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Generations Sharing the Holocaust Experience*

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Abstract: The author's feelings and experiences in sharing the Holocaust with her own children and the children she addresses regularly in schools are discussed in this paper. From her talks and exchanges with young people, it has been the author's experience that *stories of how we lived, not perished, make the greatest impact on young and old listeners. Unless we know the people's lives and what the Jewish people, as well as society at large, lost through the deaths of countless brilliant, educated, compassionate people, as well as children whose futures will always remain unknown and unrealized, we cannot fully mourn their deaths. To really know what the world lost through the Nazi terror, we must share stories of family members and of people we knew and admired with those to whom Holocaust victims are becoming statistics and numbers, not individuals with vibrant lives and futures that were cut down.*

Children particularly need to hear life-stories of those who perished, not only the facts of how their lives ended. The author reports on sharing the Holocaust experience, not only with Jewish children, but with children of all religions, colors, ages and backgrounds—not only in person, but through correspondence, conference calls/visits and classroom exchanges as a volunteer for the New York City School Volunteers Program in which she takes part.

**Based on remarks made at a panel discussion entitled "Bridges Between the Generations: Sharing the Holocaust Experience," held at the 28th annual convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, New York, June 21, 1993.*

How Do We Share the Holocaust Experience?

When a question would come up while my children were young, even before I got ready to answer, my son would plaintively ask, "Ma, how long is this going to take?" As often as not I'd say, "If I answer you by way of a highway, it will be short, but if I take side streets (*geselekh*), not express roads, to tell my story, it will take longer." And so, the following observations will be made more often via side streets, not superhighways, via little *geselekh* of reflection and memory.

How do we share the Holocaust experience? There isn't one way, or two, or three, or more. The ways are myriad and many, and they change, or start, or end, depending on the time of day, the light in the room, the mood of the storyteller and of the listener. To me, stories are the bridges between generations. Of course, there are many Holocaust books, of which others have written. By and large, however, I do not mean books. I mean stories, told by individuals, person-to-person, generation-to-generation, eye-to-eye, touch-to-touch.

Many years ago, I spoke to a group of sixth graders in a New York school. The girls were sitting on the floor, and I before them on a low library stool. Discussing the Holocaust in the early seventies was much less common than it is now, and for a young child to have visited Dachau with her parents nearly unheard of. Still, a beautiful girl named Jennie, whose face and name remain fresh in my mind, had gone to Dachau, and she kept asking me *how did I feel* on the cattle train to Siberia, *how did I feel* on the barren steppe—hungry, cold, scared. "Did I fail you, Jennie, in some way?" I asked in turn. "Didn't I write about all that in *The Endless Steppe*?" (T.Y. Crowell, 1968) "Yes, you did," replied Jennie. "But I want to hear you say it."

When I began writing short stories which resulted in *The Endless Steppe*, I never thought of them as a prelude to a book for children. I did not think of them as Holocaust experiences, because I did not even consider us—my parents, grandmother, and myself—part of the Holocaust. We were, after all, living in the lap of luxury in Siberia, compared to what was happening to people in the ghettos of Vilna, Warsaw, Bialystok, Cracow, and in towns and villages too numerous to mention. And we survived.

From the moment the war ended to this very day, I am attacked by pangs of survivor's guilt. Why did I have it so easy during the time that our loved ones were tortured, shot into graves at Ponar, deported to Majdanek and gassed? Why did I live and they did not?

In 1992, when I spoke at a school in the East Bronx, I was approached by a substitute teacher who had heard that I was a Holocaust survivor. "Show me your number," she brusquely ordered. She pointed to hers. "I don't have a number; I was in Siberia," I replied. "How can you call yourself a Holocaust survivor if you have only been in Siberia?" asked the teacher. "Others call me that—I don't," I told her. Nevertheless, *The Endless Steppe*, begun as short stories, and even earlier as entries in a journal that I'd kept after the war, and later rewritten as an article in the literary magazine of James Madison High School in Brooklyn (from which I graduated in 1948), is considered a Holocaust experience. There is a generation of adults, even parents, who remember it as one of the first "Holocaust" books that they read in junior or senior high schools all over the country, even though Siberia was not occupied by Nazis and did not have ghettos, mass killings, and gas chambers. (And they don't put the word Holocaust in quotation marks, as I just did.)

Bridges between generations need not be, as I said before, books. Some years ago, I was asked to speak to a group of young mothers in New Jersey who had asked for my help in telling their children about the Holocaust. Most of these mothers' parents or parents-in-law were Holocaust survivors, yet these stoic, loving survivors could not share with their children the stories of their war years. How, then, could their children pass it on to the next generation?

