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Conference Speech Notes:

Between the Drowned and the Saved

The Representation and Role of Children and Grandchildren of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Public Commemorative Practice

My research project looks at how the children and grandchildren of Jewish Holocaust survivors are represented and what role they play in public commemorative practice. In particular, the two institutions that I have looked at are museums and testimonial archives. Although there are further generations, those two were selected as the ones most likely to have a lived experience of a survivor.

The research began with a curiosity I had about a juxtaposition that seems to exist within the contemporary memoryscape around the Holocaust. Every month I receive the newsletter from the organisation *Generations of the Shoah*, originally started by survivors and now continuing through the generations.

If one looks, for example, at the events page, this is always interesting because these are the things that are up-and-coming, perhaps not yet permanently recorded but clearly of interest now. Reading through this section, one encounters a very particular language and tone:

“heartfelt tributes” to the “indomitable spirit”, “finding hope”, “courage and compassion”, “small miracles”.

And then, sometimes even at the very same institutions that host such an event, one encounters a very different form of commemorative reflection: For example, at the same institution that hosted a Courage and Compassion Concert, one comes across testimony such as that of survivor Anneliese Herz. In reflecting on survival she says, in essence: “I live, but I do not really live. Part of me died.” One sees echoes of this formulation repeatedly. As Lawrence Langer quotes from Levy-Hass’s Bergen-Belsen diary: “We have not died but we are dead.”

I began to wonder about these two registers through which commemorative practice is displayed. On the one hand, the language of resilience and continuation; on the other, testimony that insists that something fundamental ended and cannot be recovered.

It was in this context that I came across Lawrence Langer’s concept of the ‘afterdeath’ of the Holocaust. Langer writes that the paradox is that “life stopped at Auschwitz and other camps and ghettos, and life went on afterwards, giving birth to two selves whose contradictory natures must somehow be transmitted to us.” This concept seemed extremely useful for understanding something of what it meant to survive and yet have to mourn the version of yourself that you would have been had this rupture not occurred.

What I also began to consider was that if the ‘afterdeath’ is a realm in which “the clear borders between living and dying merge” (L.Langer, 2021), this must become a particular problem when survivors have children. If one turns to the classic sociological model

proposed by Karl Mannheim, generations are premised on what he calls the "social relevance" of the "biological rhythm of birth and death" (Mannheim, 1972): what happens when such a rhythm is ruptured?

Research Design

On a practical level the research consists of two parts of fieldwork: the first is museum case studies. Initially I traced the trajectories of Jews from German-speaking Europe from their original homelands to the places where they were deported and murdered, and to the places where survivors and their descendants later settled. The museums included in the study therefore span Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States. I looked at both Jewish and Holocaust museums although in the case of Jewish museums, documented only related exhibition materials, whereas for the Holocaust Museums, I assessed them in their entirety.

The second part of my fieldwork concerns testimony collections. In many testimony archives it is a common practice at the end of the testimony to bring descendants of the survivor into the frame or to show photographs of family members. I wanted to find this generation: My request was simply that they watch or re-watch the testimony of the survivor, their parent or family member, and then reflect on their impressions. These re-viewings became a springboard to interviews and workshops.

The project follows a grounded theory approach, allowing categories to emerge from the material itself. For now, I will mention two central observations that emerged from this process: First, the material suggests that there is a specific generational model for this cohort

of Holocaust survivor households in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Second, while we often talk about museums as national or political projects, there is also a way to consider them as generational projects, in the sense that they actively generate and shape the roles that descendants occupy within commemorative practice.

Representational Strategies

In my analysis, I arranged the materials into various categories of representational strategies. I will provide a short overview of two of these which stem from the immediate post-war period.

One of these representational strategies appears relatively briefly but branches off into many later roles and representations. The other one remains the most common and long-lasting strategy, although it does not remain uncontested.

