

Ghosts of Grief: How Children of Holocaust Survivors Navigated Childhood in Maine

David Giesel, Colby '15
May 2015

The Holocaust is a difficult time period for anyone to discuss. The Jews who survived the Nazi camps carried the scars, nightmares, and hardships endured in the camps for the rest of their lives. The lives of so many were lost, and for those who survived, they often had to begin anew from nothing. For many, it was difficult to start a new life after liberation. Many survivors began to rebuild their lives by reuniting with family, or starting a new family, but the ghosts of the Holocaust stayed with them for the rest of their lives.

Some of these survivors found their way to America and then to Maine, where they started to rebuild their lives and raise their children. They did this triumphantly, but always with the events of the Holocaust in the back of their minds. Each survivor dealt with their pain and suffering differently after liberation and had their own ways of sharing this pain with their children. They had difficulty expressing to their children how they felt. Their children grew up in America and a world removed from Nazi Germany. Their parents struggled to explain their history in Europe because “applying the lessons of the Holocaust to ordinary life was both a futile exercise and a trivializing insult. When it came to the evil of the Nazis, nothing applied.”¹ There was no easy way to tell a child why he had no grandparents, why he could not comb his hair a certain way, or why his

¹ Thane Rosenbaum. "Identity." In *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes: Reflection of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Menachen Rosensaft. 1st ed., 81. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015.

parents no longer wished to speak their native tongue. The children grew up, had to find their way in the world, but the events endured by their parents were always a part of them and shaped their lives and Jewish identity. Growing up in Maine, the childhood of children whose parents survived the Holocaust was affected and marked by the experiences of their parents. Without knowing or understanding the depth of their parents' grief and experience, the children struggled with their own feelings and were unable to speak about how they felt about their parents' pasts.

For some children, their parents kept silent, but to keep the sorrow and grief in one's mind for so long created psychological problems seen in both survivors and their children. Elie Wiesel encompasses this gifting of sorrow perfectly, stating that "many if not most of the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors live with ghosts."² Their parents inadvertently passed these ghosts onto their children without parent or child knowing what exactly was being transferred, but through the darkness of the Nazi crimes and the difficulties of putting these feelings to words, the children were left to feel isolation and grief without understanding its origins.

As the children grow up and begin to learn about the Holocaust, their parents are the best sources of knowledge, but "not so much through what they told [them] about it as through their persons, their eruptive fragments of memory, and most of all, through their palpable and pervasive personal suffering."³ Their grief was immense and in retelling their experience to their children would have brought back all the ghosts from Europe. Survivors were often "a puzzle to themselves," which only complicated and

² Elie Wiesel. "Introduction." In *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes: Reflection of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Menachen Rosensaft. 1st ed. xix. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015.

³ Eva Hoffman. "Identity." In *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes: Reflection of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Menachen Rosensaft. 1st ed., 85. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015.

made more difficult their ability to share the grief with their children.⁴ Because the children were unable to understand their feelings or what their parents had experienced, they too had difficulty expressing how they felt. This paper draws upon interviews with four children of survivors who grew up in Maine: John Isaacson, Eva Messerschmidt, Michael Messerschmidt, and Harriet Slivka Hillson.

John Isaacson grew up in Lewiston, Maine, in a Jewish family where he experienced the grief and struggle of growing up with these ghosts. His father, Irving, had grown up in Lewiston as well. Peter Isaacson, John's grandfather, was an attorney and law partner of former Governor of Maine, Louis Brann. The Isaacsons were already an established and prominent Jewish family living in Lewiston before the war. John was not isolated from the Jewish community of Lewiston, but because he had no understanding of the grief that followed him in childhood, he was left to struggle on his own.

Irving enlisted in the army during the war and then joined the OSS as a spy in Europe. While in Germany, he met his future wife, Judith. Judith had survived the camps with her sister and mother, but lost many family members along the way. This loss and sadness affected Judith and her mother, Rose, deeply. Judith struggled early in her relationship with Peter. She had difficulty letting herself fall in love, calling off the wedding at first once she discovered how many of her family had been lost. The immediate loss was so great for so many survivors. The ghosts stayed with survivors even as they began to raise their own children, and these parents carried with them a

⁴ Zdzislaw Ryn. "Long-Term Psychological Morbidity Or Incarceration in Auschwitz." *Echoes of the Holocaust* no. 6 (2000): 1-4.

lingering sense of guilt for being unable to save loved ones and family.⁵ There was little time to process the destruction while it was occurring; yet some, like Lot's wife, were never able to shake the hardship and remove themselves from the past.