How People Lived, and Not Only How Their Lives Ended

I decided to focus the discussion on asking the Holocaust survivors to share with their children stories of their childhood years, before the war, when they were carefree, went to school, played ball, practiced musical instruments, dreamed and planned for their futures—stories of how they lived, not suffered and nearly perished, stories of the daily experiences of their brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends—not only how they died. We should speak of people's *lives*, and what the Jewish people, as well as society at large, have lost through the deaths of countless compassionate, brilliant, educated people, of children with uncharted futures, whose existence was cut down and who also would have become contributing members of society. Children, particularly, need to hear *life-stories* of those who perished, not only how their lives ended. The father-in-law of the hostess for the meeting in New Jersey was present when I spoke. For me, one of the most moving moments of the afternoon came when he interrupted me. "Oh, yes, make them tell you how we lived." He, who never before had spoken of his childhood, gave a lyrical, heartrending account of his boyhood years, how he studied at a *heder* and went to *shul* with his father; how he played on the streets near his *shtetl* home, what the family did on holidays, how it was before the war.

An unexpected, refractory incident occurred in the spring of 1993 in Jerusalem, after I visited the Valley of Lost Communities under construction at Yad Vashem. The massive walls of stone, with names of destroyed communities reaching for the sky; the labyrinthine paths, purposely confusing one's sense of direction; and the utter stillness in the air touched the deepest part of one's soul.

A few days after my silent vigil close to the wall in memory of Vilna, a young woman named Michal came to visit me at

Mishkenot Sha'ananim—"Peaceful Dwellings" is its literal translation—the house where writers, musicians, and artists often stay and work while in Jerusalem. Michal is the 25-year-old granddaughter of my beloved nanny and first teacher in Vilna, Miss Rachel. Michal and I talked about her grandmother and about our lives in Vilna, The Jerusalem of Lithuania—what Michal had been told of the past by Rachel. Suddenly Michal burst out: "I don't want Grandmother to tell me any more sad stories about the war!!!"

Michal's outburst echoed a news account of a seminar at the Jerusalem Van Leer Institute, which I had read in that morning's newspaper:

"Writer Amos Elon and former Mapam MK and Holocaust resistance fighter Chaika Grossman squared off last week over how the memory of the Holocaust should be preserved here.

"Elon said that we have a hypertrophy of memory, and that 'a little forgetting might be welcome.' He urged remembering the Holocaust with greater sophistication and less political 'banalization' than today.... Grossman in her plain talk brought all the other panelists down from their pedestals of theory and myth ... She quoted Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, saying, 'Even God can't change the past'" (*Jerusalem Post*, March 8, 1993).

After a brief silence, while Elon's words and Michal's outburst were meshing in my head, I said to her, "But Michal, you always seem eager to hear *my* stories about your Grandmother's past." During visits to New York and Israel, she truly did want to hear more and more about her grandmother. (Michal knew that I had written about her grandmother in my books.) She asked about Rachel's education in a rigorous gymnasium in Vilna, about how her grandparents had met and courted, what I recalled about her grandfather, about the trips and adventures her grandmother had with her younger beloved sister, Betya, whose charm, intelligence, and sense of humor I detected in Michal's personality as well.

"But Grandmother never tells me about the *good* times before the war! I only know how they died." Without the give-and-take of life-affirming stories between Michal and her grandmother, the family's history and names will be hidden from the next generation. Betya, who perished, may be forgotten. Mishkenot Sha'ananim, the Peaceful Dwelling overlooking the Old City and the Judean desert, was fraught with anguish that day.

Before I left Jerusalem, I reluctantly accepted from Miss Rachel a parcel of precious photographs of her youth, a portfolio of prints and postcards of Vilna, and several old books. "Rokhele," I implored, "give these to your sons and daughter, to your grandchildren, not to me!"

"NO, NO!" She was vehement. "They don't *know me!*" Rachel had ceased to tell her children and grandchildren stories of her family and youth because she felt that they did not care; they seemed to her detached from and uninterested in the Holocaust. Perhaps they wished to spare her feelings and shield themselves from pain? Can anyone fault that?

A Young Hero in Vilna

In my book of stories, *Remember Who You Are: Stories about Being Jewish* (Crown, 1990), I wrote of my little cousin Mussik. He died in the Vilna ghetto, at age 11 or 12 or 13; no one knows how or when. Two cousins of my mother's, who survived the war, told me that orphaned Mussik had roamed the streets, never begging, not having a place to rest his emaciated body, until he disappeared from sight forever. Mussik, kind and generous, fair and studious, met such a terrible end.

