

DON'T LOOK BACK: HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN THE U.S.

William Helmreich

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No Social History of Survivors

Where Irving Howe's World of Our Fathers deals with Jews who came to America between 1881 and 1917, there is no World of Our Fathers about the 140,000 European Holocaust survivors who came to the United States after World War II or even about the other two-thirds of the survivors who came to Israel. Aside from a few small books such as Dorothy Rabinowitz's New Lives, which quotes from some 18 interviews with survivors surrounding the Hermine Braunsteiner Ryan trial, and one or two edited collections of interviews, there has been no social history whatsoever of the survivor community. We know nothing from published sources about the communities they set up, where they went, how they lived, their economic patterns, their family patterns, except in the area of pathology and deviance.

We know a lot about the problems that the survivors faced in psychologi-

cal terms. We frequently generalize and characterize them as people who suffer a great deal from depression, anxiety, paranoia, but in terms of the larger picture we really do not know much. Most of the research on which we base our conclusions about survivors comes from populations who were seen clinically, which introduces a certain bias into the equation. We have data about people who either were seen by psychiatrists or are in hospitals, or those who were restitution claimants, who asked for money, sometimes feeling the need to exaggerate their symptoms because the Germans judging their claims were so unsympathetic.

This is a report on the first quantitative survey of Holocaust survivors in the United States based on a truly random sample of survivors. The sample was drawn from a base that used random digit dialing and was divided proportionately according to the number of survivors that remained in the New

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.
13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-639281, Fax 972-2-639286. © Copyright. All rights reserved.
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York area and those that went elsewhere.

While their ages varied, the survivors who came to America after the war were generally between the ages of 15 and 35. A lot of the people interviewed were not in the camps, they were in hiding. Our definition of a survivor includes people who were in labor camps, people who hid, people who passed as gentiles, people who were in ghettos, and people who went to Siberia. The criteria were people who were dislocated during the war starting with 1939.

One should hesitate before concluding that those who went through Auschwitz suffered the most. First of all, it depended on what one did. Second, it depended on one's individual capacity. Third, some researchers have argued that being in a situation of hiding was in some ways even worse than being in the camps because in the camps one developed a certain level of expectations, but those in hiding every day never knew when they went to sleep that they might be awakened, apprehended and killed.

The study included 170 in-depth interviews with survivors. Some were well-known people like Abe Foxman; Jack Tramiel, the President of Atari; Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the U.S. Congress; Vera Stern, the wife of violinist Isaac Stern; but some of the average people, the shoemakers and tailors, sometimes have even more extraordinary tales to tell.

Part of the research involved searching the archival collections of Yivo, through the minutes of HIAS and of USNA, the United Service for New Americans, which at one point worked parallel with HIAS and later merged to form United HIAS. The National Council of Jewish Women has 60,000 typewritten interviews done with survivors and other immigrants and housed in Yeshiva University's archives. They total more than 200,000 pages and are just waiting for researchers to do something with them. They are a remarkable gold mine of information and material, enough for perhaps ten doctoral dissertations. In

addition, there is Yale University's oral history collection. At Yad Vashem in Jerusalem there are 236 taped interviews done with survivors who came to Israel for the 1981 world gathering.

Since Jewish history is a chain of events that spans centuries, it would be wrong to leave any piece in the chain unconnected. If we do not tell the story of these survivors after the war and if we do not get to speak with them before they pass on, we will lose a very important part of Jewish cultural history.

Survivors See Psychiatrists Less

The data from this survey paint a very different picture of the average survivor, especially in comparison to the average American Jew. One measure of psychological health is whether or not one feels a need for psychological or psychiatric assistance. Compared to a control group of American Jews, survivors were actually less likely to have ever seen a psychiatrist or social worker, despite their past ordeals.

The above fact presents those who are trying to understand the survivors as a group with a very serious dilemma. Since probably three-quarters of the research to date has employed a sample of those who have been in treatment, this means in effect that 80 percent of our conclusions are based on less than 20 percent of the total survivor population. Clearly, we know rather little about the average survivor in terms of his or her adjustment.

Success in America

On the whole, the survivors succeeded in America to a greater degree than many people think. Their family lives are remarkably stable. Their economic patterns show that they were able to successfully hold down jobs and even do well, but were not wildly successful. In 1989, 34 percent of the survivors reported earning over \$50,000, compared to 41 percent of American Jews.

Survivors also did rather well socially. They became involved in synagogues and in

educational institutions. They not only belong to Jewish organizations at a higher rate than American Jews but are also more likely to be leaders in those organizations.

