

AGING CHILD HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

By Carla Lessing LCSW



The goal of this article is to alert mental health professionals and caretakers of elderly Holocaust survivors to the possibility that aging former hidden children—men and women—were molested in hiding and have never spoken about it. Originally presented at the Selfhelp Conference in New York on March 29, 2011, the article was first published in the Claims Conference online journal Kavod: Honoring Aging Survivors, a professional journal for care providers and families; Issue 2, Winter 2012. The following is an adaptation of that report.

Many excellent scholarly articles have been written about the hidden children of the Holocaust. There are numerous memoirs from hidden children; and much has been published about the Righteous Among the Nations, the people who saved and hid Jews. However, the topic of sexual abuse endured by hidden children and adolescents while in hiding from Nazi persecution is barely mentioned in the literature. Dr. Zoe Waxman, a historian, wrote in 2010, “Until relatively recently rape and sexual abuse has remained an untold chapter in the history of the Holocaust. This stems from both the cultural taboo and also because such experiences are not considered to be a part of the narrative of the Holocaust.”

During the Second World War, when Jewish parents living in German-occupied countries became aware of imminent deportations to concentration camps, they had to make an anguished decision. There were few choices. They had to decide whether to separate from their children and find them hiding places or keep the family together no matter what happened. In December 1938, a month after *Kristallnacht*, Jewish parents in Austria and Germany had to make that same dreadful decision when given an opportunity to send their children to safety in England by way of the *Kindertransport*. The parents’ decision to hide their children from German persecution did not at all guarantee their children’s safety. It only assured the children temporary protection from deportation; it did not shield them against other harms. In an impossible situation, anguished parents had to trust that their decisions would be the best for their children. Separation was as painful and wrenching for the children as for the parents.

Tamar Shoshan, a clinical psychologist in Israel, wrote in 1989 that “almost without exception, the experience of

being violently and totally torn from close family stands at the center of the survivors’ trauma.” The younger children lost the love, protection and security of their parents, and the older ones learned that their world was a dangerous place. All children felt abandoned and alone. Parents and children hoped they would survive the war and be reunited. It was this hope that would give each the courage to endure all that would eventually come their way.

Although thousands of Jews survived the Holocaust in hiding, they are but a very small percentage of all the millions who perished. Often, they survived because some people defied German commands, putting themselves and the lives of their families at risk. Sheltering Jews, young or old, was forbidden and punishable by immediate execution or by deportation to concentration camps. The rescuers’ motivations for hiding Jews varied greatly: some did so out of pure altruism; others wished to save their souls; and then, there were those who saw an opportunity to make money. No matter the reason, all were at risk of deportation or worse.

Some Jewish children had the freedom to walk about and play; others were confined to rooms, attics, under floorboards, in barns. Many were in convents and orphanages. In all cases, hidden children were completely dependent on strangers. There were no parents to run to, or to protect them. They did not know where their parents were, or if they were still alive. They lived in the hope that their parents would come and find them.

Some hidden children were fortunate to have had caring rescuers. And if foster parents were able to give them the nurturing and love they needed, their feelings of sadness, longing, and abandonment were soothed for the time being. It gave these children a chance to develop other healthy attachments to the people

who cared for them. Many hidden children continued their relationships with their temporary parents, or with their children and even grandchildren, throughout their lives. However, not all former hidden children were fortunate to have had caring foster parents. Many hidden children have been and still are tormented by their memories of being physically and/or sexually abused by the people who hid and rescued them from death at the hands of the Nazis.

Dr. Paul Valent, a psychiatrist and himself a hidden child, wrote in 1995 that approximately one out of five children in hiding was sexually abused. A study in the Netherlands estimated that more than 80% of hidden children interviewed were treated well, while 15% were occasionally mistreated and some 5% were treated badly.

