

## Personal Action as Collectivist Reconciliation: Children of ‘Aryan’ Citizens of Nazi Germany Living in Israel

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The purpose of this research was to promote an emic understanding of the dynamics that led a group of second-generation German ‘Aryans’ to tie their fate to that of the people targeted and persecuted by their parents’ generation. We interviewed 15 non-Jewish German men and women who are permanent residents or citizens of Israel and who were born in 1929 or later to parents born in 1921 or earlier. Qualitative data analysis revealed that our interviewees depicted the intergenerational transmission of the parental experience of victimhood. Our respondents, colored by their love for their parents, accepted their parents’ narratives in which they depict themselves as bystanders or passive, subjugated accomplices of the Nazi regime. However, for most of our respondents, living with that inherited national identity had become a torturous burden. Many of our respondents had arrived in Israel with a humble and apprehensive interest in the survivors of their nation’s crimes. Most of them seemed to believe that they could correct wider historical injustices through interpersonal acts of benevolence. Their immersion in Israeli society and romantic involvement with Israeli partners was associated with an identity conflict that, for many, resulted in the ultimate form of reconciliation: conversion to Judaism and the establishment of a Jewish family in Israel.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; second generation; Germans; intermarriage; conversion; Judaism; immigration

Second-generation Holocaust survivors have been studied quite extensively. While early psychological research and clinical observations on this group suggested that the trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors was being passed down to their offspring<sup>1</sup> resulting in ‘second generation syndrome’, more recent research suggests that the squeals of growing up with survivor parents are diverse and should not necessarily be gauged with posttraumatic measures.<sup>2</sup>

Comparatively, research on the transmission of trauma to second-generation adult children of Nazi perpetrators or German collaborators and bystanders is scarce. Recent media stories on descendants of Germans who were ‘Aryan’ citizens of the German National Socialist regime (many of them former Nazis) and are living in Israel<sup>3</sup> motivated the authors of the present study to learn more about the motivations and life experiences of this unique group of individuals. Rosenthal<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Niederland, “Clinical Observations on the ‘Survivor Syndrome’”; Dor-Shav, “On the Long-Range Effects of Concentration Camp Internment of Nazi Victims”; Danieli, *Stress and Anxiety*.

<sup>2</sup>Sagi-Schwartz et al., “Attachment and Traumatic Stress.”

<sup>3</sup>Gold, *Haaretz Daily*.

<sup>4</sup>Rosenthal, “Veiling and Denying the Past.”

investigated the trans-generational effect of the Holocaust and found that events in a family's history burden the offspring, even if they took place before their birth. As children, many in this generation grew up in a social and familial atmosphere characterized as intolerant of any discourse about the Holocaust, particularly one relating to the role of their parents.<sup>5</sup> Up until the 1960s, the Nazi legacy in Germany was confronted with a 'conspiracy of silence' encompassing the media as well as the educational system,<sup>6</sup> thus keeping the Nazi past an unprocessed taboo subject.<sup>7</sup>

The suppression of the National Socialist legacy started to fade only in the 1980s as the media began to address the experience of the offspring of the Third Reich generation.<sup>8</sup> For the children of perpetrators or collaborators, the effect of their parents' denial of any involvement with the Nazi regime and the rationalization of complicity with the racist regime manifested itself in many different ways. Many of them experienced chronic guilt, mental torment and constant suspicion about their parents' deeds even when hard evidence against their parents was lacking. Others reported having nightmares in which they were the persecuted Jews (Sichrovsky 1988).<sup>9</sup> In some instances, second-generation perpetrators and bystanders reported suffering from psychosomatic disorders, accompanied by a sense of depersonalization, which caused them to feel like empty shells or strangers in their own homes, bodies and souls.<sup>10</sup> This generation of Germans was also described as feeling conflicted about their relationships with their parents and as experiencing hardships in the development of their identities, motivating some of them to seek out extra-familial role models.<sup>11</sup>

In their attempts to deal with the guilt stemming from the legacy of their parents' generation, many individuals of the postwar generation sought to compensate for the crimes of their parents' generation by volunteering with Christian 'atonement' organizations that work primarily toward Holocaust survivor welfare in Israel,<sup>12</sup> while many others turned to therapeutic and social welfare occupations.<sup>13</sup>

A small group of German postwar children settled in Israel, the Jewish homeland; some married Jewish partners, and others even converted to Judaism. Although they have mostly shied away from the media, several brief reports about the presence of this group in Israel leaked out to the local media, catching the attention of the authors of the present study. The purpose of this research is to promote an emic understanding of the dynamics that led a group of second-generation German 'Aryans' to tie their fate with that of the people their parents' generation targeted and persecuted. The present analysis aims to identify, describe and thereby understand the psychological stages that led these post-World War II Germans to choose the Jewish state as their home, and how this choice was influenced by their relationships with their perpetrator/bystander parents and the sociocultural environment in which they were raised.

## Method

### Sampling

We sought to interview non-Jewish German men and women who are permanent residents or citizens of Israel and who were born in 1929 or later to parents born in 1921 or earlier. Since none of

<sup>5</sup>Rosenthal and Bar-On, "A Biographical Case Study of a Victimizer's Daughter's Strategy."

<sup>6</sup>Bar-On, "Children of Perpetrators of the Holocaust"; Bar-On, "First Encounter"; Kellenbach, "Vanishing Acts."

<sup>7</sup>Heimannsberg and Schmidt, *The Collective Silence*.

<sup>8</sup>Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence*; Rosenthal and Volter, *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies*.

<sup>9</sup>Rosenthal, "Women in Nazi Germany"; Rosenthal, "Veiling and Denying the Past."

<sup>10</sup>Hardtman, *Generations of the Holocaust*.

<sup>11</sup>Hardtman, *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies*.

<sup>12</sup>Stierlin, *The Collective Silence*.

