Intergenerational Memory of the Holocaust

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The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.
—MILAN KUNDERA, 1978/1982, p. 3

The literature on Holocaust survival and second-generation effects has been prone to controversy beyond criticisms of research methodology, sample selection, and generalizability of findings (e.g., Solkoff, 1992). A critical backlash has also been evident (Roseman & Handleman, 1993; Whiteman, 1993), even from among the children themselves (Peskin, 1981), against the penchant of the early Holocaust literature to formulate the transmission of deep psychopathology from one generation to the next. Such an unbending formulation has understandably aroused readers’ strong skepticism and ambivalence, in part because to expose the magnitude of the Nazi destruction is to confirm Hitler’s posthumous victory (Danieli, 1984, 1985). But seeking to correct this early bias wherein Holocaust suffering is equated with psychopathology has, often enough, also created an overcorrection that discourages understanding the Holocaust as a core existential and relational experience for both generations. This stance also has made it difficult to integrate the Holocaust literature with the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) literature (that followed it), which appears thus far not to have been similarly burdened with the accusation that to explore negative effects is to pathologize and demean survivors. What the extensive clinical and research material on the Holocaust—its contradictions as much as its consistencies—has taught us is the diversity of meanings of Holocaust suffering for both generations that can neither be accounted for by narrow psychopathological diagnoses (Bergmann & Jacovv, 1982) nor be contradicted by survivors’ and their children’s undeniable resiliency and coping. In the growing polemic between those who stress the negative effects of trauma (e.g., Krystal, 1968), and those who focus on survivors’ strengths and coping skills (e.g., Harel, Kahana, & Kahana, 1988), our body of work (e.g., Auerhahn & Laub, 1984, 1987, 1990; Auerhahn & Prelinger, 1983; Laub & Auerhahn, 1984,
1985, 1989; Peskin, Auerhahn, & Laub, 1997) has rejected the polarization of researchers into those who claim that no (ill) effects of the Holocaust are to be found in survivors and their children versus those who claim that there are (negative) effects. Instead, we have shifted the focus away from value-laden judgments of psychological health to the issue of knowledge, and have come to view both generations as heterogeneous and therefore as consisting of individuals with different kinds and degrees of Holocaust knowledge. We find that it is the very individualized quality of knowing massive psychic trauma that compellingly informs as well as shapes one's subsequent life experiences, world view, fantasy world, relationships, decision making, and action. Therefore, both character and psychopathology indelibly bear the marks of knowing trauma, and it is through this lens that we attempt to examine the intergenerational effects of massive psychic trauma. Much of our work has sought to examine the question of what kind of knowledge of the Holocaust is possible, and to trace the threads of different forms of traumatic knowledge as they have woven through the conscious and unconscious of both generations. Indeed, we view the ongoing debate among researchers and scholars as to the extent of impact the Holocaust has had on individuals as part of the continuing struggle of all of us to fully grasp the nature of massive psychic trauma.

In this chapter, we summarize our current understanding of the many ways massive psychic trauma is known, for central to the response to trauma are the issues of knowing and forgetting. The chapter focuses on the attempt to know, the defenses against knowledge, the different levels of knowing that are possible, the inevitable limits of knowing, and implications for healing, and will progress from an initial focus on survivors to a later focus on the next generation. That is because in our clinical work with survivors and their children, as well as in our work collecting oral histories of Holocaust survivors at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, we have found that knowledge of psychic trauma weaves through the memories of several generations, marking those who know of it as secret bearers (Micheels, 1985). Furthermore, we have found that massive trauma has an amorphous presence not defined by place or time and lacking a beginning, middle, or end, and that it shapes the internal representation of reality of several generations, becoming an unconscious organizing principle passed on by parents and internalized by their children (Laub & Auerhahn, 1984). Traumatic memory thus entails a process of evolution that requires several generations in which to play itself out. We initially understood this to be the result of conflicts arising from the paradoxical yoking of the compulsions to remember and to know trauma with the equally urgent needs to forget and not to know it (Auerhahn & Laub, 1990), but now see the situation as infinitely more complex. For along with any conscious or unconscious needs to know or not to know exist deficits in our abilities to grasp trauma, name it, recall it, and, paradoxically, forget it. We know trauma because it thrusts itself upon us unbeckoned. But we also fail to know it and frequently forget it because we are incapable of formulating and holding such knowledge in mind. Often, we cannot form an initial memory; at other times, the memory, once held, disappears. This process is exemplified by our psychiatric nosology, which has repeatedly omitted and reinstated the diagnosis of trauma, under various names, over decades (Solomon, 1995). On the political level, Dennis Klein (1991, p. 3) has noted an equivalent process in the tendency of some to deny or marginalize the Holocaust, coining the term history's memory hole to describe this phenomenon. It is no wonder, then, that survivors are unable to complete the process themselves, leaving their children to carry on the working through of trauma. These children become burdened by memories that are not their own (see Auerhahn & Prelinger, 1983; Fresco, 1984). As one child of survivors told us, “I am a prisoner of an empty space.” The child echoes what exists in parents’ inner worlds; the child’s psychic reality thereby reveals the indelible marks left by trauma.