

Ceresenie, Steven (2022, June). Notes of a Psychology Watcher. *Michigan Psychologist*, Michigan Psychological Association: 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter, 2022 Issue, pp, 10 – 12.

## Book Review

Rita Benn, Julie Goldstein Ellis, Joy Wolfe Ensor & Ruth Wade (Editors). (2022). ***The Ones Who Remember. Second-Generation Voices of the Holocaust.*** Connecticut: City Point Press.

Social scientists and historians have tried to trace the causes of the Holocaust – and learn how it happened that German perpetrators murdered two thirds – 6 million people – of the European Jewry during the Second World War. This determined, organized, unrelenting process to annihilate the Jews from the face of the earth occurred in a country that ranked high in western civilization – the land of Goethe, Kant and Beethoven.

This ferociously murderous attempt to rid the world of Jews staggers the mind with our knowledge of the endless suffering and cruelty of the perpetrators: continuous beatings; forcibly rounding up Jews in synagogues and setting them on fire; making parents watch their children die in inhuman “medical experiments;” having people dig their own graves and then machine-gunning them all; lies about resettlement calling the street from Treblinka railroad station to the gas chambers the Jews were forced to walk naked the Himmelfahr-strasse – the street to heaven. The list of atrocities carried out by the Germans goes on and on. (1)

*The Ones Who Remember. Second-Generation Voices of the Holocaust* is a remarkable book as it brings together 16 adults who tell their personal, intimate family stories growing up with parents who were Holocaust survivors. This second-generation group described how their parents’ trauma deeply influenced so much of their family life – from children to adolescents to adults – and how this trauma affected their lives as parents. There have not been many first person, personal essays reflecting how the Holocaust affects the next generation.

This book evolved over many years when a group of congregants at Temple Beth Emeth in Ann Arbor – The Generations After Group – began meeting to share their experiences.

In the Introduction, the editors write: *When we began meeting in 2004, we experienced a shock of familiarity with each other beyond the coincidence of having settled in the same Michigan college town and the same Reform Jewish congregation. We had in common an implicit understanding of what it was like growing up with Holocaust survivor parents: to be the namesakes of the ‘lost souls’ who’d perished; to confront our parents’ muteness, and sometimes anger, when we asked questions about their past; to bear the challenge of remembering when there was so much we didn’t know. With one another, we didn’t have to engage in emotional translation. Our stories became each other’s stories.*

The second-generation members wrote poems and short stories for their services in their congregation. These services included their parents’ journeys from the suffering and cruelty of

the death camps, to survival and life after the Second World War and were included in the liturgy for Holocaust Remembrance Day (January 27) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

The Holocaust Remembrance Day of January 27 commemorates the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by the Soviet Army in 1945. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year in Judaism – traditionally observed with a day-long fast, confession, and intensive prayer.

No matter how much they knew about their parents' life of loss, terror, and suffering, children of Holocaust survivors knew they had to hide their own emotional turmoil and put on a false self of joy, attempting to meet their parents' sometimes harsh and unrealistic expectations. Here are some quotes from these personal reflections of the Second Generation:

- *For as long as I can remember, my mother's screams of terror in the night were an ordinary occurrence. My siblings and I didn't ask questions. Being awakened several times a week or more was our family reality. We simply went back to sleep and didn't discuss it the next day. We certainly didn't mention my mother's night terrors to anyone outside the family. (Ruth Taubman)*
- *At some point as a child, I must have realized that my parents had a very troubled background that my older sister and I should not ask about. We wanted to protect them from any further sadness and pain, so we never made trouble ourselves. We were always good. I remember at about age eight cutting myself on a piece of broken glass and my sister admonishing me, 'Don't tell Mom.' (Julie Goldstein Ellis)*
- *It didn't matter how many times my mother spritzed her sweet French perfume over her clothes. She could not cover the stench of the Holocaust from seeping out. Despite her remarkable resilience, invisible ghosts of sadness hovered, casting shadows on the makeshift beauty of a life she tried to create for herself and our family...I assume my parents thought by not talking about their experiences, they could contain their own sadness and pain, as well as protect me and my brother from the cruelty that exists in the world. Likely, they had no inkling about what we as children or adults might imagine or pick up from that which was left unsaid. (Rita Benn)*
- *Yom Kippur was always accompanied by the sound of my mother's weeping. Every year, the same grip of anxiety settled in our house. My mother weeping over the death of her parents, her family, and the loss of everything she's known life to be as a nineteen-year-old in Hungary. She wouldn't explain exactly how she felt, but it wasn't so hard to figure out. (Sassa Akervall)*

