

Living Life as a Child Holocaust Survivor

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May 5, 1945 is indelibly etched into my memory. I was not quite five years old on the day of my liberation. Liberation was not as liberating as it sounds, not for a Jewish child emerging from nearly three years in hiding. I believed that my Christian rescuers, Albert and Violette Munnik were my parents and their daughter Nora, my sister. I had forgotten my parents. Never mind that I was a boy with black, curly hair in a sea of blondes. I had become Robbie Munnik. They were my family and I did not know differently.

However, my parents miraculously survived, each in a different hiding place in The Hague, Holland where I was born on August 5, 1940. The three of us, what was left of our family, were re-united. My father and mother's parents, (my grandparents), and their brothers and sisters, (my uncles and aunts) had all been murdered. My Jewish parents reclaimed me and I was returned to Leo and Emmy Krell. For nearly three years as a hidden child, I had not complained or cried. I knew somehow that it was dangerous to do so. But I recognised freedom sufficiently to cry about three years-worth when I had to leave the Munnik's. That was the second time I lost my family in addition to other separations in the crazy days following the order to assemble for "resettlement to the East" on August 19, 1942.

I was a child whose sense of security had been ruptured. I had lost my bearings. A fragile beginning. Nor did I know I was a Jew. How could I? Upon return to my parents, I became Robbie Krell again and was enrolled in a Catholic school near our home for an entire year. I was the Mother Superior's favourite, either because I was a good student or perhaps more likely, a promising prospect for conversion. After living with my Christian rescuers, then brainwashed by Catholic nuns, I learned about being Jewish at home, hearing stories from survivors who returned. They spoke of Auschwitz and other mysterious places in Yiddish, ably translated by my second cousin, eight-year old Milly who had returned from Switzerland with her parents. We heard things no child should hear and therefore listened all the more attentively.

That was my introduction to Judaism, an unforgettable litany of horrors visited upon Jews that imprinted on my mind. Seemingly from nowhere, I had a Hebrew teacher. Mr. Krakauer, who tried to teach me at our home. A good student at school, I was unable to absorb Hebrew, not even a prayer. I did not know what the problem was. Now I do. How can a depressed child learn from a depressed teacher? He was a concentration camp survivor and G-D only knows what torment he experienced and transmitted.

If learning Hebrew was meant to make me more Jewish, why should I co-operate? So far I knew only that being a Jew meant death, for everyone was dead, save one first cousin, and Milly. We had lost the privilege of growing up as children steeped in play and security. Childhood transferred into adulthood overnight, a dangerous adulthood. We had become "elderly children."

My six-year old cousin remained with his Christian rescuers. He declined our offer to live with us. Understandable. He thought they were his family. Had my parents not returned, I would have remained Robbie Munnik. I once asked my Moeder if she had wanted my parents to die. Her response, "Of course I thought of it. Then you would have been mine. But because I loved you, I wanted them to live." After the war, I was shared by my two sets of parents. Albert and Violette Munnik attended both my graduation from UBC medical school in 1965 and my wedding to Marilyn in 1971. They were my angels. But while they saved my life, they could not fix my life.

My personal recovery began the day in 1951 when we left for Canada aboard the Diemerdiijk, a freighter with passenger accommodation, via the Panama Canal on a five week journey to Vancouver.

The prisoners who worked in the "Kanada compound" in Auschwitz were right about naming the storage place of furs and treasures after Canada, the country they imagined to have an abundance of food and natural wealth. The compound held the goods plundered from Jews arriving to the camp.

To this ten-year old immigrant, the opportunities were obvious. Even with loving parents who did their best, I knew I was on my own.

I hit the ground running, learned English, mowed lawns, delivered newspapers and joined Habonim. Then I worked my way through university, medical school, an internship in Philadelphia, residencies in psychiatry at Temple University Hospital and child psychiatry at Stanford. I returned to Vancouver where I became professor of psychiatry at the UBC Medical School.

I barely looked up. The task of being normal when you know you are not is all encompassing. Shy beyond belief, I was nevertheless the lead in the school play the moment I arrived. Who better to play Franz Schubert than a kid with an accent who could play the piano? Next I was on stage winning spelling bees. And then, strangely, without electioneering, I was voted class president, then grade president, a trend that continued throughout university where I became the medical school president and representative on student council. What was this, this ability to be elected without campaign speeches, without self-promotion? At least in part, it was the child survivor in me. I had mastered the art of silence. Silence was the language we child survivors learned and silence was the manner in which we communicated and moved through life.