These abused children had to deal with the triple trauma of separation, persecution, and sexual abuse. In her book *Women in the Holocaust*, Joan Ringelheim writes about “Pauline,” interviewed in 1998:

[Pauline] had been molested by male relatives of the people who were hiding her. They threatened to denounce her if she said anything about it. Pauline, who was eleven or twelve years old when she was first hidden, took the threats seriously. She didn’t tell the Jewish woman who checked on her periodically. She didn’t tell her twin sister. After the war she did not tell her husband or her daughter. “This is the first time I ever admitted this,” she remarked in 1984. (p. 342)

A few children were able to stop the abuse. For example, eleven-year-old Ruth was in hiding with a childless couple. The couple took a weekly bath in an aluminum tub in the kitchen. Ruth recounted the traumatic incident to Diane Wolf in 2007.

Tante [Aunt] Hanny insisted on washing me. Her presence in the kitchen made me feel uncomfortable, but at the same time I knew that it was my responsibility to be grateful. These people were putting their

Continued on next page

lives in danger for me. I told Tante Hanny I was too old, that I had been washing myself for a long time. She would not listen. One day the washing turned into a massage. I could not stop her. The expression in her eyes frightened me. In the moment all my fury at her took over, and I splashed her with water. She never touched me again. (p. 156)

Others were not as fortunate warding off the aggressor. Another survivor who was violently molested by his foster father said, "Regardless what he has done to me, I can't hate him... I wonder if he ever loved me...after all, he saved my life." (Lev-Wiesel 2005).

Hidden children who are survivors of persecution and of childhood sexual abuse have lived all their lives with these intense conflicting feelings. They cannot reconcile the feelings of having been saved from death by their saviors, and concomi-

tion, including the evolution of internal representation of the self and others... Early violent trauma may have a far-reaching influence on attachment behavior. ... [T]rauma during adolescence may interfere with the task of integrating past, present and future orientation, exacerbate moral confusion, and compromise the development of symbolic thinking and expression. (p. 576)

After the Second World War, child survivors did not talk about their hiding experiences for many years. The adults often could not listen to the children's sorrowful stories of their lives while in hiding. The child survivors went back to school. Older children directly went to work. Most of them got married and had children. They created a family of their own, had friends, and felt emotionally stronger and supported. They had built themselves a foundation of support and slowly

food rations, the loneliness and the unwavering fear. Instead, she focuses on the books, which she says "kept my sanity and gave me a refuge from reality. (2007)

The 1991 International Conference for Hidden Children of the Holocaust in New York City gave these survivors the essential support and permission to come out of hiding and talk more freely to each other. But there were those who only told a part of their story, leaving out the cruel violation they endured in hiding. Another ten years went by before the community of hidden children openly acknowledged that many children in hiding had been sexually and physically abused. This acknowledgment at an annual conference of child survivors of the Holocaust gave some of these victims a safe place to tell their story. In a special workshop for child survivors who were molested, they had an opportunity to share their whole history of persecution and molestation. They were with others who had similar experiences, and they felt understood and less isolated in their agony. Still, there are many former hidden children who were molested but do not have the opportunity to join a workshop. They carry the burden of remembering alone.

The child survivors of the Holocaust are aging and entering a phase of life that is full of major changes. Many child survivors of the Holocaust are accomplished professionals or have been successful in business. They raised their children and provided them with all that they themselves had lost and did not have in their childhood. The tasks of work and raising a family have now been accomplished. "With retirement comes a loss of status and identity, loss of daily routine, fear of abandonment and a surplus of spare time to reminisce," wrote Dasberg (2003). "The change of status and social identity may be a burden for many aging people, but in the case of Holocaust survivors it brings back warded-off memories, survivors' guilt and mistrust."

For all child survivors of the Holocaust, reminiscing about their persecution can readily overwhelm coping and defense mechanisms and might lead to episodes of severe anxiety and depression. Recall triggers frightening memories of the actual event of saying goodbye to parents, the nagging feelings of abandonment, and

Continued on next page

'THEY CANNOT RECONCILE THE FEELINGS OF HAVING BEEN SAVED FROM DEATH BY THEIR SAVIORS, AND CONCOMITANTLY, ABUSED BY THEM WHILE IN THEIR CARE.'

tantly, abused by them while in their care.