- *I have come to realize that my mother's experiences and my family history have instilled in me a strong emotional sensitivity toward discrimination at every level. (Ava Adler)*
- *My parents wanted to hide their past and their wounds from themselves and from their children. As if they and their children could then emerge unscathed. They were determined that their children would not be affected by the Holocaust. They would not, or could not, see the myriad ways we soaked it up. (Fran Lewy Berg)*
- *My father said little about his suffering during the war while I was growing up, but I heard the cries from his nightmares. 'He had a bad dream about the war,' my mother would explain. Over time, she described his losses: his parents, Eli and Eva and seven more brothers and sisters, his countless nieces and nephews. We could never have enough Salton hot tables to hold the yahrzeit\* candles for all of them. (Joy Wolfe Ensor)*

\*A yahrzeit candle – a soul candle, is a type of candle that is lit in memory of the dead in Judaism.

After years being with people in psychological therapy, I've learned that because some people try not to think about something must not be confused with being unable to remember it.

For most people, trauma is not repressed but invades every day and night of their life. It's not that most people repress their memories of trauma, it's that people are unable to wipe these traumatic experiences from their minds. All of us face the inevitable Issue existential, traumatic complexities of life. As psychologists, we know that to help people match the notes of their spoken words to the cacophony of their emotions and thoughts begins a healing process.

In the Foreword, Irene Hasenberg Butter, makes a poignant comment:

*The Holocaust has always been for me a sign of evil we are capable of. When I say, 'we,' I mean that it's not merely the Germans who were capable of such atrocities. We the human race are all responsible and must find ways to fight our dark side.*

Her observation of the human "dark side" reminds me of America's role in the first half of the 20th century in the involuntary sterilization of more than 23,000 individuals in the United States. The Nazi regime credited a California state hospital's sterilization program for inspiring their own sterilization of 250,000 "unfit eaters."

Irene Hasenberg Butter's observation also reminds me of the trenchant comment of the Russian Nobel Prize novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a famous dissident, a critic of communism who spent eight years incarcerated in the forced labor camps of the Gulag. About the human condition, Solzhenitsyn writes:

*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good*

*and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his heart?*

The editors of **The Ones Who Remember. Second-Generation Voices of the Holocaust** hope readers take away the following lessons:

1. The book hopes to inform and educate the Holocaust-affected communities about the intergenerational influences of trauma and resilience.
2. The book hopes to motivate readers to speak out about oppression and to offer compassion. We are all more human than otherwise. My father's business partner began to speak out about his experiences in the death camps when groups formed to revise and deny the existence of the Holocaust.
3. The book hopes to help the reader see from the many essays that adversity can lead to a sensitivity to discrimination, strength, creativity, tolerance and posttraumatic growth.
4. The book hopes to highlight the success of the second-generation – The Generations After Group – to give encouragement to all those who have confronted the inevitable challenges of being human.

This book is a treasure of information about the wide effects of trauma. The Second Generation's unique remembrances about their Holocaust survivor parents are filled with honesty, joy, sadness, vulnerability, conflict, anger, humility, hope, and resilience – the qualities that make us human. This book has much to teach us about the universal themes of how trauma lives in family members and how we may triumph over trauma in unique and creative ways.

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl in his classic, "Man's Search for Meaning," offers invaluable lessons he took away from his time as a prisoner in the death camps – lessons that form the core of his existential psychological therapy he called logotherapy:

*Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way...Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.*

Amen.

(1) Nozick, Robert. (1989). *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*. Touchstone: New York.