When I spoke at a Young Writers Festival in Cincinnati, a third grader, in a Reds baseball sweatshirt, asked me, "Mrs. Hautzig, do you have a hero?" Seeing my perplexed look, he repeated, "Do you have a *hero*?" It then dawned on me what he had in mind: a sports giant, a rock star, a TV performer. After a long silence, I finally answered him: "Yes, John, I have a hero. His name was Mussik and he was my cousin. He was always fair in play, and he was kind, and he was the one to settle all the arguments among us cousins. He was wonderfully funny; he would have made a wonderful teacher, an advocate for people less fortunate than he, a social worker, or a lawyer. He could have been a veterinarian, because he could heal any sick animal. How we loved him and how he loved us!" And then I had to tell John how Mussik's life ended. When I finished describing my hero, the silence in the auditorium was palpable.

Jacqueline Hechtkopf wrote in the *Nashville Banner* (October 13, 1990): "For to truly mourn a young victim of the Vilna ghetto, one needs a sense of what this little boy's life was like before the Nazis, as well as who he could have become had his life not been taken."

Remembering names, repeating names, telling about individuals counteracts "the trouble with phrases such as 'Six Million' or 'Holocaust Survivors' which become, in time, sterile titles devoid of the humanity they seek to commemorate" (*Community Review*, Harrisburg, PA, July 10, 1990).

"Unto Every Person There Is a Name"

A news item entitled "Victims Recalled," in the April 10, 1993 issue of *The New York Times* (p. 9), announced that hundreds of people would gather on April 18th in "public parks, war memorials, schools, and historic sites around the nation to commemorate Yom Hashoa. . . . At each of these sites volunteers will read the names of victims of the Nazi terror. The national project, coordinated by B'nai B'rith, is called 'Unto Every Person There Is a Name.'" By giving names of those who perished to our children and grandchildren, we can share their namesakes' lives. But we must be watchful lest we be misunderstood. In my own case, it turned out to be a bittersweet experience for my daughter and me. Her middle name is the same as that of my beloved aunt Margola. I wrote about Margola in the story that opens *Remember Who You Are*. One of the first reviews, in the English-language *Forward* (June 15, 1990, pp. 9, 10), was a long, impassioned, and provocative essay by Polly Shulman. Among the many comments she made about the story of Margola, she wrote, "What do the living owe the dead? Are their children liable for the debt? There is bitter meat in this nutshell version of the conflict between the Holocaust generation and their children. The 'Margola' passage is particularly, ironically, revealing for the question it raises but leaves out: What message will your daughter think you are trying to send her if you name her after a woman who gave up her life to die with her mother?"

I was not trying to convey a message in naming my daughter Margola. I was only giving my firstborn child the name of a young woman whom I had adored with all my heart. Some years later my daughter and I met the reviewer, and my daughter talked at length with Polly Shulman. What was said between them I do not know, but I do know that my daughter telephoned me afterwards and said, "Ma, I know that you named me for Margola because of the way she lived, not died." I believe that she had said as much to Polly Shulman—for which I was profoundly grateful.

My daughter knew about Margola's life, for it is at the center of my story, *A Gift for Mama* (Viking/Penguin, 1981). Although it

is loosely based on the family's prewar life in Vilna, all the names in the story, except Margola's and my mother's, were changed. Erica Marcus, an associate editor at Crown when *Remember Who You Are* was published, did not cry when she read the story of Margola in that book. Months afterwards, I gave Erica a copy of *A Gift for Mama*; she told me that she wept bitterly only after she had read the story of Margola's life before the war. My daughter says that one sentence in it makes her unbearably sad; the rest gives her great joy. For years she had asked me to "write a story about the good times, the times you were a happy kid." I think that *A Gift for Mama* gives as good a picture as would nonfiction of what life was like for us before the war. All truthful fiction does; it is as important as non-fiction accounts of the stages in our lives, both good and bad.

One of the most touching naming ceremonies that I ever attended, the perfectly built bridge between generations, took place in the winter of 1993 at Congregation Ansche Chesed, the synagogue on the Upper West Side in New York that I've attended since 1950. The parents of the baby spoke about her name, Nina Maxie Yaverbaum; I shall quote from the words of Polly Merdinger, Nina's mother:

My brother and I were named after my mother's parents, who were killed in the Holocaust, and so I've always felt that names were important because it was through my name that I had my only connection to my mother's family. On another level, though, I've always felt very detached from these relatives whom I never met and whom I know only from stories. I always call them "my mother's mother" and "my mother's father." It startles me when people refer to them as my "grandparents."

But when Julia [their older child] was born, my mother sat holding her one day, and she moved us very deeply by something she said. She told us that when she looked at our baby, she knew why she had survived. Hearing that made us feel our connection to my mother's family much more deeply than we ever had before.