Rose brought with her a devastating tragedy that developed in John as a child. He was not alive during the Holocaust but it was omnipresent in his life. Rose had incredible difficulty adjusting to life after the war. John began to get a feeling from his grandmother, common amongst the children and grandchildren of survivors, that he was the successor to the life of her husband killed by the Nazis and all the other men she lost during the war. Rose would often speak of men in her life before the war, and often John could not tell if she was speaking with him, or with those men from her past. These were some of the ghosts that John grew up with.

John was a young man growing up searching for his own identity. Rose's struggle with reality made John uncomfortable to be around her at times. As she struggled with the barriers between the past and reality, John too struggled with these boundaries. It is a psychological theme common amongst all people with profound grief that they may have trouble recalling events and establishing their coherence.⁶ John grew up in a stable, American household, but the events of the Holocaust and his grandmother's profound traumatization stuck with him as a child.

⁵ Paula Fass, *Inheriting the Holocaust: A Second-Generation Memoir*. 1st ed., 120 New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009.

⁶ Mayo Clinic Staff. "Diseases and Conditions: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)." Mayo Clinic. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/basics/symptoms/con-20022540>.

Eva Messerschmidt was born in Germany after the war to two survivors, Kurt and Sonja. She soon moved with her parents to New York City and spent her childhood in Maine. Michael Messerschmidt was born six years after his sister. Kurt was a cantor who worked at Temple Beth El in Portland. Due to their father's position in the community, the Messerschmidt children grew up with a strong Jewish community, but without anyone to share her experiences with. Unlike many of the children around them, the Messerschmidts did not have grandparents to share family gatherings or family history with. There was always a small, empty dinner table.

Eva's mother, Sonja, received letters from Europe periodically, but would always take them into another room, read them, and cry. Eva did not know what was in these letters but was only left to assume what they entailed and the ghosts they carried with them. It is troubling for a child to see her mother cry. To not be able to comfort her is even harder. Eva was left helpless and had no one to talk with to better understand her mother's pain. The content of the letter is unimportant, but the feelings they invoke and the past they represent are important to Eva. The unknown and unspoken grief is transferred without any real understanding, creating the "palpable and pervasive personal suffering" inherited by the children of survivors.⁷ The children did not suffer physically at the hands of the Nazis, but they suffered by the horrors of their parents' experiences.

School was an especially troubling setting for both John Isaacson and Eva Messerschmidt. In school the Holocaust was an unspoken topic, and many of their classmates knew nothing about the horrors of Nazi Europe. In Hebrew School, John was learning about Jewish identity, but for him growing up and learning about the Holocaust

⁷ Eva Hoffman. "Identity." In *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes: Reflection of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Menachen Rosensaft. 1st ed., 85. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015.

without any real explanation meant that being Jewish was a bad thing, a secret, and a form of intense grief and sadness. John had a stable American household on one side of his family, and an intense and confusing background on the other side. Growing up with both identities would only cause confusion as to his Jewish identity.

There was no discussion in school about the events of the Holocaust, and the children had no peers with whom to share his experiences with. Hebrew School and Jewish summer camps brought much of the same. Children of survivors could gain some knowledge about the Holocaust in books or by watching special television programs, but in many ways they were left in the dark. Their parents struggled to speak with them about their experiences in the Holocaust, and the children's teachers had no way of doing so either.

Growing up, Eva knew that there was something deeply troubling in her parents' past, but could not fully understand what was the root of the issue. She speaks of always feeling different from her Gentile friends, but also from her Jewish friends. At Thanksgiving, when her friends had many relatives come to their house to celebrate, Eva only had her immediate family. She did not understand as a young child why she too did not have a large family to celebrate holidays with. As a child she did not know why she felt this difference, and while she knew that some of her friends knew about her parents' past, she did not speak with them about it. Her parents did not discuss their lives in Germany, and German was rarely spoken in the house, and not with the children.

Eva read extensively to better understand what her parents experienced in a second-hand manner, but was never privy to the full events in detail. Eva remembers much more in the immediate years after the war about her parents' ability to cope with

the grief than her brother, Michael. It is interesting that these siblings encountered the Holocaust in different ways. Eva always felt a much stronger connection to Europe and the war than Michael did. Eva felt different from her peers, and grief from her parents' past. Michael did not have such intense feelings. Everyone is different and deals with grief in their own way, but the difference in their age may just have been a long enough time for Kurt and Sonja to be more able to help their younger child deal with his grief.

Michael and Eva's parents spoke English with German accents, but Michael did not realize this difference until late in his childhood. To him, they were just his parents, and they all lived in America. His parents' past, Europe, was not known to Michael, but passed on feelings unknown. Eva knew her parents had been terribly mistreated in Europe, so when they spoke longingly of their homeland, she was confused. All she knew of their Europe was the atrocities committed against them by the Nazis. The Messerschmidt children grew up with a strong sense of Jewish identity that formed due to their father's position in the community. They were welcomed with open arms and accepted.

