



Texts of Trauma, Texts of Identity: The Narrative Legacy of Holocaust Survivor Stories

by Hannah Kliger and Bea Hollander-Goldfein

Studies examining the long-term consequences of the experience of trauma on human beings have focused on the effect of trauma on personal and cultural formations of identity.¹ We are particularly interested in how people adapt in the aftermath of trauma, and how they construct and communicate memory and meaning as individuals and within their communities.

The Transcending Trauma Project of the Penn Council for Relationships centers on one particular community, Holocaust survivors, defined as Jewish individuals whose lives were threatened during World War II, because they resided in countries controlled by Nazi Germany.² We elicit testimonies that are fluid rather than fixed, open to the expression of deeper personal meaning and self-exploration. As survivors' narratives are heard, particularly within the family, their stories about traumatic events teach the listeners more than just how to cope with trauma, but more broadly how to be in the world. The listener, in turn, selects, remembers, and internalizes (albeit not consciously) the stories which later may translate into life lessons.

The historical accuracy of autobiography is less the point than the ways in which the traumatic events and meaning of survival are remembered, reported, and assimilated. Meanings heretofore unarticulated are generated in a



context and environment co-created by the interviewee and the interviewer. Participants in this process have expressed appreciation for the questions that no one has ever asked them before.

The in-depth interviews conducted by the Transcending Trauma Project shift the angle of vision from documenting external conditions to recording and analyzing the internal realities of survivors' lives, especially the personal and emotional significance of events before, during, and after the Holocaust. We ask about the memory practices of survivors in order to probe not just what happened to them, but mainly what happened within them.

Three methodological innovations are featured. First, our subjects, wherever possible, are families of survivors, their children, and in some cases even grandchildren.

Second, we look at past and present family and communal backgrounds to explore individual differences and why they exist.

Third, we ask interviewees to incorporate issues and descriptions significant to them. Our interviews are open-ended and include discussions of family of origin, key life events, cultural affiliations, and religious and moral belief systems.

In asking survivors for their life histories, our query focuses on how they rebuilt their lives, the methods they used to cope, and the ways in which their beliefs, attitudes, and values affected their will to live and, later, to start over and rebuild. Speaking from one's inner self for the first time is a powerful, often affirming experience. Thereby, the interviewer and interviewee are both transformed by the interpersonal process.

From this perspective, speakers listen to themselves and watch others listen acceptingly to their narratives that incorporate, often for the first time, their inner private experiences. Moreover, we witness the power of these narratives to reveal the value systems of those who share the memories of trauma, as well as the impact on the value systems of those who hear the stories of survival.

For children of survivors, listening to the experience of survivor parents has multiple consequences.

For the second generation listening to traumatic memories, they are hearing not only what the parent went through; they are also hearing who the parent or grandparent is. When a particular attribute of a survivor parent is clear and emotionally compelling, this attribute can become an organizing value system in the developing identity of the child that is expressed throughout the uncharted territory of his or her life. The workings of this process emerged in the analysis of intergenerational interviews. We have framed this process as the transmission of pivotal narratives.

We raise the following questions: What makes a narrative pivotal? How does the developmental stage of the listener/receiver of the story determine the stories' impact? Similarly, how does the developmental stage of the survivor/storyteller at the time of the telling determine the stories' impact? Does the relationship between the survivor and the child of survivor/listener determine how the stories are integrated? What accounts for differences among siblings' responses to the same stories heard? Is it in the repetition of the same stories over and over again, or perhaps in the silence broken with one particular story, that makes a narrative pivotal?

In the cases described here, we trace the metamorphosis of pivotal family narratives recalled and now recounted by children of survivors.³ The first example is the story by Iris, a child and grandchild of survivors. The story is one of several narratives that have had a profound impact on her. The memory begins with the long death march of Iris' grandmother toward the end of World War II:

And she takes her shawl and puts it over her head and walks away from the hundreds, perhaps, women, that are being marched at gunpoint. And she took an out, she took the choice, she took control of her destiny, and as I interpret it, very calmly decided how she's going to determine the rest of her life, whatever it is.

As the interviewer asks Iris to consider the meaning of this choice, she reflects:

And she has said and has written that you know, she consciously made this very logical decision. If she turns around and walks away she'll get shot in



the back and it will be over. And if she makes it, she'll get to be with her kids. And there is some courage in that...that incident evokes for me courage, control, solitude, the self-reliance that I think informs a lot of what I do in my life.

Asked to probe further about her own life, Iris underlines her own intuitive sense about being separate, the imperative to not be part of a crowd.

I see that scene, and I imagine her as being, if there are four or three women across in a line, she was obviously on the edge. So I know that whenever I'm in a crowd, I am reluctant to get into the center. I always stay on the edge. I'm conscious of where the exits are all the time. All the time.