Although those ten formative years determined the arc of my life, for a time I severed my ties to that decade. It was less easy for my parents to do. My father told me when I was fourteen that we were broke. He had been a successful furrier in The Hague but not in Vancouver. Eventually he achieved modest success in real estate. My mother remained unhappy. Nevertheless she had a son at age forty-one, a brother for me with a fifteen-year gap between us. She had a second chance to raise a son and she burdened him with stories of the war. It was like two families living side by side but involving the same cast, a Dutch family with me and its Canadian version with Ronnie.

Working on being normal was obviously a serious matter but one that required a carefree appearance. What I did not realise then was how deeply affected we children were by the events of the Shoah and how intimately the traumatic consequences were intertwined with our daily existence.

As a newly minted psychiatrist responsible for the UBC Child and Family Psychiatry Clinic. I was busy teaching residents and senior medical students. Then in my small private practice Holocaust survivors began to bring me their children. And from them I learned of the impact of the Shoah on survivor families.

I also learned what was missing in our community. There was no Holocaust education so with two colleagues, we founded the Holocaust Symposium for High School students in 1976. The 42nd annual symposium takes place on May 2nd.

I started in 1978 a program to record audio visual testimony of Holocaust survivors. When I announced in 1983, my intention to build a Holocaust Education Center, survivors told me of failed attempts to create a memorial to their loved ones. So I initiated the effort that led to the construction of a memorial at the Schara Tzedek cemetery, where over 1000 names are inscribed, each representing a family member murdered in the Holocaust. It was unveiled in 1987, a full forty-two years after the end of World War II. Why so long? Like elsewhere, the established Jewish community did not take note of our need for a place, a symbolic gravesite to say Kaddish. That is why my father would not set foot in the cemetery or any Jewish cemetery. He did so only in 1987 when he could see the names of his family inscribed at the base of the memorial.

Then I founded the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre in order to have an administrative center to co-ordinate the Holocaust education programs, to house the audio-visual testimonies, to collect archival materials as well as mount exhibitions both travelling and original. This Centre was dedicated in 1994 in order through its various programs, to combat racism, prejudice and particularly anti-Semitism. We have taught over 20,000 students annually since opening our doors.

I was naïve. I thought, thousands in our community would recognize its value and take out memberships. Instead, thousands avoided even entering the exhibit space. They must have thought it a chamber of horrors, rather than a forward-looking, cutting edge effort to secure our community

All these initiatives were brought to fruition by dedicated volunteers, survivors who served as speakers, others who served as docents, wonderful board members and brilliant executive and education directors.

But there was one overriding issue that became the driving force of my preoccupations. I discovered child Holocaust survivors! That may sound strange. For it was well known that children who had survived the Shoah arrived in the USA, here in Canada, and of course, in Israel. They did not need to be discovered. But they had disappeared from view. For almost forty years, child survivors did not identify themselves as survivors. Immediately after the war, children were discouraged from talking about their experiences. In any case, said adults, you were too young to have memories, lucky you. Therefore you did not suffer like we did.

Other well-meaning adults urged children to forget in order to get on with their lives. That is not how it works. Traumatic memories experienced in early childhood are not forgotten. They remain and they return.

In the early 1980's, some of us encountered memory and realized that we children also suffered consequences, Holocaust trauma so to speak. My self-discovery took place at the 1981 World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust survivors in Jerusalem. Rabbi Israel Meier Lau spoke, "I am the chief Rabbi of Netanya. My father was the chief Rabbi of Piotrowsk. He was murdered in Treblinka. My mother died of hunger in Ravensbrück. I was liberated from Buchenwald. I was eight years old."

Then I got it. Then I realized. My cousin Nallie was six, I was five and cousin Milly was eight. We were the children who had survived. And no one had paid any attention to us. We struggled virtually alone. With Rabbi Lau's help I had discovered child survivors.

Throughout the 1980's awareness grew, Child Holocaust survivors began to speak with each other and to speak out. This led to a Gathering in New York held in 1991 which attracted 1600 people, primarily child survivors and their families.

It was a breakthrough of great significance and three books of child survivor accounts and experiences were written shortly after. The workshops provided a safe environment in which participants gained self-awareness and much needed relief. Among the plenary speakers were Abe Foxman, Judith Kestenberg, Sarah Moskowitz, and myself. Sarah and I founded the child survivor group of Los Angeles in 1983. It had grown to have 300 members, many of whom attended the New York Gathering.

