

Reflections on the Holocaust and the War in Ukraine: Perspectives from a Grandchild of Holocaust Survivors

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Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, is Thursday, April 28, 2022. For several decades, the [Transcending Trauma Project](#) (TTP), has been researching the effects of the Holocaust on survivor families. A qualitative research project at Council for Relationships, TTP has interviewed 307 survivors, spouses, children, and grandchildren. TTP's first book, *Transcending Trauma*, focused on the survivors, their experiences, and their relationships with their children. Currently, TTP is examining the impact of the Holocaust on the third generation's relationships, values, beliefs, worldview, and faith. We have conducted over 45 interviews with the grandchildren of the survivors in the TTP project. My son-in-law, Avi, is the grandson of four Holocaust survivors. He recently went to Poland as part of his work at [The Jewish Agency for Israel](#) and shared his thoughts with all of us. He has given me permission to share them with you.

"My first flight in nearly three years and who would have thought...

I am on my way to Poland, where I'm going to visit The Jewish Agency for Israel's operations to help Ukrainian refugees and bring Ukrainian Jews to Israel.

Lots of emotions this visit; all four of my grandparents were born in Poland, and survived the Holocaust. (Two of Avi's grandparents survived 17 months in a hole dug in the ground for them by a non-Jewish, Polish family friend.)

This trip isn't about them, but I'll be thinking of them a lot these next few days. They were all involved in Zionist youth groups before World War II.

But there was no Israel for them.

There was no place sending teams of people to help them escape and guide them to safety.

Of course this isn't a direct parallel to what is happening today in Ukraine. The horrors are of a different sort.

But I'm proud to be part of the efforts to ensure there never will be such a parallel.

I'm motivated to see, to listen, and to tell the stories of the refugees, the volunteers, and our staff on the ground, working to rescue Ukrainians and provide humanitarian relief...Today we went to the border area at Medyka, Poland. This is one of the major border crossings between Poland and Ukraine. There is a constant stream of refugees coming through there, day and night.

One of the places we went to is a former shopping center that is now being used as a shelter for refugees.

Rows and rows of cots. Families sitting on the floor. Polish soldiers patrolling. People coming to our stand to get underwear and socks.

I stepped away from my team briefly because I wanted to take a moment and feel this place. Feel the horribleness of it. Feel the sadness of it. Feel the cruelty that could lead a mother to bring her children to stay on the floor of a supermarket, totally exposed, with nothing, because being there is safer than their beds back home in Ukraine.

I came across a huge wall, covered with kids' art projects. I, of course, thought about my daughter's art projects and how grateful I am that she never had to pass the time making art projects in a place like this.

It made me sad. It made me angry. That the world could be this messed up.

I want to write something cathartic here and, yes, I also felt the kindness of people, of the volunteers, of the refugees to each other.

But there is no nice way to tie up the loose ends of what I saw today. The world is far out of balance. We have a lot of work to do."



Figure 1 Photo of kids' art projects from shelter near Poland-Ukraine border courtesy of Avi Bass

And so, the impact of the Holocaust continues into the third generation where the worldview of the grandchildren of survivors, as we have found in TTP's research, is shaped by the events their families experienced. The TTP research team is motivated by the sensitivities of the third generation, people like my son-in-law, Avi, whose response to the Holocaust is to leave the world a better place than when they were born. The research will also educate social service providers and others on how best to help others

who have experienced genocide and extreme trauma, like the Ukrainians, the Rwandans, the Cambodians, and others, to cope, adapt, and rebuild their lives.

Nancy Isserman is Co-Director of the [Transcending Trauma Project](#) and Director of [Operation Home and Healing](#): Services for Veterans and their families. Her PhD dissertation examined the impact of the Holocaust on survivors' beliefs of tolerance and intolerance toward the perpetrators and their descendants of the WWII crimes against Holocaust survivor families.