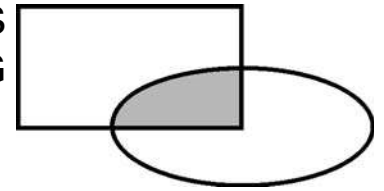


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# Intimate relationships among second generation Holocaust survivors in Israel – A qualitative analysis of coping with the parents' heritage

Eli Somer and Moshe Nizri

Many researchers assume that the continuing influences of the Holocaust on its survivors are long-term, and hypothesize that its stamp is also present in the lives of the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors (e. g., Shmotkin et al., 2011). Notwithstanding, controlled studies have found that second generation Holocaust survivors do not report more psychopathology (e. g., Ijendoorn et al., 2003).

However, there is evidence that the Holocaust experience is reflected in intimate relationships of the second generation (Wiseman et al., 2002). Compared to control groups, the second generation Holocaust survivors displayed less intimacy towards their partners (Mazor & Tal, 1996), evaluated their partners as less loving and sexual, and more controlling and invasive, perceived the quality of the marriage as inferior and presented insecure intimate communication patterns (e. g., Joels, 2002).

It appears that the massive losses made it difficult for some of the survivors to develop new loving and intimate partner relations, and were less emotionally available to their children, who internalized a relationship model characterized by a low level of intimacy and difficulty trusting people. For example, second generation Holocaust survivors who grew up in families that were silent about the parents' trauma tended to experience others as more vulnerable and weak, or as controlling and hurtful (Wiseman et al., 2002).

Our study sought to qualitatively examine intergenerational transfer of difficulties in intimacy and explore strength or growth in partner relationships of the second generation.

## Method

Data were gathered from 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996) with 15 men and 15 women who were born between 1947 and 1965 to parents both of whom were persecuted by the Nazis. Participants were retrieved from a non-clinical convenience

sample, using snowball sampling. Data analysis was based on grounded-theory (Charmaz, 2006). The study was guided by three main research questions:

1. How do second generation Holocaust survivors describe their relationships and intimate relations?
2. What (if any) is the connection between their experience of intimate relations and their parents' Holocaust experiences?
3. What points of weakness/strength do they see in their intimate relations in the shadow of their parents' Holocaust experiences?

## Findings

### »I think that this relationship preserves my security« – the yearning for stability and a sense of safety

Various interviewees described how they formed their intimate relationships with the intention of creating a secure and stable space – to counter-balance the psychological insecurity and lack of emotional stability associated with their parents' difficulties in containing their Holocaust experiences. For example, one interviewee says:

»This experience of being immigrants and – my parents, how their world exploded and everyone there disappeared, so although they never raised it in conversations with, I still got the sense that family is not a secure place. And today with my husband, everything is so simple and secure. ... I think that my partner constitutes some kind of mirror that there is another world, sane, that can be relied upon, secure. I think that this relationship preserves my security.«

Some of the survivor parents had difficulty conveying and regulating their Holocaust experiences for their children in a way that would allow them to experience the family and the world as a secure space. The security that some of the interviewees strive to reach by means of intimate relationships is not directed at meeting a specific need (such as, for example, financial or phy-

sical security), but rather at creating and preserving a sense of existential emotional security. Another interviewee notes:

»My wife healed me .... This is the model of a woman that if you are talking about a corrective experience, she is the absolute antithesis of my mother. Someone healthy, who is able to give, who enjoys everything, who doesn't play guilt games, who takes responsibility.«

The partner relationships of some of the respondents allow a space of predictable relations in which the rules of communication are clear, expression of emotions is permitted and the intimate connection is curative.

### »I am trying to do things differently« – the tendency to reconstruct the parents' intimacy versus the yearning for correction

Various interviewees clearly identified the shadow of the Holocaust in their survivor parents' relations. For example some of the interviewees mentioned:

»It was clear to my mother that she would marry as she was 21 years old and alone in the world.«

»Their friendship was directly connected with their survival; each needed the family unit in order to survive.«

The survivors' partner relationships are perceived by their children as a means of survival that gives them the opportunity to have the corrective experience of belonging in the context of the traumatic existential solitude that is the lot of persecuted people. The intimacy allowed them the hope of in the face of the loss of their previous world.