The late Elie Wiesel of blessed memory, Auschwitz and Buchenwald survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, spoke at the closing. I introduced him. He began "For years and years, you and I have asked ourselves certain questions. Among them the most important one: Why the children? Why has an entire regime, if not an entire people with some exceptions, mobilized its national energies and resources in hunting down Jewish children? Why were they the first to be marked and singled out, the first to suffer and first to perish? Of all the crimes conceived in fanaticism and hatred, the war against the Jewish children, I believe will remain the worst, the most vicious and the most implacable in recorded history."

Our gatherings have continued annually in such places as Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Houston, Toronto, Montreal, Prague, Warsaw, Amsterdam and Berlin. This past November we were back in Jerusalem, for the third time. I have delivered the opening keynote address to the assembled 400-700 child survivors and their families on a dozen occasions, each and every time, filled with anxiety and trepidation. It is an awesome responsibility when the wrong words can wound and the right words can heal. These gatherings are about shattering the silence that envelops each and every survivor so that they will feel less alone and understand that their flaws and idiosyncrasies are shared.

The key objective for survivors is to transmit messages from their experiences, the essence of Holocaust education. Elie Wiesel said "Tell the right stories and people will do wonderful things."

A story.

We who teach from our experiences in the Shoah and its consequences, seldom know whose hearts and minds will be touched. But over a dozen local teachers bring their classes because as youngsters they once attended a Symposium – as they say, "The most meaningful day of my high school life."

Last year I spoke to a class from Moreno High School in the Tolerance Education Centre at Rancho Mirage.

Faced with forty beautiful brown faces, the Education director asked, "How many of you are from parents who are both American citizens?" One hand went up.

I told my story for about thirty-five minutes to these Mexican, First Nations and Central American children who listened attentively.

They asked wonderful questions just like any other classes we encounter in Greater Vancouver.

Did your family lose their faith?

Do you believe in G-D?

How did you become Jewish again?

What was it like to be an immigrant?

How were you treated by the other kids?

Were your parents depressed and how did they start again?

After we were done, a few stayed behind to shake hands, or hug, or ask further questions. But one young man stood aside and waited patiently. When everyone was gone, he said: "I have had a life changing experience. I decided to embrace the bad." I said, "I think I know what you mean. But tell me." He said, "I had a bad beginning, in my home and in my country and I have fought to forget many awful things. Now I have decided to take those bad things and use them to rebuild myself and to derive strength from what I endured." Where are you from? I asked. "Guatemala". "May I quote you about "embracing the bad" when I speak or write?"

His face broke into a broad smile. "Of course." Then he joined his classmates.

On a speaking engagement to the Santa Barbara Jewish Federation back in 2003, I met Walter Kohn who was one of the German Jewish boys interned in Canada as an enemy alien. From his internment camp in Quebec in 1941 or 1942, he applied to the UBC Physics Department hoping to be accepted as a student. He wrote "I know a little math and physics." He was rejected with the response being "You will never get in here." So Walter Kohn went to the United States and eventually received a Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

When I met him following my talk I asked him how he viewed himself with regard to surviving the Holocaust. He said, "I never thought of myself as a Holocaust survivor." Despite his fleeing certain death, despite losing most of his family, he would not accept the term, survivor. When Professor Kohn visited Vancouver to open our exhibit on Enemy Aliens, we continued our conversation. I asked him again. He remained silent, and then thoughtfully and slowly answered, "No, still not. But I do see myself as a man with special responsibility."

It struck a chord. We survivors of different backgrounds, whether Kindertransport children, concentration camps, of hiding in convents and monasteries, caves and sewers - all carry a weighty responsibility - to speak for the millions whose voices were cruelly stilled. Perhaps the precise definition of who exactly is a Holocaust survivor pales beside the responsibility that was imprinted on those whose lives were ravaged by the Shoah in one way or another. I was simply fulfilling my responsibility for those who could not. And a majority of local survivors joined our various efforts in order to give voice to those who were silenced. They were faithful to memory. I hope that hearing us will inspire you also to accept that responsibility - as witnesses to the witnesses. You will now carry the memory that may inoculate a generation against hatred and prejudice. And where anti-Semitism flourishes, everyone is in danger because it never - ever stops with Jews.