Throughout her life, Iris has been cast as an oppositional rebel for her refusal to adhere to the rules. She shares her awareness of this judgment of her behavior with resentment and pain as revealed by tears welling up in her eyes. But, in the context of the pivotal memory of the grandmother who had enough and left, Iris' behavior needs to be understood as a strong and suitable reaction. Her apartness is less defiance than it is her inherited mode of survival. Making this connection, spontaneously, in the course of the interview provided an inner sense of self-recognition. For Iris, the recognition provided a much needed salve for private doubts about her inner motivations. She knew she was not an oppositional rebel but could not explain the compelling drive within her. She continues later in the interview:

There's a defiance in general about rules and especially in crowds. But it sort of filters in all parts of my life. That following what everyone is supposed to be doing somewhere in my consciousness means sure and certain death. That it's up to, if I want to survive, I have to be on my own as a solo player, away from the crowd. I think that plays out a lot in my life. It's not, I have not consciously done this, but if I were to outline the path my life has taken, in terms of career, for instance, I manage to do things in a roundabout way, not from start to finish. I'm not assigning this experience of my grandmother's as the reasons I live the way I do. But it is interesting to note. And I think there's a connection that,

that nothing in my life has been start to finish...And there's something that I still hold, that if you keep running, you're safe.

Establishing her own path and finding the routes of her choosing are pieces of Iris' legacy. In fact, when asked by the interviewer to connect this most profound and resonant memory to "a trait of yours, an aspect of yours, a defining quality of you. Not just you reacting to war stories, but a war story that became, as you say, a self-defining aspect of your identity," she states:

That would be it. And as I mature and understand myself more with each passing month and year, and as I fine-tune my truths, it becomes more and more clear. (Crying) And I feel like I'm on that...I'm behind her in those footsteps. In a way, the path has been paved. I'm not rebelling; I'm following a path.

In the telling of that story, in the context of the research interview, a critical clarification of self in relation to story occurred. The memories became messages about how one's core values, while rooted in a past that is painful, move forward to a more valid interpretation and a purpose routed in moral and personal choices.

In a second example, Beth reviews a story she has always known about her mother's war experience:

It is at that first selection...that the drama of what happened between mother and her mother and her baby took place. There were three groups. One was the people sent to the trains into the death camp. Another group was the young people who could work, and then another group were those family members of the people in the work camp...So anyone connected to the people in the work camp was still being allowed to re-enter the work camp. And they had children, that group. So my grandmother, in I think the chaos of that moment, I can't imagine it feeling anything other than terribly frightening, my mother was holding my brother in her arms. He was eight months or nine months at the time. Her mother was trying to take the baby away from my mother, saying to her, 'I'll take care of the baby, and you can go work.' Well, the unstated reality



was, my grandmother knew she was going to her death, and that the baby would go with her, but at least my mother would have a chance to live.

Hearing her mother recapture the moment yet again on a recent occasion, Beth is reminded of her mother's choice to refuse to relinquish her infant child. She describes this latest retelling:

But what she said poignantly, clearly, in words this summer which I knew was always part of the story whether she said it or not, (pause, crying) was the unwillingness on my mother's part to have any role in her mother's death.

For Beth, the daughter of the woman who could not tolerate any role in another's suffering, the message is clear. It is clear even without the explication of a larger meaning system by the parent about how the decision was made. The interview process helped define what she sees as a "very deeply embedded part of me...." She continues:

It was like looking in the mirror when she told me that. And again, it's like I always knew it, and I always knew the message, but there's something when you take the time to really focus on it and pay attention and put all the words on it.

The pivotal memory assumes its place as a guiding principle for her own standard of behavior. In the unfolding of her own narrative, Beth is drawn to the abiding power of the unspoken but ever enacted value statement acquired from her mother's testimony:

But I think I was very...(pause, crying) I'm not sure why this is so emotional. (pause) But I think I was even more exquisitely attuned to and avoidant of and unwilling to cause anybody pain. (pause) At all. In any way.

Her essential identification with the central principle of empathy for people, what her interviewer terms "a universal, governing, dominant law in your very core being," is enunciated in numerous examples throughout her interview. With the interviewer as guide, Beth contemplates her own choices as lifelong continuities emergent from the pivotal telling of trauma.