While some of the interviewees expressed satisfaction with their parents' survival and intimacy patterns, others expressed resentment of the parental model to which they were exposed, and did not want to re-enact it. For example:

»My father was the arbitrator at home. It is very likely that the large measure of freedom that I require now in my marriage is in order not to be like her, she was not free at all.«

»I think that I am not like them in this way. My parents went through many crises in their intimate lives .... They more or less each lived their own lives, they lived alongside one another in the family, with a lot of anger, my mother was very angry with my father and I don't want to be like that, I am trying to do things differently ... I don't want my relationship to be like that.«

The parents' model is perceived as enmeshed and based on two complementary characteristics: considerable separateness characterized by a strict division of roles, alongside dependence and separation difficulties. Contrary to the parental model of intimacy, which was characterized by an unpleasant polarity, a significant group of interviewees described the need for intimate relationships based on partnership and independence.

**»Enough, enough, how much can one take?« – the yearning for release from the Holocaust after years of dealing with it**

Many actions of second-generation Holocaust survivors are intended to correct the painful vacuum-like experience their parents brought with them from Europe. For example, this is how one interviewee described the reasons that led him to engage intensively with the Holocaust as an adult:

»My childhood was one in which I had a feeling all the time as though there was something, some kind of black cloud that no-one talked about. I felt it, I knew that it was there, no talking, no talking. We went all around this .... It left me with the need to investigate this. It wasn't by chance that I took this direction of interest in the Holocaust and it was important for me to travel to Poland, to make these journeys to Poland and to see the things. That is, it left me all the time with something that as a child I had a need to decipher.«

The compulsion of the second generation of survivors to process and reframe their childhood experiences constitutes an overarching theme that runs through the various domains and time lines of our respondents' lives. Partner relationships in this group are framed not only as a normative life goal, an antithesis to the ethos of their parents' suffering, but also as one of many means of giving significance to a childhood in the shadow of the Holocaust. It appears that the commitment and intensity that characterized the survivors' efforts to correct their childhood experiences was associated with signi-

ficant costs in their adulthood. Some interviewees expressed saturation regarding further engagement with the Holocaust. For example, one interviewee reported the following:

»Enough, enough, how much can one take? So one day a few months ago I got a letter from »Amcha« [an organization for survivors and their families; E.S.], so I got up at home and I think that Zvika was there and I say enough, enough, I don't want to be a second-generation Holocaust survivor any more, enough, I have paid, I have done, I have contributed and that's it, and I tore up the letter and threw it in the garbage and I said that I don't want any more letters from them, I don't want anything, I am no longer a second-generation survivor, I don't want this, I don't want to talk about my parents, I don't want to.«

Interviewees expressed two dialectical movements throughout their lives, vacillating between polar viewpoints: (1) from a strong connection to the story of the Holocaust stemming from their parents' over-involvement to exclusion and compartmentalization of their parents' experience during childhood, and (2) from a connection to, and engagement with, the subject of the Holocaust in their adulthood to a later satiation and yearning for release from the emotional burden.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The stories the 30 second-generation survivors of the Holocaust told about their partner relationships and ways of life revealed a complex impact. *Processing*, a mental effort to cope with, and resolve, internal conflicts had been employed by our respondents in an attempt to clarify and interpret intolerable familial and collective traumata that were left incomprehensible by their survivor parents. Whether because of the magnitude of the loss, or whether due to the power of the events experienced, many survivors failed to achieve some clarity about the traumatic events, let alone »detach/free« themselves psychologically from their harrowing pasts/leave their harrowing pasts behind them.

Accordingly, the necessary processing tasks were left to their children. Partner relationships of the second-generation survivors became an essential space in which childhood family experiences were understood and disengaging themselves from their enmeshment with their parents was experimented with. Our respondents attempt-

ed to come to terms with their parents' emotional legacies both inside and outside of their marital nests, but satiation and fatigue motivated some to distance themselves from the identity of second-generation survivor.

Many respondents displayed what has been termed the »paradoxical relevance« of the children of Holocaust survivors (Chaitin, 2007). On the one hand, for many the Holocaust has had a daily significant relevance, and on the other hand, they were unable to explain what this relevance actually is. Participants in this study perceived the Holocaust as highly relevant to them, but many also feared being overwhelmed by it.

As a result, numerous respondents showed how deeply affected they were by their parents' traumatic Holocaust experiences alongside feelings of distance from their parents' suffering in Europe. Second-generation Holocaust survivors interviewed in this study continued to move between these two positions throughout their lives. The Holocaust moves back and forth in their discourse, between being a focus that attracts pain and a source of distress from which to move away and between being a figure in the forefront of their consciousness and a less conscious background.

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