When it comes to visiting Israel, survivors are more than three times as likely to have visited Israel two or more times than American Jews. Overall, 89 percent of all survivors have visited Israel at least once.

Higher Birthrate; Lower Divorce Rate

Survivors have a higher birthrate than American Jews, which is one of the clearest signs that survivors believe in the future, namely, that they choose to bring children into a world that was once so cruel to them. Even though they make less money, they are more likely to own their own home than American Jews because they invest a great deal of importance in that. For them, security and independence are very important considerations in their postwar lifestyles.

Most of the focus to date on problems of survivors has been in terms of family problems. Yet, in fact, only about 11 percent of the survivors are divorced compared to 18 percent for American-raised Jews. On the one hand, one could say that the turmoil in the Holocaust survivor's lives apparently did not translate into a high divorce rate. On the other hand, they might have been more willing to suffer through bad marriages because of their conservative, Old World values.

Do survivor-survivor marriages work out better than marriages between survivors and Americans? It would seem so because survivors who married Americans are almost twice as likely to get divorced as survivors who married survivors. Maybe survivors' unions last longer because the couple can better understand each other's problems. It might also mean, however, that those survivors who linked up with Americans became more Americanized and were therefore more willing to consider divorce as a solution to marital strife. The divorce rate for survivor-American

couples is the same as the divorce rate for American couples -- 19 percent.

Choosing America or Israel?

First of all, why did the survivors who chose to come to America do so? Many came because of family. Unlike the Jews who came to America at the turn of the century, the survivors found that America afforded them the opportunity to resume rather than to break off family ties because in many instances the only members of their families who were still alive were those who had come to the U.S. before the war. For them this was a reunion, not like the old days when one left their family behind. Their family was already in the U.S. and because of this they were able to enter the country.

Another reason was that people were sometimes just too tired to take on the challenge of becoming pioneers. They knew from letters from Israel that life there was tough and before 1948 getting there was not so easy.

One woman, Anna Lowy, told a reporter for the Jewish Examiner that she selected the United States over Palestine "not because I don't love Palestine but because I do love Palestine. But Palestine needs strong people to work and fight for her and I am no longer strong and I can fight no more. But I have one wish, to see Palestine just once."

There were many survivors who looked to America because of its size and diversity, and separation of church and state offered them the promise of being able to fit in, to disappear and to hopefully put the past behind them. Elie Wiesel describes this feeling in his novel The Fifth Son. The speaker is glad that he waited for the American visa. The American way of life suits him. It is easy to blend in with the masses. There are people for whom the pain of being Jewish was simply too much to bear. New York, as Wiesel writes, the most extroverted city in the world, is also the perfect city for loners. Approximately 65 percent of the survivors stayed in the New York area. The other

35 percent were scattered among some 341 different communities.

One of the least known facts we discovered was that there were 1,500 survivor families who started farms after World War II in such established locations as the Vineland, New Jersey area, as well as Colchester, Danielson, and Norwich, Connecticut; Ferndale, Ellenville and other towns in Sullivan and Ulster Counties and the Niagara Peninsula in upstate New York; Petaluma, California; and on individual farms throughout the United States.

If we are to fully understand why some survivors selected America or Canada while others opted for Israel, a lot of research is required. We have to do a full demographic breakdown of those who entered each country. We would have to compare factors from country to country such as age, health, the religious affiliation of the people, the country of origin, their socioeconomic status, how they spent the war years. We would have to know if they were positively influenced by Zionist ideas before the war; whether or not they had relatives in Israel, Europe and America; where in Europe they were after the war, etc. We must also remember that the survivors went through different experiences. We cannot lump together people who went through camps, people who hid in Siberia, and people who hid in people's homes. All of this would have to be done for each year of the postwar era, and ideally it would have to be supplemented with in-depth interviews which would try to determine the precise basis for the decisions made. Only then could general conclusions be drawn about the survivor communities in Israel and the West and such work has as yet not been undertaken.

The cathartic effect of fighting the enemy instead of the running, cowering in fear, and humiliation that typified the survivors during the war is a major difference between what happened to the survivors who came to Israel and those who came to America. Survivors in Israel immediately became part of the majority, whereas those who went to America were members

of a minority once again, albeit a tolerated minority.

Even as new arrivals, the survivors in Israel were not seen as intrinsically different from other new immigrants to Israel. Therefore, being an immigrant there did not have the same stigma attached to it that being an immigrant in America did. There are many newspaper articles that recorded the difficulties that faced the survivors when they came to the United States as immigrants, as well as the prejudice and discrimination that they encountered.

