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The Continuing Struggle to Survive After Survival

by Robert Krell, MD

I stand before you keenly aware that I am here only because of a narrow escape from those who sought to murder me. As a Jewish child born in 1940 in The Hague, Holland, my family was ordered to report on August 19, 1942 for "resettlement to the East." That meant being assembled at Westerbork, and from there, deported primarily to Auschwitz or Sobibor.

My mother and I would have been killed shortly after arrival. Mothers with babies were doomed. 108,000 Dutch Jews were sent to the factories of death. About 5,500 returned.

I stand before you keenly aware that I am in Berlin, the city in which were conceived the most grotesque crimes in human history. For it was here that the minds of well-educated and presumably civilized Germans formulated plans for the annihilation of Europe's Jews: men, women and children. And by war's end, in German occupied countries, 93% of Jewish children had been murdered.

I survived in the care of my Dutch Christian rescuers Albert and Violette Munnik and their daughter, Nora, who I shall visit in The Hague in two weeks.

Nora is 83 years old, nearly the age of Anne Frank had she lived. But the Frank family was betrayed and deported on the last train to leave Holland on September 3, 1944, destination Auschwitz.

And I stand before you also aware of the great strides that Germany has made to preserve this history and to remember not only what it has done but to teach this history to succeeding generations, indeed, to the world.

For those who pose the question concerning whether there are long-term consequences, a story. One day, my mother, in her mid-80's suddenly apologized for giving me away into hiding. I was stunned. I told her she had been heroic. There was nothing to apologize for. Her response, "When I left you, you tried to follow me pulling a little suitcase, and I looked into your eyes and knew you would never forgive me."

And it is true. She was so smart. She knew that having saved my life through her uncommon courage that I would nevertheless be unable to truly forgive her for abandoning me. A child cannot comprehend the reasons for such a rejection. That we learn only as adults. We live with such complexities, we Holocaust children.

What was done to us involved not only physical annihilation. Those who survived also experienced the touch of death, the murder of the soul. My parents, who miraculously survived in frightening circumstances, never recovered. How could they?

In 1945, my father learned that his parents and two sisters were dead; my mother was informed that her parents, two brothers and little sister were dead. And so there were three of us. Only the son of one of my father's sisters survived also.

We spent those post-war years in shock. While Dutch citizens resumed their lives, traumatized by years of occupation but largely intact, Dutch Jews were shattered. I saw them. They came to our home, some with whip lashes on their backs. I heard them describe the horrors of the camps, the smell of the crematoria.

It was too much for a little boy aged 5 or 6. And you may ask, even today, were there consequences and did they last all these years?

And the answer is "What was done to us, never, ever left us. The Shoah envelops us like a shroud. But we put it aside so that we can function as if normal."

For children under the age of 16 in 1945, there was little help. Most surviving children were orphaned and housed in orphanages or shelters such as Ecouis in France where 426 boys from Buchenwald were looked after by the OSE. And yes, of these boys told by a psychiatrist or psychologist that they would never recover, the majority led productive lives, even attained great achievements. They included Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, a Chief Rabbi of Israel, George Goldbloom, a US businessman, Kalman Kalikstein, a physicist who worked with Einstein.

But who can say that they recovered from the Shoah? Elie Wiesel, who devotes his life to healing, injustice and Holocaust remembrance and education? Rabbi Lau, who is now the Director of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust Remembrance Authority? Their lives remain rooted in Holocaust memories.

The Holocaust's imprint was too traumatic to overcome, too painful for healing. And medical professionals shied away from us in the postwar years. There was no help.

Think of it. Before the war, every psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and psychologist focused on the traumas visited upon a child in the developmental years. Anna Freud discussed the vulnerability of a child's ego. One symptom and therapists recommended years of individual or play group therapy to heal children suffering from anxieties.

But postwar, where was this legion of therapists? They were nowhere to be seen. They were not prepared to deal with us, we were the carriers of traumas too great to confront.