<sup>13</sup>Hecker, *The Collective Silence*.

the investigators spoke German, only interviewees with adequate command of conversational Hebrew were invited to participate. The first respondents recruited were, in fact, the individuals featured in the aforementioned stories in the Israeli media. Thereafter, sampling of this tiny population was done by a 'snowball' method,<sup>14</sup> whereby we asked every new participant to refer us to other Germans with a similar background who also reside in Israel. As sampling progressed, we resorted to a more intentional sampling aimed at achieving the maximum obtainable variation among respondents to foster optimal understanding.<sup>15</sup> To that end, we combined theoretical sampling (e.g. Jewish converts versus gentiles, children of perpetrators/collaborators versus children of bystanders or non-supporters of Nazism) and criterion sampling (e.g. men and women, married to an Israeli partner or not).

### **Interviewees**

We identified 17 individuals who met our inclusion criteria and contacted them. Two individuals declined to be interviewed, and 15 provided informed consent to take part in this research (see Table 1).

Our final sample included 12 women and 3 men. Four had been children during the war; eight were born during the war or immediately after its end, and three were born more than a year after the war ended. Two-thirds of our sample (10) were married to Jewish Israelis, and most had children and were raising them as Israelis. All of our female respondents had converted to Judaism and become Israeli citizens, while all three male respondents retained their original religious affiliation. Our respondents were rather vague with regard to their parents' involvement with the National Socialist regime; however, eight interviewees reported that at least one of their parents had volunteered with the German Nazi party long before its ascent to power, with five of these parents reportedly holding senior positions in the German military or the Nazi administration. No claims can be made for the representativeness of our sample as nothing is known about the population of Germans of this generation living among Jews in Israel and its size.

### **Procedure**

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews aimed at exploring and understanding the interviewees' subjective experiences and the meanings assigned to some of the major life decisions they had made.<sup>16</sup> The interview guide included two categories of broad questions inviting respondents to reflect and construct their life experiences and the contexts in which some of their main biographical choices were made, specifically those concerning the evolvement of their relationship with the Jewish people: (1) descriptive questions aimed at collecting information on the investigated phenomenon as offered by the respondents (e.g. tell me about your childhood; tell me what brought you to Israel, etc.) and (2) structural questions aimed at gaining an understanding of how the respondents construct their experiences (e.g. How, in your mind, has your familial and national past influenced your decisions, if at all?). We also asked contrast questions for the purpose of honing our understanding as researchers (e.g. You said earlier that your decision to convert to Judaism was a pure theological choice, but you also said later that you became curious about the faith after you learned about the Holocaust. Could you talk to me more about your path to Judaism?).

<sup>14</sup>Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*.

<sup>15</sup>Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*.

<sup>16</sup>Kvale, "The Qualitative Research Interview"; Kvale, *Interviews*; Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*.

Table 1. Description of the study participants

	Name	Year of birth	sex	Occupation	Education	Marital status + religion of partner	Age of approach to Judaism and Israel	Conversion to Judaism	Family experiences during the war	Involvement of first generation with the National Socialist regime
1	Leah	1945	F	Translator	BA	Married to a Jewish man	20s–30s	Yes, in Germany, prior to her relationship	Father was a senior Nazi prosecutor. Was later sent to the front	Father and uncle were Nazis
2	Olga	1943	F	Journalist	BA	Married to a Jewish man + one child	20s–30s	Yes, with her marriage	Father was absent, beloved uncle injured in battle, another uncle served in the military	Grandparents and uncles were Nazi sympathizers
3	Jacob	1938	M	University professor	Ph.D.	Married to a Jewish woman + three children	20s–30s	No	Father arrested as political dissident	Uncle was Nazi official
4	Clara	1944	F	Academic research	Ph.D.	Was married twice to Jewish husbands + children	20s–30s	Yes, with her marriage	Father was a party member and a senior military commander	Both parents were members of the Nazi party
5	Hannah	1945	F	Academic research	Ph.D.	Married to a Jewish Holocaust survivor	20s–30s	Yes, with her marriage	Father was wounded as a soldier	No
6	Nurit	1945	F	German language teacher	BA	Married to a Jewish man + one child	Early 30s	Yes, with her marriage	Father was killed in the battlefield	Uncle was a Nazi official
7	Stephan	1950	M	Journalist	BA	Married to a Jewish woman + one child	20s–30s	No	Parents were abroad during the war	No

8	Sarah	1933	F	Social worker	MA	Single	Early 30s	Yes	Mother died before the war. Father 'employed' prisoners of war in his business	Father was a member of the Nazi party
9	Tziporah	1957	F	Social worker	MA	Was married to a Jewish man + Children	Early 20s	Yes, prior to her relationship with a Jewish man	Very religious family that opposed the regime. Father was a prisoner of war	No
10	Miriam	1938	F	Special education teacher	MA	Was married to a non-Jewish man	In her 60s	Yes	None reported	Her father was a Nazi sympathizer
11	Rivka	1943	F	Teacher	BA	Was married to a non-Jewish man	58	Yes	Father was a senior manager in military-related factory	Both parents were members of the Nazi party
12	Yasmin	1942	F	Nurse	BA	Was married to a non-Jewish man	In her 40s	Yes	Father disappeared during his military service. Mother worked in a Nazi newspaper	Mother was a member of the Nazi party
13	Bella	1939	F	Translator	BA	Was married to a Jewish convert	20s–30s	Yes	Father was a military officer, deserted as dissident. Family was in hiding	No
14	Andreas	1940	M	Carpenter	Vocational high school	Married to a non-Jewish German woman	23	No (his five sons converted)	Father was killed during his military service	No
15	Bat El	1938	F	Personal coach and group facilitator	Ph.D.	Was married to a Jewish man + children	20s–30s	Yes, with her marriage	Father was a judge, member of the Nazi party. He was killed in a bombing	Father was a member of the Nazi party

Notes: Names were altered and some details changed to conceal the identity of study participants. Hebrew and German names in this table reflect the participants' original ethnic name choice.

The nature of the research interview and the divergent backgrounds of the conversing parties required the interviewer to balance an empathic, supportive stance essential for rapport building in this tension-loaded interview with the academic distance needed for objective critical thought during data collection. To facilitate this rapport, interview sites were chosen by the respondents, who for the most part opted to be interviewed in the comfort of their homes. Interviews lasted about three hours each and were audio recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer.