The impact of telling the trauma is contrasted, in

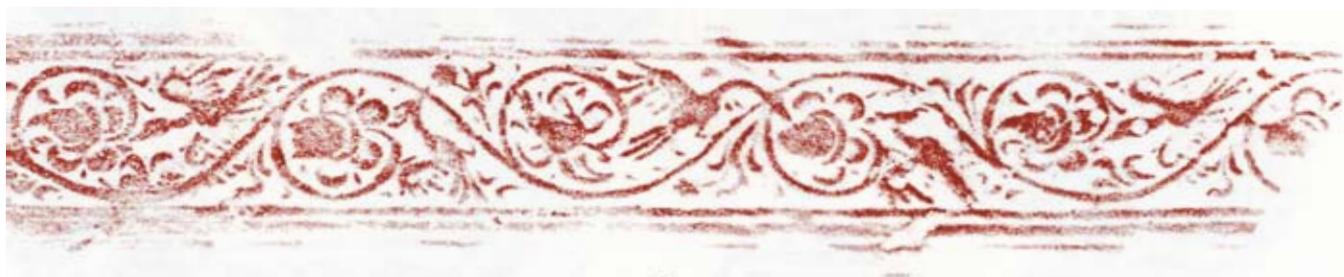
the next case, with the powerful legacy of not telling, where silence about deeply held painful secrets pervades the family. Lisa, a daughter of Holocaust survivors, claims not to have "a memory of a story told to me by either of them that I would say was a pivotal one." Only in adulthood did Lisa learn that her mother had a husband and a child who died of starvation in Siberia during the war, and with that knowledge came a clearer understanding of her mother's withdrawal and her distance. Lisa confirms the sentiment of other children of survivors, that the most important event in her life happened before she was born, yet in this instance "the way [these] memories and stories were transmitted...was through silence." The interviewer offers the possibility that "the impact was not what she told you, it's who she was because she didn't tell you." "Right," Lisa responds:

I could not make sense of her inability to connect emotionally, physically, and so I internalized bad feelings about myself...Had the stories been made available earlier...it would have generated quite a bit of sadness...perhaps even overwhelming sadness, but I think it would have helped me be more compassionate of her and of myself.

When asked to think about the ways in which her mother's silence has informed her behavior in her own life, Lisa takes a moment to reply.

It's difficult for me to be angry and to confront people. I grew up without expressing anger because it would have hurt her to have done that with her. I had a sense of being damaged because she couldn't connect to me. If I have feelings, if I get angry, I feel guilty. It's a challenge to validate my feelings and have feelings of anger, to confront people...I deal with it all the time. I'm more sensitive to my own feelings and the feelings of others. This whole scenario goes through my head—"Why are you angry? Don't be angry!" My inclination is to be silent; my challenge is to work on that, because that's what I learned growing up.

Pivotal narratives, verbally communicated or non-verbally conveyed, play a role in identity formation. From these examples, we see how the experience of



trauma, and its memory and telling, must ultimately take us to the intersection of survival and identity. An integration of both the positive adaptation and the negative sequelae of surviving extreme trauma is needed, and is possible by looking at the survivor and the survivor's family.

In other words, we are studying what it means to decode the text to understand the individual, and then recontextualize the text to understand the family. The preliminary findings indicate that the approach has been successful in eliciting a more fully integrated life history. Individual differences emerge while illuminating significant familial and group themes. Without undermining or underestimating the tragedies and trials that individuals and communities experience, a legacy of resilience and resourcefulness becomes apparent when family

units can be investigated. As poignant narratives are shared on a deeper level, with oneself and with significant others, life themes emerge as representations of belief systems that are guided by human connection.

The capacity for transforming trauma may depend on the capacity, ultimately, to negotiate memory, to recognize the personal teachings that are embedded in the process of sharing stories whether or not the speaker or listener are consciously aware of the messages imparted, and to integrate these narratives through life-affirming belief systems. By gathering the narratives of all generations, this study speaks to the complex process of surviving. The lessons of the Holocaust are many, among them the capacity of individuals to use their memories to weave a narrative of survival that forms the foundation of meaning. ■

1. See Brenner, I. (2004). *Psychic trauma: Dynamics, symptoms, and treatment*. Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson; Garland, C. (Ed.). (1998). *Understanding trauma: A psychoanalytical approach*. New York: Routledge; Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic Books; Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma*. New York: Free Press; LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Van der Kolk, B. A., McFarlane, A.C. & Weisaeth, L. (Eds.). (1996). *Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*. New York: Guilford Press.

2. The Transcending Trauma Project, under the

auspices of the Council for Relationships in the Division of Couple and Family Studies in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Jefferson Medical College, has examined coping and adaptation in Holocaust survivors and their families. The project has conducted 275 in-depth life histories of survivors, their children, and grandchildren in order to understand how they were affected by the Holocaust yet managed to rebuild their lives after the war.

3. For the interviews cited in this essay, the names of the interviewees have been changed. Full transcripts are available from the Transcending Trauma Project office at the Council for Relationships, 4025 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