On Arrival in America

What was it like for the survivors when they first came to America? The boats usually left from Bremenhaven and the journey took about two weeks. The main ports of arrival were New York, Boston, and New Orleans, while those who came through Shanghai arrived in San Francisco.

The most frequently used location in New York was the Hotel Marseilles, a massive 10-story building located on the city's upper west side, though at 425 Lafayette Street there was the HIAS center with a dormitory in the building. Some people remembered the Marseilles as a dilapidated halfway house for war refugees and others identified it as the place where they got their first key ever to a private room. The hotel was a bustling center of immigrant activity where people talked, reminisced, and made plans for the future. An Aufbau reporter described the scene in 1946 in the following terms: "Two buses stopped in front of the Hotel Marseilles. European baggage is unloaded. Inside people converse excitedly about the new immigration. Chocolate and peanuts are pressed into the hands of children." (Two months after reading this I interviewed a survivor in Westchester, Alex Petrushka, a master piano teacher, who told me, "The peanuts, I remember the smell of the peanuts to this very day.")

The Marseilles Hotel was the headquarters for the numerous agencies that were continuing the absorption process and it

had meeting rooms, recreation halls, medical facilities, and a clothing distribution center. People attended English classes, lectures and films designed to orient them to America. Immigrants came into the hotel at all times of the day and night. You would walk around the lobby and listen to the conversations of the immigrants in a dozen tongues and had the feeling that you were in another world, a world whose inhabitants were simply unwilling to shed the cultural baggage of the past. They groped hesitantly towards the future, a future which for them was fraught with peril, for it required adjustments that they really had difficulty in even considering because they had gone through so much already.

It was a recurring sight: women would come in and burst into tears when they saw clean sheets in their hotel rooms. The well-known philanthropist William Rosenwald talked about how a group of children arrived at a shelter and the youngest were sent to an infant's home. It took the older children three days before they gathered enough courage to ask if the infants had been sent to the gas chambers.

The accounts varied from community to community. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, for example, a number of survivors explained in great detail how they would never forget how the community gave them furnished apartments, refrigerators full of food, and helped them find jobs. On the other hand, one arrival who came to Pittsburgh said of the Steel City Hotel where she stayed that "horses should live there, not people." Another survivor, who came to Oklahoma City, said, "Don't even ask what it was like. It was just terrible."

There were also people with unique problems. For example, I spoke with a Sephardic man from Salonika who settled in the Bronx where the people at the local synagogue thought he was a spy because he could not speak Yiddish. Although he spoke Ladino, they told him, "You must be a spy. You cannot be Jewish and be a survivor and not speak Yiddish." Eventu-

ally he took a very long walk every week to a Sephardic synagogue where he felt more at home.

I met a man in the Milwaukee area whose parents were survivors but did not even know he was Jewish until age 24. His parents had decided after the Holocaust that they were not going to tell anybody that they were Jewish, a story one hears more often about survivors who stayed in Europe. This couple came to America courtesy of Catholic Relief and were sent to a city in Wisconsin, where they joined the Lithuanian Church and told no one that they were ever Jewish. One day the man walked into his mother's room and found her looking through some photographs that had Xs through the faces in some cases. His mother explained that they were photographs of relatives killed during the war. That revelation began a process of self-discovery that was to eventually culminate in him dropping his studies for the priesthood and becoming a volunteer for the Justice Department division that tracks down Nazis in America.

The organizations did a magnificent job in helping the new arrivals. It was not easy to help 140,000 people adapt and it involved an incredible network, at the same time competing with the newly emerging State of Israel for scarce funds.

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The story of the survivors is not a story of remarkable people. It is a story of how remarkable people can be and there is a difference between the two. What emerged was that human beings have tremendous capacities for strength and regeneration that are often not called into play, but when they are called into play people somehow seem to find the strength to do so.

The Rambam says that in order to conquer a tendency to be cheap one should be very generous for a while. We have been very cheap. All we have focused on until now is the negative. This study is not a celebration of the survivors. Thousands

and thousands of survivors did not do well in America, but the majority did. Since there exist over 300 books and articles that talk about how badly they did, we ought to have at least one that talks to some extent about how well they did. The survivors had many problems, but they did far better than the literature today suggests.

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William Helmreich is Professor of Sociology and Jewish Studies at CUNY Graduate Center and City College of New York. His book on Holocaust survivors will be published this spring by Summit Books (Simon and Schuster). This Jerusalem Letter is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.