### **Data analysis**

Interviews were analyzed utilizing the grounded theory perspective, employing an inductive, hermeneutic approach.<sup>17</sup> Immediately following each interview, we read the transcript several times to establish thorough familiarity with the text and then performed a case analysis. Parallel to the interview process, we applied cross-case analysis to identify emerging common themes, with case and cross-case analyses fertilizing each other.<sup>18</sup> Basic components of the interviewers' experiences were divided into openly coded units of meaning,<sup>19</sup> which were later condensed into themes that were coded axially,<sup>20</sup> conceptualized, and interpreted in a process involving constant review of the data. Bracketing of interviewer bias was of high concern because of our desire to preserve data credibility in light of the obvious tension associated with the divergent backgrounds of the conversing parties and the emotionally laden themes of these interviews. The first author also provided feedback immediately following the submission of the interview transcripts in an effort to safeguard credibility.

## **Results and discussion**

### **The family narrative**

The process of recruiting and interviewing respondents for this study was influenced by the dark shared history of those involved – both the researchers and the respondents – in this study. We were interested in getting as close as possible to the oral family histories and ethos that had been transmitted to our interviewees by their parents. Two major storylines emerge: one portraying the suffering of the German families, fear of the brutal Nazi regime, fear of the allied bombings, absent fathers, forced postwar evacuations from eastern provinces liberated by the Soviet army, postwar poverty and hunger; the other of parental resentment toward and defiance of the National Socialist dictatorship.

'It Was Horrible': Family Ethos of Anguish in Battered and Defeated Germany

Many respondents spoke of the horrors of bombarded cities as conveyed to them by their parents and their personal experiences of fear as bewildered children. This is how Hannah described her first apocalyptic journey home from the Berlin hospital where she was born:

I was born on April 17, 1945, two days after the last onslaught on Berlin had begun ... My father had been recruited to fight the blazing fires, and my mom had heard nothing from him in three months ... She had carried me in her arms through the smoking rubble and among carcasses of horses ... The hospital was a huge distance from home ... I can't imagine how she made it ...

<sup>17</sup>Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*.

<sup>18</sup>Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.; Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*.

<sup>20</sup>Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

Hannah's description implies empathy with the lonely, mortified young mother trying to get home with her newborn baby through the smoldering ruins of her city. Hannah then went on to portray the suffering of the defeated German nation and the postwar destitution and hunger:

I was an undernourished child ... Mom had to walk for miles to a distribution center where fish oil was rationed for the infants ... She had no milk because she was famished herself ... A million Germans died of starvation after the war ...

Although German society is currently engaged in debates regarding the moral privilege of its civilian population in portraying a narrative of victimhood and trauma, most of our respondents did not hesitate to describe themselves to their Jewish interviewer as first- and second-generation *survivors* of World War II.<sup>21</sup> Equally noteworthy was the fact that these accounts elicited genuine empathy in the authors of this study. For moments, it felt as if the interviewee and interviewer were sharing similar familial and national ethos of victimhood. Echoes of post-traumatic emotional scarring were evident in more than one account. For example, Bella, who was four years old during the war, said:

Our home was bombed and incinerated ... I will never forget this ... After the war I was a nervous wreck. All these bombings and running to the bomb shelters ... Our city was ... completely leveled by the English; it was shocking. I never understood what was going on. I used to cry when woken up during the air-raid sirens because in their haste my parents would not allow me to pick my clothes or take my doll with me ...

Some of the data we collected bore clear echoes of concentration camp icons of suffering. For example, Jacob, who was eight years old when his family fled to Germany from the east, described his experience as follows:

Two of my sisters starved because there was real famine ... We survived because we stole from the farmers ... We told our parents we had found the food because they would never approve of [us stealing], but we knew we were all going to die because there was absolutely nothing to eat ... I was so thin and covered with pussy wounds; I looked like the children in the concentration camps ...

Here, Jacob borrows directly and unapologetically from the uniquely Jewish idioms of the Holocaust. In fact, as an adult he shows behavioral symptoms that are synonymous with the post-Holocaust syndrome, continuing:

We were happy to live on scraps, to get the minimum so we could survive ... So today we cannot throw away even a slice of bread ... I can't bear to see my grandchildren waste food.

Presented out of context, these words could easily be mistaken as the testimony of a Holocaust survivor.

Several of our respondents shared the pain of growing up with a physically or emotionally absent soldier-father. Tziporah, who was born in 1957, shared the following about her father, a disabled veteran of the Wehrmacht:

[His chronic pain] caused depression, and he had bouts of weeping ... It was a very difficult situation, and I remember him saying in the morning that he saw images from the war again ... He would see faces and images and scenes from the war in the wall paper design of his bedroom ...

<sup>21</sup>Schmitz, *A Nation of Victims?*

Tziporah's story bears commonality and resonance with another central, national symbol in Israel: the tragedy of the wounded veteran and his suffering family. However, it also reflects a child's sympathy for her suffering parent and concern for him, which, in this case, was particularly complicated given the unspoken circumstances of her father's injuries. It seems that our interviewees seized the opportunity offered to them by the investigators to emphasize the universality of their childhood experiences and their similarity to the Israeli experience. Nurit, for example, was very explicit about this:

I hesitate to talk about this in Israel ... This is ... a part of the Holocaust history that has not been researched: what happened to children whose father was a Nazi or a fallen German soldier ... how did they grow up? This is something universal. It is unrelated to Nazism or the Holocaust ... I wish I could shake off what the Nazis did to the Jews so I could talk about this.

These children of 'Aryan' Germans bear the scars of hunger, fear and sadness, experiences shared openly in Israel by many Holocaust survivors, war veterans and their relatives. It is conceivable that part of the unusual attraction our respondents felt toward Israelis comes from a sub-conscious awareness of paradoxical similarities between their experiences and those of the citizens of the Jewish state. However, this awareness of common fate and experience shared with Israelis, although felt acutely, remains suppressed as it is perceived to be an illegitimate position to express openly.

