like the two of us were alone in this big and awful German place, while in Poland I was part of a big group, all of us feeling the others' strong support while we walked in the camps with the Israeli flag.

“But then in Dachau we went to the religious monument with the ‘Yizkor’ sign and the Hebrew message, and I felt for a moment that same strong sense of the power of a group – all the Jewish people together mourning this horrible and unfair death of our people.

“Inside the monument there is room to light candles, and when we went inside we started crying and hugged each other. A few Germans about to enter saw us and waited outside... it was our private moment, remembering our people.

“The more you learn, talk and think about the Holocaust, the more you don’t understand,” she wrote. “What made so many people so cruel? How can this be?”

“As we walked away from the site toward the parking area, we felt it was very good and important that we went. We felt it was our victory – the fact that we were walking there – though we both agreed it wasn’t much of a victory, though....

“It’s weird in a way,” she concluded, “because you would think this visit to Dachau wasn’t suitable for a honeymoon, but I think it was actually very suitable. The Jewish way is always to remember the bad and our history even when you are happy and celebrating – like when you break a glass at the huppa [wedding ceremony].

“This month was about celebrating our marriage and the beginning of our lives together. But we didn’t just do fun and carefree things; we also took the time to remember what happened.”

OUR FAMILY is intimate with Shoah destruction. My mother and grandmother were deported to Auschwitz, and many of our relatives were murdered (see “Second Generation Revisited,” The Jerusalem Post, May 4, 2005).

As I began reading my cousin’s daughter’s evocative email, I was curious about how deep an impression the Shoah had made on her – a young person with no grandparents alive to question closely about that unbelievably terrible period. It seemed doubtful whether events already somewhat removed in time would have a great personal impact.

But after finishing and being touched by her account, I felt – going on that small piece of evidence – that the transmission of our people’s Shoah story was in safe hands, for another generation at least.



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