The first observation is that the representation of descendants is not the same as the representation of victims. For example, in Holocaust exhibitions there is often a strong drive towards the individualisation of victims — the return of a name, a face, a place. It is a restoration of dignity to those whose identities were erased. For the children, however, there was no such injustice done to them, and therefore there is no corrective need in that same vein. Instead, one finds something quite different, which I have called ‘Additions’.

This already begins with the survivors themselves and a kind of obsessive adding up of numbers to make up for what was lost. The children appear not as individually named figures but often as a mass presence or gathering. They appear almost as entries in a kind of spiritual accounting ledger.

Yet this representational strategy is itself challenged. One also encounters the imagining of what might be called the ‘Shadow Generation’: what the world would look like if the dead had lived and had descendants. In this sense one is confronted with the unborn dead. In this context, the loss is calculated as so great it is beyond accounting.

The second representational strategy concerns the positioning of children within the destabilised worldview of survivors as parents. This often appears in exhibitions in sections dealing with liberation and return to life. A central example is the testimony of Shoshana and Abraham Roshkovski displayed at Yad Vashem. The couple meet and marry in the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp shortly after the war. Roshkovski becomes pregnant soon after their wedding. Yet her first reaction is not joy but panic. She asks the doctor to terminate the pregnancy, and when he refuses, she attempts to lose the baby by lifting heavy objects and ironing over her stomach.

The reason she gives is a sound-memory association: “I heard babies screaming in Auschwitz. I don’t want it.” Perhaps one would read her wish not to have a child as an indictment on a world she feels like she can no longer trust. However, something else seems to be at play as well. The pregnancy holds and there is something quite striking about the order in which Roshkovski describes her son’s birth. She says: “When my son was born, when they brought him to me and I saw him alive…” There is an astonishment here at the sight of life itself. Although the child is born from her, she seems to register his existence only when he is brought to her. It suggests something of the condition that survivors describe — a destabilised sense of time, place, and even of their own status as living or dead.

During the war one finds this uncertainty expressed in literary texts as well. In the Magdeburg barracks in Terezín, a 1943 poem by Hanuš Hachenburg describes the dead as "thirty thousand sleeping there who will awaken one day." Yet in Artur Polak's poem written on liberation the dead remain "slumbering in a thousand hills."

When survivors later have children, these features of the afterdeath realm appear not to dissolve but to become accentuated. Roshkovski recalls taking her son for walks to the mass graves at the cemetery. This is not unique but part of a broader phenomenon of survivors bringing children to sites where the living and the dead meet.

For example, in the Jerusalem Synagogue Museum in Prague there is a photograph of the infant Vera Trnka placed beside a memorial plaque for her murdered grandfather. The exhibition caption reads: "Loved ones murdered during the war remained part of the family." A similar motif appears in a 1949 sketch of Displaced Persons camp life by Arie Navon. These examples suggest that the children of survivors are placed in a particular position within this liminal realm between the living and the dead — 'Mermaiding', as it were, between the drowned and the saved.

These representations point towards a generational model that differs from the regular rhythm of generational succession. When Holocaust survivors named themselves the 'She'erit Hapletah', the surviving remnant, they also devised a symbol. The image depicts a felled tree whose trunk has been severed from its roots, yet from the stump a branch and leaves emerge. The image captures something essential about the generational condition after the Holocaust. The family tree has been catastrophically disrupted. Generations do not appear as a simple

linear sequence — second generation, third generation, fourth generation — but as a staccato formation marked by severance and slippage.

The presence of descendants within Holocaust commemoration does not produce a single or resolved outcome. The children of survivors succeed neither in fully bridging past and present nor in widening the rupture into further fracture. Perhaps their role lies less in what they achieve than in where their movements direct our gaze. Within these landscapes of remembrance, they remind us that while the dead do not wake, neither do they rest peacefully.

Primary Source:

Roshkovski, A., & Roshkovski, S. (2010). The Displaced Persons' Camp [Video testimony]. Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urSGFm57rzM

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