Our interviewees' experiences of suffering should be understood as part of the ongoing debate over German victim narratives and the process of German memory building.<sup>22</sup> The recent resurgence of German victim discourses in, for example, feature films like *Der Untergang* (2004), the made-for-TV movie *Dresden* (2006), and Günter Grass's 2002 novel<sup>23</sup> *Im Krebsgang* (Crabwalk)<sup>24</sup> may signal that private traumatic experiences, which were, for years, silenced by uniform public and political discourses, are now being expressed publicly.

#### 'What Could They Do?': The Parents as Victims of the Nazi Regime

Many of our respondents portrayed their parents as bystanders who were simply adapting to life in a dictatorship and regime of terror by lying low and staying away from risky behavior. According to our respondents, their parents were unanimous in expressing ignorance with regard to the Holocaust and exhibiting normal apprehension with regard to Nazi tyranny:

People are average, not heroes. What could they do? I don't know what I would have done under the same conditions. Imagine a troop of SS men passing by you in the street. If you did not salute like this [stretches her arm in a 'Heil Hitler' salute], you were taken away immediately or beaten to death. This was a totalitarian regime that terrorized the population. (Hannah)

Many respondents, such as Leah, were clearly ambivalent about their parents' involvement:

I had very good and liberal parents ... My father joined the Nazi party in '31 ... I asked him, 'How could you?' So he said there were so many unemployed [people] back then, so he thought ... He wanted out in '34 but did not have the courage, because leaving would have been worse ...

Leah apparently sees no contradiction between her father's liberalism and his joining a nationalistic racist party, nor does she question his comment about wanting to leave the party in 1934,

<sup>22</sup>Moeller, *War Stories*.

<sup>23</sup>Grass, *Crabwalk*.

<sup>24</sup>Crouthamel, *A Nation of Victims?*



accepting, at face value, her father's self-serving reasons for joining the party and not leaving it later. Like Leah, many other respondents made great efforts to rationalize their fathers' involvement and their parents' ignorance of the Nazi atrocities. For example, Miriam shared:

My mother and her friend were arguing all night. My mother insisted they never knew [about the Holocaust], and her friend insisted they did know. My mother was a rural mother of ten children, and her friend was of a different social class. So I believe her [my mother] that she never knew.

And Sarah said:

I am 100 percent sure my parents knew nothing, and they were educated people ... Everyone was busy surviving ...

Our respondents resolved the cognitive dissonance that emerged in the formation of their attitudes toward their parents by accepting and upholding their parents' claims that they knew nothing about the Holocaust as it was taking place. However, these assertions of ignorance have been disproven; on several occasions, evidence has emerged indicating that Germans knew that Jews were being disenfranchised, expropriated, brutalized and deported to concentration camps and that many Germans knew about the mass executions.<sup>25</sup>

Our respondents, colored by their love for their parents, accepted their parents' narratives in which they depict themselves as bystanders or passive, subjugated accomplices of the Nazi regime. Some respondents described their parents as devotees of banned churches who would not renounce their faith for the sake of convenience or opportunism. Others proudly recounted stories of parental civil defiance, for example, here is what Bat El shared:

On Hitler's birthday on April 21, every home had to be decorated with the Nazi flag, but we never did, and the neighbors were critical, but my mother refused to display the flag.

My father was arrested by the Gestapo before the war for criticizing Hitler's regime. He spent three days in jail until an influential friend intervened, and he was released. But it damaged his career. (Bella)

Olga most explicitly expressed the difficult bind as follows:

Imagine that you love them because they are your family, yet they did horrible things or at least did not do anything to prevent them ... It will remain a conflict until the end [for me]. Until the end.

For many of our respondents, life in Israel was more compatible with their parents' accounts as victims of the vicious Nazi government and the calamity it brought upon its citizens before its demise. Their family narratives seemed to justify their 'right' to be Israelis even more when they described not only victimhood, but also active defiance of Nazi oppression and resistance to it. For example:

My father was a senior reverend in one of the banned churches ... His Nazi brother told him about Hitler's book; it was like the Nazi bible, and my father replied that the book was like a cancer of the German soul. He was arrested for that ... (Jacob)

While Jacob's account of his father's defiant stance seems reliable, it is also conceivable that Jacob fabricated the story in an attempt to create positive associations with his father, for himself,

<sup>25</sup>Longerich, *Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933–1945*.

and block out negative ones or, in other words, engage in ‘cumulative heroization’, which is defined as ‘the phenomenon of history becoming ameliorated from generation to generation’.<sup>26</sup>

### Encountering the victims’ narrative

‘I Discovered that My Mother Lied to Me’: Distancing Oneself from One’s Parents and Discovering the Holocaust

Several participants were quite direct about the fact that their parents’ silence regarding National Socialist ideology implied their support for it. The expressive paralysis around their parents’ commitment to Nazi doctrine is evident between the lines of Clara’s account:

Look, my father was. It suited him. He belonged to an extreme student group. He was more right wing than the right-wingers ... He supported the regime. Period. She [my mother] came from an antisemitic home. So there is nothing ...

It was too difficult for Clara to utter the complete sentences when she talked about her Nazi parents. She could not say, ‘My father was a Nazi’ or ‘National Socialism suited him’. When asked if she heard her parents talk about their ideology at home, she replied briefly, ‘No. They never talked.’ This inability to speak openly was most likely a reflection of Clara’s own parents’ silence around these issues, still glaringly present in her conscience.

It seems that for some respondents, awareness of unspoken parental identification with Nazism was a gradual process. For example, Yasmin shared:

Look, I discovered a few things my mother had lied to me about ... I asked her what newspaper she had worked for, and she replied, ‘One just like our local newspaper’, but in school I found out it was the Nazis’ newspaper. It explained a few things ... In the 1950s, a high school teacher was charged for using antisemitic language, and one day we heard that he had fled to Egypt. When my mother told me that the man had escaped, she had this dirty smile on her lips that annoyed me terribly. That smile ...