Whether they grew up in Europe, Israel, New York, or Maine, the children of survivors are burdened with a grief that they can often not explain – they were “too familiar with emotional pain.”⁸ Eva Messerschmidt spoke of always feeling different from both her Gentile and Jewish friends, but was never able to pinpoint why until she later better understood the Holocaust and her parents' experiences. The differences John felt from the community around him are similar to those of Eva. For John, being Jewish made

⁸ Thane Rosenbaum. "Identity." In *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes: Reflection of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Menachen Rosensaft. 1st ed., 77. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015.

him a target for extermination—an extremely troubling identity. John did not know how to cope with these feelings. Each child felt some degree of difference from the communities in which they grew up, both due to their Jewish identity and to the experiences of their parents as Holocaust survivors.

It was a grief that was never spoken of, but put pressure on her to succeed. Eva felt that she needed to behave and become successful so as not to burden her parents with any further grief. This is a sentiment that another child of Holocaust survivors in Maine, Harriet Slivka, also expressed. The children did not know the roots of some of their feelings related to their parents' experiences, and because the history of the Holocaust was not yet taught in schools, nor spoken about publicly, they did not have places to turn to for explanation. Eva did not know why her mother would cry as she read the letters, just as former Israeli Security Agency Director Avi Dichter had no idea why his mother got so upset with him when he combed his hair to left, the style of Hitler.⁹ These children often had no idea what was upsetting their parents. Without knowing what was truly upsetting their parents, they had no way to express their own feelings.

These children grew up knowing that there were other families like them who had emigrated from Europe after the war, some of who had also been in the camps, but there was no formal network amongst them to cope with the experience. None of the children directly knew peers who were also dealing with the same issues. They may have heard that another family was from Europe, Jewish, and had immigrated shortly after the war,

⁹ Eva Hoffman. "Identity." In *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes: Reflection of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Menachen Rosensaft. 1st ed., 87. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015.

but because the subject was not spoken at home, in synagogue, or at school, they did not know how to properly approach the subject with peers dealing with the same feelings.

The unspoken secret pain and grief is something that children of Holocaust survivors all across the world deal with – the “palpable personal suffering.”¹⁰ Why at times did they feel miserable when they had so much good in their lives?¹¹ The parents want to protect their children from the misery they endured at the hands of the Nazis, but in some ways also hurt their children by not explaining the reasons for their tears, nightmares, and depression.¹² These traits were then often passed down to their children who carried the grief and sorrow with out an understanding, or proper coping mechanisms. Parents often did not sit down and in one fell swoop explain everything that had happened and why they still carried so much of it with them.¹³ John and Eva knew the war made their mother sad and to talk about it upset her. They did not want to upset their parents, but had difficulty understanding why Europe hurt them. Without having the full experiences of their parents explained, children were possessed by the same “tormentors of their parents,” but had no true understanding of what they were.¹⁴ These children viewed the world partially through the lens of their parents, a lens they struggled to understand and explain.

¹⁰ Eva Hoffman. "Identity." In *God, Faith, and Identity from the Ashes: Reflection of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Menachen Rosensaft. 1st ed., 85. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015.

¹¹ Lisa Dobi-Reitman. "Family Ties: The Search for Roots." In *Second Generation Voices: Reflection by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators*, edited by Berger, Alan and BERger, Naomi. 1st ed., 16. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

¹² Hasia Diner. *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence After the Holocaust, 1945-1962*. 1st ed., 217. New York: New York University Press, 2009

¹³ Lisa Dobi-Reitman. "Family Ties: The Search for Roots." In *Second Generation Voices: Reflection by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators*, edited by Berger, Alan and Berger, Naomi. 1st ed., 17. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

¹⁴ Abraham Peck. "Is Dialogue Possible: Germans and Jews." In *Second Generation Voices: Reflection by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators*, edited by Berger, Alan and BERger, Naomi. 1st ed., 253. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

We inherit many things from our parents – some things are tangible, others are intangible. Often, the intangible contributions from our parents are what shape our childhood the most. The children of Holocaust survivors inherited their parents' ghosts. They grew up knowing these ghosts existed, but not what they were. A sense of grief and sadness took hold in parts of John Issacson, and Eva and Michael Messerschmidt's childhood that they could not explain. What we inherit from our parents is always a part of us, and the ghosts of the Holocaust were gifted to the children of survivors and shaped their identities and childhood.