We left for Canada in 1951 and I set about becoming a normal Canadian. With after-school jobs and summer work, I put myself through Medical School, then Psychiatry in Philadelphia and Stanford and became Professor of Child Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

In the 1970's, Holocaust survivors brought me their children and I worked with Holocaust survivor families struggling with overwhelming memories, some of which complicated the lives of the entire family. I helped some of the adults fill

out restitution forms. A particularly poor and troubled survivor patient who had worked in the mines as a slave labourer, and who lost 8 brothers and sisters, was awarded \$1,300. 00. I was furious upon hearing this. He saw it differently. "They acknowledged my suffering. They owned up to what they did to me." I learned from him that reparation is not just about money, it is also about justice.

I soon discovered that Holocaust survivors who sought restitution were in many instances, directed toward German psychiatrists for evaluation.

Can you imagine it?

One child taken by her mother in an effort to obtain some financial help faced a particularly gruff doctor who yelled at her in German. This particular child, who when hidden with a Polish family, had sat in total silence under a dining table at which German soldiers had a meal. Had she spoken, moved, or coughed, her death was inevitable. And years later, she endured this harsh treatment from a German physician.

Dr. Kurt Eissler in his powerful article "Perverted Psychiatry" in the American Journal of Psychiatry (1969) cites instances of reparations exams performed by appointed German psychiatrists.

"A Jewish woman aged 23 years, lost her father and two younger sisters upon arrival in Auschwitz. She went through four concentration camps in which she often had to collect corpses. Amongst her complaints during examination, were lack of initiative, difficulty in concentrating, poor memory, and hypermnesic preoccupation with traumatic events. The psychiatrist's diagnosis was "anxiety neurosis, unconnected with the persecution."

"A woman was interviewed whose parents, brother, three sisters with their children, husband and eight-year old daughter had been killed during the course of the persecutions. She herself spent years in a ghetto and in several concentration camps and had frequently been beaten to unconsciousness. She complained of depression, anxiety, phobia, feelings of guilt. The doctor denied any connection between these symptoms and the experience of persecution. He

included in his report, “despite such grave experiences, of which no one is spared, most people continue their lives and have no chronic depressions.”

It may stretch belief but these psychiatrists frequently attributed the excruciating symptoms of atrocity to the patient’s prewar personality or to that of their upbringing.

It is no wonder that children who survived the Shoah all but disappeared into their own lives. The few who tried to talk were told that as children, they had no memories and therefore did not suffer, or if it looked like they were suffering, were told to forget it and get on with their lives. The comparative few who applied for compensation were humiliated and shamed again.

I got on with my life. My Holocaust preoccupations never stopped. I did not let on. But when I presented myself for a Dutch restitution program to personally experience the process, the examiner, a pleasant lady representing the Netherlands, asked me why I thought I should seek compensation. After all, her Dutch husband had been a child during the war and he did not need any help. She did not even recognize that her non-Jewish husband suffered neither loss of family nor required hiding, at risk of discovery and death. Yes, he was hungry also.

As protocol dictated, she referred me for a psychological interview. I felt confident. After all I was a 60 year old Professor of Psychiatry, successful in my career and with a lovely family. I was asked the reason for my assessment and then I cried for two hours. I remained in therapy for five years.

I became deeply involved in the self-discovery of child survivors and our emergence as a distinct group of Holocaust survivors that culminated in the 1991 Hidden Child Conference in New York. From 1982, I worked with Professor Sarah Moskowitz, author of *Love Despite Hate*, concerning 24 child survivors found in Terezin and brought to England for their recovery and followed up by her nearly forty years later. In 1982-83, I helped found the Los Angeles Child Survivor group and we began to write about Child Holocaust Survivors and their coping skills and adaptation.

In the course of that work we defined child survivors generally as those children who were aged 16 and under by 1945 and we also examined restitution issues concerning children.

In 1998, Sarah and I coordinated a survey of Child Survivors to inquire about their experiences for war-related consequences. One thousand questionnaires were sent out. At that time, Child Survivors were aged mid-50's to mid-60's and were asked, "As you look back on your life, how do you think you were affected by your Holocaust experiences in childhood, physically, socially, emotionally, educationally and economically?" 664 Child Survivors responded.