Yasmin represents a set of respondents who were unable to contain their ambivalence toward their parents for very long. In a sense, she, and others like her, had been gathering information about their sympathetic views and involvement with the Nazis for a long time, until her disdain for these attitudes finally came to a head. For Yasmin and the other interviewees in this group, the only way to resolve the conflict with their parents was to, in fact, extricate themselves:

I actually ran away from home ... I was 20 years old ... and I wanted to separate [myself]. (Olga)

I was less than 18 years old when I left home. (Hannah)

It amounted to me leaving my parents’ home when I was 16. They disapproved, but I knew how to fight them until they agreed: (Tziporah).

Arousing encounters with historical facts and testimonies, including documentaries, facilitated a two-pronged identity redefinition: heartfelt identification with the persecuted Jews coupled with growing discomfort regarding their German identities. For members of this

<sup>26</sup>Welzer, *Grandpa wasn’t a Nazi*, p. 9.

group, part of their shock and anger toward their parents was probably associated with the disbelief they experienced as children upon ‘discovering’ or learning about the Nazis’ atrocities. Here are two typical accounts:

There was this magazine called *Crystal* to which my parents had a subscription. It is no longer published. For a year or two it featured a historical supplement ... I read it passionately until it got to modern history. It exploded in my face. Suddenly I was reading about the Holocaust. I said, *This is impossible; there are no such things, how come? I understand that there were wars and how bad they were, but this?* I was devastated! (Leah)

There was this weekend retreat on the shores of a beautiful lake near Munich ... There I came across a book, called *The Yellow Star*<sup>27</sup> ... I looked at the photographs, and it was some sort of a jolt. I did not sleep for two nights. I was 23 years old ... I am going back in time now. I remember that in elementary school I read in a newspaper about the atrocities discovered in concentration camps, and I recall this [same] shock ... (Bella)

Many interviewees describe their first encounter with this dark chapter of their nation’s history as an adult-less experience, that is, without the adults in their lives. For some, it was a repeat discovery. For example, during her interview, Leah spontaneously recalled that her initial confrontation with the facts of the Holocaust did not actually take place during her first encounter with it; rather, 17 years had elapsed since then. However, the knowledge had receded into the recesses of her consciousness. Leah may have sensed that the Holocaust was a topic that would be better processed with the assistance of the adults in her life.

For most of our respondents, their introduction to the Shoah and the painful truth about the national ‘family secret’ occurred haphazardly and in solitude; no adults are present in their stories to help them cope with this emotional tempest. Many of them expressed an intense preoccupation with and emotional reaction to the horrific suffering of the Jews, for example:

I could not stop reading books about concentration camps like Treblinka. I later ended up working for an attorney who specialized in securing restitutions for the survivors. I sometimes stayed over the weekend to catch up with typing up testimonies. I cried and typed ... these piles of these dossiers ... (Clara)

During the Eichmann trial I was listening to proceedings on the radio ... and the atrocities described in the testimonies ... and there was this story on how the Gestapo were forcing women in labor to deliver on the floor with projector floodlights to enhance their view of how babies are born ... and the babies died, of course. At that time I wanted to have children so badly. It was too much. I collapsed. (Bat El)

The revelation of the facts of Shoah among our interviewees was accompanied not only by disbelief, but also by guilt and a deep sense of shame:

Only after I buried my father over seven years ago could I start living without guilt. (Clara)

Our generation carried the feelings of what our parents had done. We could not feel guilt for crimes we did not commit, but we felt shame. What shame. (Olga)

There is nothing to do about it. Nothing. Can I be proud to be German? Definitely not. Definitely not ... I felt shame about being part of Germany all along. I am really ashamed of it. To belong to such a

<sup>27</sup>Schoenberger, G. *Der gelbe Stern*, Hamburg: Rütten & Loening, 1960.

country is shameful. I felt how horrible it is that this [the Holocaust] belongs to me, that it is part of my history. (Tziporah)

The sense that you were born to a people that committed such crimes ... you can never shake it off. It is impossible (Nurit)

Listening to and reading the transcripts of the accounts of these middle-aged Germans in Israel shed an initial light on the mystery of their weighty decision to live in Israel, among Jews. For most of them, living with their inherited national identity had become a torturous burden.

### **Bonding with the Jewish people**

‘We ... Decided that We Would Marry Jewish Men as an Act of Solidarity’: The Initial Pull toward Jewish People

Troubling encounters with the brutal facts of the German persecution of the Jews during their adolescence formative years instigated a process of identity reevaluation in our respondents. Here is Bat El’s description of the agonizing identity conflict that emerged following the Eichmann trial:

Facing the [Jewish] suffering was bad enough, but I ... belong to those who perpetrated the crimes. Both the [victims’] misery and the [perpetrators’] wrongs were on me. How could I live?

Similarly, Hannah shared:

In high school, our history teacher put together an exhibition on the Holocaust. [What I saw] enraged me, I felt resentment, shock ... I had a good friend in class, and we both decided that we would marry Jewish men as an act of solidarity. I was fifteen years old. We felt a sense of kinship and empathy ... and we both decided to marry Jews or even convert.

Hannah’s juvenile way of resolving this cognitive dissonance involved the ultimate bonding imaginable with the victims: through marital union.

Still, naturally, our interviewees remained unable to put their identity conflicts to rest merely through youthful fantasies. Their curiosity about and preoccupation with the Jewish people continued into adulthood. Many traveled to Israel as tourists or volunteered on kibbutzim or at welfare agencies, particularly those offering services to survivors. Their first encounters with Israeli Jews, especially with survivors, stand out in their spontaneous accounts as challenging experiences that elicited mixed emotional reactions. Clara described her deliberate process of seeking out survivors:

I had many discussions with individuals bearing tattooed numbers on their arms ... strangers. I used to seek them out ... I walked the streets looking for them ... I wanted to deal with that.

Tziporah commented on her initial hesitancy around survivors in Israel:

At that period I wanted to know, but I was too shy to ask questions. I did not want to stir up feelings; I could not tell what their reactions would be. I imagined it would be difficult for them to tell their story. They seemed to prefer being silent ... I always hoped they would say something, even a small word.