In a workshop at an annual child survivors' conference, a well-dressed woman in her sixties revealed that the man who saved her life had molested her. She remembered that while in hiding she had longed for some attention, but when she received it, she, a young teenage girl, had to endure the physical violation by a middle-aged man. It left her confused. She struggled with feelings of guilt for longing for attention, and of ambivalence for the foster father who saved her life as well as used her as his sexual object.

Trauma during childhood greatly affects the development of trust in others. Violent childhood victimization, such as sexual abuse, has a harmful effect on attachments and intimacy. Pynoos (1993) wrote about interpersonal violence and traumatic stress reactions:

[T]raumatic events in childhood occur during critical periods of personality forma-

tion, including the evolution of internal representation of the self and others... Early violent trauma may have a far-reaching influence on attachment behavior. ... [T]rauma during adolescence may interfere with the task of integrating past, present and future orientation, exacerbate moral confusion, and compromise the development of symbolic thinking and expression. (p. 576)

In contrast, hidden children who were sexually and/or physically abused continued to keep quiet about the abuse inflicted on them while they were in hiding. They wanted to forget the horrible times when they were violated by adults they desperately wanted to trust. The Australia Jewish News revealed the depth of the trauma experienced by a rape survivor:

She was only 12, but she can still recall the rotten smell of the wood, the musty dry air, the dust, the perpetual darkness and the rats. More than six decades later, Dr. Simonne Jameson ... still cannot shake the memories of three years living in hiding in an underground cellar of the National Library in Paris during the Holocaust. She tries to forget about the daily rapes [by police officers], the small

constant fear of being caught by the Nazis. Tauber wrote in 1997, "To survive, these children had to risk trusting strangers, but they could never know whether or not they would be betrayed or killed. It was hardly ever safe enough for them to express any emotions. Their Holocaust experience taught them that joining with

give up self-reliance, a trait that is highly valued and that they depended on as a safety-measure all their lives. Relying on others means having to trust the people one has to depend on. Sadly, for hidden children and certainly for those who were also abused, trusting others, particularly strangers, has been a life-long problem.

'NOW IN THE FINAL PHASE OF THEIR LIVES, THE CHILD SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST AND OF SEXUAL ABUSE HAVE MORE TIME TO REMEMBER AND REMINISCE'

others—except for perhaps a sibling they were trying to survive with—meant increased danger. For many of them, the sense of security still depends on an absolute reliance on themselves." (p. 159)

Most victims of Nazi persecution and childhood sexual abuse have carried their emotional torment for more than sixty years. "The various late-life losses, as well as declining health, exacerbate unresolved childhood sexual abuse issues." (Gagnon and Hersen, 2000). For child survivors of the Holocaust, reminiscing about childhood can become overwhelming, fraught with frightening images and memories, severe anxiety, and depression. For hidden child survivors who also were sexually abused, reminiscing is even more emotionally devastating when they recall the terrifying assaults. Ann, an eight-year-old orphan at the time of liberation, for example, survived the Holocaust in hiding in France and was sexually abused by her rescuer. She states, "The Holocaust is keeping coming back and I get depressed. I have done well. I have a husband and three children. But since I am not working, I think more," Valent wrote (1995).

Now in the final phase of their lives, the child survivors of the Holocaust and of sexual abuse have more time to remember and reminisce. They are faced with their childhood history of multiple losses, of abandonment, separation, powerlessness, dependency and sexual abuse. As one grows older, there is an increasing likelihood of dependence on other people. It can be very distressing for hidden children to

Those who were abused carry an irreconcilable burden of rage and gratitude toward the abuser for saving his or her life.