We are the "second generation," and now we have given birth to another daughter, Nina, who is in the third generation. We want her to have a Hebrew name that will continue the memory of someone in our family from the first generation, who did not survive. And so, we chose the He-

brew name *Yasmin*, which begins with a "yud," in memory of my mother's brother—my uncle Yanek Weiss, whose Hebrew name was Israel Yakov. My uncle Yanek was, from all I've been told, a very bright, sweet, and musically talented boy. He did not live to be bar-mitzvahed. Nina was born five days after Yanek's birthday. We hope that she will be blessed with all the same good qualities that my Uncle Yanek had, that she will live a long, healthy, and peaceful life, and that she will continue our connection to the first generation, into the fourth, fifth, and sixth.

My own son's middle name is Rudomin, given in memory of all the Rudomins: Mussik, Sanna, and other cousins who perished in the war, as well as to carry on our family name into future generations. He is proud and pleased to have the same name as did his beloved grandfather (my father) and relatives he never knew. At the same time, he showed few outward signs that he wanted to know about our experiences during the war. He never read *The Endless Steppe* and I never forced the issue. David seemingly protected himself from knowing more than he could tolerate, while at the same time wanting to protect me from the hurt he saw and felt whenever the Holocaust was spoken of at home. Quite unlike my daughter, who wanted to know everything about everybody and who considers herself a native of Vilna—not of New York, where she came into the world—David often said when he was young, "I wish you guys all came from Montana," assuming that Montana assured a normal, American, happy childhood.

Building Bridges Between the Generations

In addition to his middle name, and stories about my Rudomin cousins, uncles, aunts, and other relatives, there were other, unplanned ways to share my growing up in Siberia with my son. One day, when he was about nine or ten years old, I was translating "Bontsye Shvayg" (Bontche the Silent) for a collection of stories by I. L. Peretz (*The Case Against the Wind, and Other Stories*, Macmillan, 1975). When he walked into the room, he noticed that I was crying while I typed. "Ma, I've seen people crying in movies, or when they read sad stuff, but I never saw anybody crying when they write." He walked out in total exasperation and closed the door with a firm bang. I said

nothing to reprove him, nor to explain why I cried.

That same week, when David came home from school, I offered him a cup of tea and something to eat. Having tea in the kitchen on days when he had no after-school activities was one of our special times together. I had prepared warm rolls with sweet butter, and we settled comfortably at the table. "Do you want to know why I cried the other day as I typed?" I asked. "Sure, Ma. ..." He did not ask how long my tale would take: the weather was lousy, the kitchen warm and smelling of fresh baking—no reason to rush. And so I told him about Bontche, who never asked for anything in his life and who never uttered a word of complaint against man or God. When he got to Heaven, and the Presiding Judge of the Heavenly Tribunal offered Bontche *anything*, truly *anything*, that Bontche wished for—all he asked for was a warm roll with fresh butter every morning. "When I was in Siberia, David, that was

my dream of Heaven too. Fresh bread, with butter, and sugar—and chocolate if at all possible!"

I think that David learned more from this than he might have learned from long, detailed accounts of our hunger and pain in Siberia. To this day (nearly 20 years later), when we have tea and fresh rolls with butter, David smiles and says, "You know, Ma, Bontche had the right idea!"

The story of Bontche is our bridge, David's and mine, a story that he heard at a moment when learning about the difficult years in my life was not overwhelming, nor threatening to the equilibrium he was so good at maintaining for himself.

Bridges between generations can be built according to wondrously varied, unplanned sketches, and follow carefully drawn plans laid out by master "architects" of a family history. The knot that ties us together is the near certainty that "no one leaves us for good," as Cynthia Rylant,

author of *Missing May* (Orchard, 1992), said in a recent speech. A bridge assures safe passage from one side of a river to the other—just as stories and memories assure the immortality of those who crossed their final bridge, under unspeakable circumstances, to what I hope and pray is eternal peace in a better world.

Esther Hautzig was born in Poland. Her autobiography, The Endless Steppe, describes her family's deportation to Siberia, which most likely saved them from Hitler's Holocaust. Ms. Hautzig is a prolific author, and teacher of children's book writing. Her most recent book, Riches (Harper Collins, 1992), was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award for Children's Literature and an Honor Book in the Sydney Taylor Book Award Competition. She is a member of the Authors' Guild and is listed in Who's Who of American Women.

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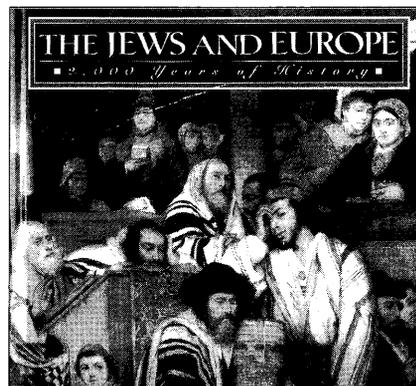
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