The impersonal, observational and cautious scouting of ‘survivor territory’ was soon replaced by more direct encounters:

I saw many people with tattooed numbers on their arms. I met them on buses and trains. It was hot, and people were not wearing coats or sweaters so you could see the numbers ... There were so many of them, you know? I felt horrible. I was sure they would never want to speak with me. How would they talk to a German? But they all did ... (Olga)

Clara's first encounter with a married couple of survivors – a nervously avoidant wife and a catatonically silent husband – turned out to be more than she had bargained for:

I went there [to the kibbutz] because I wanted to live with them, to get to know them [the survivors], and every volunteer was assigned a foster kibbutz family to visit after work, have coffee with, and talk ... I was assigned a dreadful woman ... She could not sit down for a moment ... always busy, constantly serving us food and beverage. We couldn't talk to her. And her husband, I don't know what was wrong with him. He had been in the Holocaust ... He was strange ... very thin. He used to stand in the kibbutz mess hall and stare. Like a statue.

For others, their first encounter with survivors was both informative and overwhelming. For example, some respondents came across survivors with an intense drive to have their testimonies be heard by German ears:

There was a long period, you know, that survivors did not talk ... They said nothing, even to their children. Then they realized that they were getting old and that they had told no one ... Some had an urge and a psychological need to tell their stories to Germans. It was completely mad. There was a period that I used to get phone calls from survivors asking, 'Are you willing to tell my story? Nobody has heard it yet, and I heard you are German journalist and I want the Germans to know.' (Stephan)

The respondents described the process of bearing witness, as Germans, to survivor testimonies as both a privilege and a moving experience. Nurit, for instance, was invited to meet a German Jewish family of survivors and told of the meeting as follows:

He shared with us his experiences as a youth in Germany. It seemed that he had never shared some of the stories with his wife or children ... but he chose to share them with us, German women ... It was an honor that he trusted us and could get it all off his chest.

'What Strength These People Have ... After All The Destruction They Are Now Building a New Society ...': From Hesitant Exploration to Romantic Idealization

The process by which Germans decided to tie their fates to those of Israelis entails an evolving, complex progression. For many respondents, it began with estrangement from their own family members coupled with curiosity about the 'others' whom they had victimized. This push away from their German identity was later reinforced by a sometimes-romanticized pull toward the Israeli ethos.

Many interviewees eventually decided to stay in Israel for an extended period of time, intending to transition from observer to more of a participant-observer experience that would give them a deeper understanding of the people with whom they sought to acquaint themselves. Our respondents appeared to be motivated by far more than mere intellectual curiosity:

OK, so why had I come to a kibbutz? I wanted to be on a kibbutz not only because of my curiosity [and desire to know more]. That's clear. I wanted to give something of myself ... I hadn't thought of rectifying the wrongs. I wanted to help, to contribute to a reconciliation, to show that ... there are new Germans ... (Leah)

I thought, *What strength this people has* ... I wanted to take part in building a social-democratic society, building the land after all that suffering and destruction, to build a just, peace-seeking society (Andreas)

Most interviewees also hoped to make amends for the actions of their parents' generation and offer the survivors a small compensatory or corrective gesture. This attitude reflected apprehensive guilt and awe combined with a romantic idealization of the 'new Jew' rising like a phoenix from its ashes. They wanted to forge a new relationship between the 'new Germans' and the 'new Jews'. Sometimes this rhetoric included Christian undertones, too:

For us the Jews were the chosen people, of whom the Nazis had killed six million. We saw it as the worst curse to befall the German people. We wanted to do something for the Jews with all our will and with all our ability ... It was a sort of a calling. (Peter)

Regardless of their original motivation, many respondents emphasized how meaningful and emotionally rewarding their personal relationships with survivors became. For example, Jacob shared:

This relationship [with survivors] is very dear to me ... and to them, as well. They, too, want to meet other kind of Germans ... and I am happy that someone belonging to a people that suffered so much at the hands of my people could befriend me ... This is almost magic. A miracle.

Many children of World War II-era citizens of Nazi Germany living in Israel approached survivors with a humble interest, yet also fear that they would hurt or offend these aging survivors. The welcoming response many of them received was not only reassuring, but also redeeming. It gave these young Germans the sense that they were not necessarily the detested pariahs they had expected to be in Israel.

### Relationships with Israeli partners

'We Committed a *Rassenschande* and This Meant We Defeated the *Arierparagraph*': German-Israeli Relations as the Ultimate Defiance of Nazi Racism

The gradual draw of our respondents to survivors and their milieu, along with their immersion in Israeli society, inevitably led to the development of romantic liaisons with Israeli partners. Eleven of our fifteen respondents had married Jewish partners, and nine married couples had had children. Beyond the obvious personal attraction between the partners, deeper emotional associations may have played a role. For example, Bat El offered a disturbing portrayal of a liaison with Robert, a Jewish refugee from Germany, in the shadow of the grim German-Jewish history as follows:

I met him at a social gathering at Orna's student flat, and he took me home on his Vespa ... We came up to my place; we talked a little, and he wanted to get in bed with me. I said, 'But Robert I don't do these kinds of things [pre-marital/extra-marital sex]' ... and then I thought ... *After the Holocaust how can I resist ... Now I must abandon my principles and surrender to him ... because he is a Jew and I am German* ... And we had sex ... I was a virgin, and all I sensed was pain ... I am telling you this story because it must not be personal ... It has so much wonder and mystery ... I am telling you the story of Germany and Israel.

Bat El identifies completely with her nation when she surrenders to an unwanted sexual advance by a Jewish man. This, she believes, is the penalty to be paid by post-Holocaust Germany. She actively reverses the historical power balance between the nations. By invoking images of

humiliated Jewish women and of Christian suffering as atonement of the sins of others, she not only idealizes the violence perpetrated against her as a deserving penalty for her parents' generation's crimes, but she also sees her post-hoc complicity as a defiance of Nazi racial law:

As we lay silent after it, he asks, 'What are you thinking about?' I say, 'It begins with an A,' and he replies, 'I think of something that starts with an R.' My word was *Arierparagraph* [the Aryan Clause, which prohibited any contact with Jews]. There is this famous photo of a woman tied up to an electric pole in some city square with a sign on her chest that says, '*Ich bin am Ort das größte Schwein und laß mich nur mit Juden ein!*' ['I am the biggest pig around; I hang out only with Jews.'] His word was *Rassenschande* [a Nazi term meaning racial shame or racial defilement]. We had committed a *Rassenschande*, which meant we had defeated the *Arierparagraph*, and that was wonderful.