Because of the uniqueness of the problems of hidden children who were abused by their rescuers, it is necessary for the professionals to be knowledgeable about the specific problems of hidden children of the Holocaust. In an initial assessment the person will show readiness to reveal, but we must keep in mind that revisiting childhood history might open old wounds. Not able to reveal, the elderly child survivors might benefit from talking about present-day life. In addition to verbal treatment, creative therapies might be considered as another or additional treatment modality.

In conclusion, presently as well as in the near future, mental health professionals, medical doctors, nurses, and caregivers will encounter in their work more elderly hidden children who were molested while in hiding. We cannot repeat the earlier mistakes when professionals were emotionally and theoretically unprepared for patients who had survived the Holocaust. How can we be prepared and help people who now are facing a multitude of losses that mirror those they experienced in their young lives?

Professionals must keep in mind that former hidden children have had a lifelong struggle with the fear of abandonment, separation, and persecution. Those who were sexually abused by their rescuers have continuing conflicts of gratitude and rage at the person who violated them while saving their lives. We must

tread gingerly in our exploration of elderly child survivors' histories, but even more so with those who might have been molested. Elderly child survivors of the Holocaust are facing a critical time of major change and loss. Some of the changes come gradually and others unexpectedly. All of these changes and losses will affect the core of hidden children's childhood trauma. Hidden children who were molested while in hiding are even more vulnerable in this phase of their lives. We should be alert to the fact that there are more victims of childhood sexual abuse among the child survivors of the Holocaust than anticipated, so that we can lighten the burden of those who have been carrying these emotionally painful memories for many decades. ■

References

- Dasberg, H. (2003). *Late-onset of post-traumatic reactions in Holocaust survivors at advanced age*. In H. Rossberg & J. Lanser (Eds.), *Das Schweigen Brechen [Breaking the silence]* (p. 311-348). Berlin-New York: Peter Lang.
- Eitnger, L., & Major, E. F. (1993). Stress of the Holocaust. In L. Goldberg & S. Breznitz (Eds.), *Handbook of stress: Theoretical and clinical aspects* (p. 617-640). New York: Free Press.
- Gagnon, M. & Hersen, M. (2000). Unresolved childhood sexual abuse and older adults: Late-life vulnerabilities. *Journal of Clinical Geropsychology*, 6(3), p. 187-198.
- Landsman, L. (2007, June 8). Out of the darkness. *Australian Jewish news*. Retrieved from http://jewish-survivors.blogspot.com/2007_06_01_archive.html
- Lev-Wiesel, R. & Amir, M. (2005). Holocaust child survivors and child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 14(2), p. 69-83.
- Pynoos, R. S., Sorenson, S. B. & Steinberg, A. M. (1993). Interpersonal violence and traumatic stress reactions. In L. Goldberger & S. Breznitz (Eds.), *Handbook of stress: Theoretical and clinical aspects* (p. 573-590). New York: Free Press.
- Ringelheim, J. (1989). The split between gender and the Holocaust. In Ofer, D. & Weitzman, L.J. (Eds.), *Women in the Holocaust* (p. 340-350). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shosan, T. (1989). Mourning and longing from generation to generation. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 43(2), p. 193-207.
- Tauber, Y. & van der Hal, H. (1997). Transformation of perception of trauma by child survivors of the Holocaust in group therapy. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 27(2), p. 157-171.
- Valent, P. (1995). *Early abuse and its effects: Anne, a Holocaust survivor and sexual abuse*. Talk at the Victorian Association of Psychotherapists Annual General Meeting, Australia.
- Wolf, D.L. (2007). *Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden children and postwar families in Holland*. Berkley: University of California. p.126-162.

Carla Lessing, a Vice President of the Hidden Child Foundation and our own in-house social worker, is a psychotherapist in private practice. Her other published article is The Vanished Communal Heritage of Holocaust Survivors: Its Impact on Survivors and Their Children—Journal of Jewish Communal Service, Summer 1999.