The general findings revealed a staggering number of separations from parents with three-quarters of fathers and two-thirds of mothers never returning. More than half of respondents lost both parents.

Three quarters of the Child Survivors in this survey reported themselves to have suffered serious to severe life-long effects emotionally as a result of their traumatic past.

With respect to Restitution, there were at that time, six main road blocks to obtaining restitution:

1. Missed Deadlines

Many children did not know how to make claims. Nor did they know if their families had property or insurance. Children placed in adoptive or foster homes were not in touch with the community. They were taught not to think of themselves as survivors. When they did, it was too late to apply. According to our survey, over half never applied or had applied and been rejected. One third of those who applied received a one-time lump sum payment, one half of them less than \$700 US dollars.

2. Documentation Requirements

In most cases, young children had neither the knowledge nor resources to obtain proof of country of origin, birth certificates, death certificates, or names of

witnesses. As one respondent stated, “First they killed my family and now they want proof that they existed.”

3. Time Requirements for Those in Hiding or in Ghettos

In order to qualify, a child was required to have been in closed hiding (confined) for 18 months. “Open” hiding (able to be outside) did not warrant restitution – as if these children had not also suffered loss of home, family, identity and religion leaving them with feelings of abandonment, identity confusion and loyalty conflicts.

A 1987 study by Moskovitz had also revealed that over one half of Child Survivors in hiding were harshly treated, beaten and one in five were sexually abused.

4. Time Requirements for Six Months in Concentration Camp

In Treblinka and Majdanek, young children were unlikely to live more than one day. In Auschwitz the majority of adults lived no longer than three months.

It raises the question, “How many days in Auschwitz are required for the experience to have left its mark on a child?”

5. The Means Test

One’s economic status was required to be at poverty level, precisely the persons who cannot afford legal advice or the resources to pursue rightful compensation. Even today the annual net income for residents of Canada to meet the income eligibility requirement for a monthly pension is \$29, 103.

6. Requirement to be interviewed by German Psychiatrists

Under certain circumstances such as continuation of pension, an interview is arranged with a German psychiatrist rather than simply a board-certified psychiatric practitioner. This raises a single question. Where any Jewish child survived the Nazi occupation, what could possibly be grounds for discontinuing a pension?

Each and every child has suffered enormous losses, profound disruptions, fear and malnourishment, and life-long consequences.

To summarize, in our survey, Child Survivors reported themselves despite personal successes and achievements as seriously and permanently affected to this day:

Emotionally	81%	Socially	69%
Educationally	66%	Physically	67%
Economically	65%		

We are 15 years beyond our 1999 survey and Child Survivors are now aged mid-70 to mid-80. And for many, war's memories are returning to cripple them once again. For those persons who have had reasonably normal lives, childhood recollections are a nostalgic review of mostly cherished memories. For child Holocaust survivors it is a trip back into bottomless despair.

It should be noted, that in Los Angeles this year there is a shortfall of 1.1 million dollars for the care of Holocaust survivors. This is being raised by the local Jewish community. A typical account follows:

"I am a 78 year old Survivor of the Holocaust. I was a child during the Nazi occupation and I was hidden in the countryside by a Christian farm family. Both of my parents perished in German concentration camps. I immigrated to the United States in the early 1950's.

I live on a limited income. I receive \$800 in monthly income from Social Security and a \$1,100 monthly pension from Holland. I rent a small apartment on the west side of Los Angeles that costs \$1180 per month. I have a lot of medical bills related to hearing loss, arthritis, and psychiatric care relating to chronic depression.

Last year I was granted about \$4800 from the Holocaust Survivors in Urgent Need Fund. This was a life saver for me. I used the funds to cover dental work and bills

relating to my apartment. I am feeling much better and able to eat and chew without pain.”

I suggest you view those who express need with compassion. Do not humiliate them with seeking proof beyond establishing they lived under the Nazi domination and survived. And do what is right and just to ensure their remaining years are dignified.

And, remember that it is not only about establishing a degree of financial security. It is also about assuring a measure of justice.

And justice demands an official acknowledgement by responsible governments, particularly those that collaborated in the murders of my people.

It is growing late in the day. Our sun is setting.