Ignoring her personal preferences and moral values with regard to premarital sex and yielding to the sexual coercion of the Jewish German refugee, Bat El transforms the sexual assault into an act of German self-sacrificial restitution to the Jewish victims and a victory over the racist legacy of her parents' generation. When she finds out that this encounter left her pregnant, she rejects Robert's suggestion that she have an abortion, insisting that after the murder of one million Jewish children she cannot be involved in the death of another one. (Bat El and Robert went on to get married, and their son later became a combat pilot in Israel's Air Force.)

The interweaving of the German-Israeli relations is also present in Olga's account. Olga visited Israel with her Israeli boyfriend for the first time in the summer of 1965 shortly after Germany and Israel established diplomatic relations. At the time, the first German ambassador, Rolf Pauls, a decorated Wehrmacht officer, was met with violent demonstrations throughout Israel. Olga described her first visit as follows:

As we drove through the country, we saw protest signs and graffiti along the roads, and I thought, These are very interesting times. Diplomatic relations are established; the first German ambassador is appointed ... and I plan to live in the country with Eitan [her fiancé]. How fitting. How lucky I am, that is – this is not only about Eitan and me; this is about Germany and Israel.

The development of Olga's love affair with Eitan is just a small part of the wider historical context of the establishment of bilateral relations between Germany and Israel. Olga sees herself as lucky, not necessarily or exclusively because she is involved with a wonderful man, but rather because she is part of a bi-national act of reconciliation. In fact, when Olga described first meeting Eitan on campus, she commented, 'There was something rather strange; I really liked every Israeli guy,' implying that, for her, Eitan's 'Israeliness' may have carried more weight than his personal attributes and that her attraction to Israelis was not very differentiated.

For Olga, and some other respondents, dating an Israeli was an act of rebellion against the National Socialist dogma still endorsed by their family members. For example, Olga shared:

My aunt G., a nurse by profession, talked to me in private before my marriage to Eitan and said, 'He is a rather likeable fellow, a really nice man, but I want to warn you about a covenant between an Aryan and a Jew. The children born of such a covenant are generally not normal in their heads ... This is a proven fact ... It is scientific knowledge ... that children of Jews and Aryans are a disaster. The children are abnormal.'

Clara offered:

When my relationship with M. [her Israeli boyfriend] became serious, my mother killed me with her nagging ... She used to open his letters. One day she took a photo he had sent me, and she pierced his eyes with a needle.

Through these relationships, our respondents rebelled against their parents' generation and found a way to amend their sense of collective shame and create a personal corrective experience. For example, Hannah shared:

When I learned that Amos [her husband] was a survivor ... I can put it this way: as long as we are together my goal is to make him feel good, and the background/context [for that] is the Holocaust, the loss of his sister, nephew, and many cousins ... I don't want to be overly dramatic, but this was the cause ... a calling. I am here so he can feel good ... to soothe the soul that was hurt ... I can't let go of it. It guides me constantly. I mean, the Holocaust is ever present in our marriage.

Hannah is fully committed to ensuring that one victim of her parents' generation experiences no pain again. Likewise, most of our other respondents seemed to be operating on two levels of meaning, believing that they could correct wider historical injustices through their interpersonal, microscopic acts of benevolence.

### ***The ultimate identity quandary: am I a German or a Jew?***

The German women and men whom we interviewed had uprooted themselves from Germany and distanced themselves from their German-ness. Many of them went the extra mile not only to build an Israeli family, but also to become full members of the Jewish people by acts of religious conversion. While all of the women we talked to had converted, none of the men had become formally Jewish. Two major motivations for conversion can be identified among members of this group: first, pragmatic desires to make life less complicated for themselves and their children in Israel, particularly because Judaism is matrilineal, and, second, a genuine, emotional drive to become fully Jewish.

### ***'I Wanted My Children to Belong Here': Conversion for Pragmatic Reasons***

There are several obvious advantages to being a Jew in Israel. The term 'Jewish' is a polyseme that refers to both peoplehood and religion. Thus, anyone seeking to belong to the Jewish people must actually convert religiously. Israel is defined in several of its laws as a Jewish (and democratic) state. Under the Israeli Law of Return, Jews, and non-Jews with one Jewish grandparent, and their spouses are entitled to immediate citizenship. The Law of Return purportedly attempts to provide sanctuary in the form of Israeli citizenship to anyone who would be persecuted under the Nazi Nuremberg Laws.

Additionally, Israel does not have separation between religion and state; thus, marriages in Israel may only be performed within the religious community to which the couple in question belongs. Therefore, Jewish Israelis can only marry other Jews in the country and only under the Orthodox rabbinate, but when one spouse is Jewish and the other is formally not, the couple's sole option is to be married in a civil ceremony outside of Israel (which is then recognized in Israel as well). For Olga and a few others, conversion to Judaism was simply the convenient path to full participation in the Israeli experience. Olga shared,

I converted ... because of pure opportunism. I wanted to know; I was interested, but I was never a believer.

Furthermore, because Judaism is matrilineal, a woman's religious affiliation is of particular relevance in determining her children's religious identity, regardless of their father's religion. Thus, it was particularly advantageous for our female respondents to convert and was a way to secure a spot in Israeli society for themselves and their future children:



Our plans to get married could have not been fulfilled without my conversion ... I thought that if I want to be here, to be one of them, not to be a stranger, then I must convert ... My wish was to be absorbed into the society. (Leah)

I knew I wanted to get married, I wanted children, and I wanted the children to be part of the general society ... I realized that this cannot happen unless you convert. (Tziporah)

***'I Immediately Thought of a Death Camp ... as if I Had Been There': Conversions Driven by Identification with Survivors***

Beyond sober pragmatism, several respondents expressed deeper layers of motivation for adopting the Jewish faith. Some, such as Leah, had decided to become Jewish during their adolescence, when they first learned about the Nazi atrocities. It seems that for some of these young Germans, the psychological identification with the victims of Nazi persecution was so intense they even experienced occasional Holocaust-related flashbacks. For example, Leah shared:

We were visiting a hospital abroad, and there was this elongated barrack with chimneys and I asked [my partner]: 'Doesn't this structure remind you of anything?' ... I immediately thought of a death camp. He didn't. It was as if somehow I had been there ... I have memories from events I did not experience.

Some converts, like Leah, described an almost mystical fusion with the victim/survivor identity. Others depicted a level of connection to the survivor role that even contained resentment and alienation toward Germans:

I seem to have developed estrangement and hostility toward the other side ... I resent it when German tourists come here and when they laugh and are joyful ... I can't stand it ... They should lower their heads in consideration of where they are. (Nurit)

Referring to her birth nation as 'the other side', Nurit reveals the tension between her adopted identity, as an Israeli Jew, and her biological one, as a second-generation 'Aryan' citizen of Nazi Germany. For her, identity dissonance is resolved not only with emigration from Germany, marriage to an Israeli, and conversion to Judaism, but also with the expression of antipathy toward her identity of origin.

***Something in Me Has Always Been Profoundly Jewish': Conversion as a Primal Longing and Spiritual Quest***

Among our interviewees, conversions to Judaism were not presented exclusively as pragmatic steps in facilitating the naturalization process or as an emotional counter-reaction to the sins of their parents' generation. Some converts, like Miriam, appeared to be genuinely drawn to the Jewish faith and traditions:

[Being Jewish] is my task. My path. It is something natural ... It is my destiny ... my fate. The sages say that a convert to Judaism carries a Jewish soul from times past. I think it is true.

Miriam's conversion took place in Germany as a result of a primal spiritual longing that was experienced almost as an inevitable, deterministic course, rather than a relationship with a Jewish man or immigration issues. This awareness of having had a Jewish essence since early life was detected in other interviews as well, for instance:

Something in me has always been profoundly Jewish ... I have always wondered why Jews were so important to me and why I had to know about their lives ... When I went to Israel for the first time in 1969, it was like a holy day ... It felt ... like home. (Rivka)

Still, behind both the cynical reasoning for conversion and the mystical draw to Judaism, the desire to move away from or reject their German roots was palpable in several interviews. When we deliberately probed into the connection between the Holocaust and the drive to become Jewish, many admitted that the two events are probably related. For example, all four converts who described a primal yearning for Judaism from an early age and who denied that their conversions were related to the practicalities of building a family in Israel were, in fact, daughters of Nazis and had expressed difficulty in belonging to their original familial and national reference groups.

## Conclusion

In line with the results of many previous Holocaust-era studies, our interviewees depicted the intergenerational transmission of the parental experience of victimhood.<sup>28</sup> The children of 'Aryan' Germans we interviewed bore the scars of hunger, fear and loss experiences shared openly by many Israelis, survivors and veterans of the dramatic events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There were moments in which it felt as though the German interviewee and Israeli interviewer were, in fact, sharing similar family and national ethos of victimhood. Echoes of post-traumatic emotional scarring were evident in more than one account. It is conceivable that part of our respondents' surprising drive to tie their fates with that of Israelis stemmed from a subconscious awareness of paradoxical similarities between their experiences and those of the citizens of the Jewish state.

We experienced unexpected empathy and identification with the respondents' shared family legacies of war, which may have been similar to the reaction of their Jewish Israeli partners, given that during the 1960s confrontations and the desire to fill in gaps in family histories were frequently caught up in recriminations and accusations on the part of the children and defensive reactions on the part of the parents.<sup>29</sup> 'What looked like a coming to terms simply became a public drawing of a confrontation between the generations'.<sup>30</sup> Despite the fact that our respondents understood and identified with their families' suffering during the war, their troubling discovery, during formative adolescent years, of Germany's persecution of the Jews instigated a process of identity reevaluation. They responded forcefully, by protesting and uncovering unspoken family and national secrets.

Müller-Hohagen (2005) writes about taboos, which prevented reflection, as an outcome of a 'collective silence'. Similarly, the term 'eloquent silence' was coined by Rommelspacher (2001) to describe how the National Socialist era was addressed in mid-century Germany. The suffering of those who lived through the war and their traumatic memories of 'bombs, flight and expulsion' was delegitimized in Germany with claims that the presentation of war-era German victimhood had been used as a screen.<sup>31</sup> As adolescents, our respondents faced a contradictory experience: they not only identified with the valid suffering of their families as citizens of a defeated

<sup>28</sup>Bohleber, *Transgenerationale Weitergabe kriegsbelasteter Kindheiten. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur Nachhaltigkeit historischer Erfahrungen über vier Generationen*, pp. 107–118.; Völter, *Transgenerationale Weitergabe kriegsbelasteter Kindheiten. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur Nachhaltigkeit historischer Erfahrungen über vier Generationen*, pp. 95–106.; Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (2. Aufl.).

<sup>29</sup>Roberts, *Starke Mütter – ferne Väter. Töchter reflektieren ihre Kindheit im Nationalsozialismus und in der Nachkriegszeit*.

<sup>30</sup>Hauer, *Die Mitläufer oder die Unfähigkeit zu fragen. Auswirkungen des Nationalsozialismus auf die Demokratie von heute*, p. 16

<sup>31</sup>Rommelspacher, "Widerstreitende Erinnerungen."

country, but also sensed the defensive nature of their family's narrative of suffering. To resolve this conflict and fill in the unspoken, suppressed pieces of their familial-national criminal heritage – without the assistance of their parents and relatives – our respondents resorted to the ultimate form of reconciliation: choosing to live as second-generation perpetrators/bystanders in post-Holocaust Israel in order to definitively bind together the German and Jewish narratives.

### Disclosure statement

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