

Survivors Sometimes Tell Their Stories

Motives For Sharing And Motives For Silence

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The Transcending Trauma Project (TTP)¹ has interviewed about 300 individuals, Holocaust survivors and their family members, that is, spouses, children and their spouses, and grandchildren. Thus, three generations provide interview data on a wealth of topics, mainly focusing on coping and adaptation prior to, during, and after the war. For this particular paper, we looked at a small subset of the data, specifically, statements from the interviews which deal with whether and why survivors talked about the Holocaust with their children. Communication about the Holocaust is not best explained in a simplistic fashion, whether it occurred or not; rather, it is important to understand the complexities of decisions of whether and how much to be open with various others about one's most traumatic experiences, and the impact of those communication choices on the family system.

In some cases, survivors were silent with their families, but talked to other people, either fellow-survivors, or even sometimes in public speaking situations. In other cases, survivors talked about their Holocaust experiences with their family members, but not to outsiders. In still other cases, survivors were open about their experiences with both families and public. Finally, there were people who did not discuss their Holocaust experiences with family or strangers, but were silent altogether.

This paper represents an attempt to understand the relationship between communication and the emotional health of Holocaust survivors and the children of survivors. The impact of family communication cannot be questioned. In the case of Holocaust survivors, sometimes the Holocaust was 'the elephant in the room' that no-one talked about. Citing other authors, Eitinger and Major² note that 'children benefit most when there is not too much communication and yet the Holocaust is not a taboo subject'.

Robinson and Winnik note:

If familiar with their parents' past, they are mostly able as adults to liberate themselves from the horror of their memories; their defense mechanisms avoid and repress the subject of the Holocaust. However, just like the survivors, they are haunted by fantasies and nightmares related to the Holocaust [...] The cases [...] continue to identify as though they had gone through it themselves [...] Children who were told less [...] are less sensitive to the subject. They even tend to display a keen interest in it and seek information concerning this dark period in the history of our people, possibly for a better understanding of their parents' past.³

Waxman⁴ reviews literature that reveals both transmission of trauma and subsequent symptomatology, as well as resilience and strength in survivors and their offspring. Okner and Flaherty⁵ also cite literature reflecting differential effects of communication, both positive and negative, depending on the amount of detail, the frequency, the style and the age of the children. Adelman⁶ argues that the psychological interplay between survivors and children, represents the parent's reorganization of self in the ability and willingness and specific strategies for telling or not telling about prior Holocaust experiences. It is clear that no one pattern of communication occurs; nor did one pattern of effects.

Using the TTP database of interviews, we first considered whether the families were seen as having open or closed communication climates, as judged by the researchers who analyzed each family group. We then searched the transcripts of the interviews to discover whether or not survivors shared their experiences. The statements about communication were coded using a list of reasons for sharing and silence initially generated by the research team from a broader knowledge of the interviews and Holocaust literature. This list was modified inductively as we coded the data. Approximately 16 families from the database were examined for this paper. In this qualitative investigation, we coded any statements which reflected motives; some survivors and children used multiple motives. The team plans to continue coding the remaining families to see whether the list of motives continues to represent the interviewees' statements.

In the pages that follow, we provide a short description of each of the motives, along with examples. The examples, the words of the survivor families, speak for themselves. We attempted here to keep the motives separate, although in reality, as people talk, the motives are often grouped together, overlapping in the ways that conversations typically operate. Finally, we cannot answer here the question of impact of talking or not talking on the survivors' families. That question can be answered only through later interpretation.

Motives for sharing

1. Memorializing; honoring the past
2. Didactic; teaching to remember the facts
3. Response to direct questions
4. Self-revelation
 - a. incidental
 - b. purposeful
 - c. anticipated admiration/respect
5. Obligation and obedience
6. Instill courage and character development
7. Connection with personal or Jewish identity
8. Frozen in time
9. Preparedness
10. Gratitude and appreciation
11. 'Unload'

Motives for sharing

Memorializing.

Perhaps the most prominent motive that children and parents gave for talking about the Holocaust was to honor the past by remembering. Sometimes this memorialized a specific person or a lost way of life. N, a female child of survivors (COS), puts it this way:

My mother described to me in a lot of detail about Auschwitz and what it was like and what it looked like. She would volunteer information without my asking. If something would remind her of something, she would tell me. Sometimes I would ask a question but more often it just came up [...] She thought it was important for me to know.

This family was generally open and the survivor mother responded to direct questions as well (motive 3). GR, a male survivor, said in his interview that he's been writing an autobiography.

It's important for my children and mostly my grandchildren, so that they know what the background is. And they have to know. They don't think they need it now. They will need it 30 years from now, and I won't be around to tell them, so they might as well have it.

At times, this can appear like sheer nostalgia: Here, the agenda can be self-oriented or telling for the sake of the listener. COS H: 'They used to tell when I was a little kid, like war stories. All their friends would be Holocaust survivors, and like other parents play golf or tennis, or went to the movies, my parents told stories'. Finally, a male COS reports:

He used to always tell us stories, when we were little before we went to sleep. He used to tell us stories, either about the war or after the war, about his childhood [...] It's an incredible experience, it's incredible to hear it, and it's incredible in the sense to be part of it [...] It's great to listen to it. And he always said he was going to tape all these stories and so forth, and he never really got to it yet. Because, slowly, slowly, there are not many more people from that era to talk about it. Like yes, I am a part of it, but it's impossible to have all that information that he has, and to pass it on [...]

Didactic.

Sometimes, survivors talked about their experiences in a teaching way, so that the listener would know the facts, just so people would know. Female survivor D says:

But I speak extemporaneously, from what I remember sometimes. I used to come home and I would say, Oh, I meant to say this and I forgot! [...] And my husband said, "Whatever you remember. They don't know what you forgot. The students heard. They've learned. They know the tortures the Jews went through."

M, a male COS, reports this:

And then of course there was another tremendous message about how important it was to be a Jew. My mother would say to me, "Never forget you're a Jew, because even if you do forget, other people won't." And I'd hear stories about people in the concentration camps and how there were people in the concentration camps who were the children of intermarriages who didn't know they were Jewish; had no idea they were Jewish. And the Nazis rounded them up, did to them what they did to us. So never ever forget that you're Jewish, because you can never hide from it, and you shouldn't hide from it, you shouldn't be ashamed of it, you should be proud of it. So I had an extraordinary sense of Jewish identity [...] It's hard to remember a time I didn't know [...] and they didn't keep their experiences in the war secret.

This also reflects Motive #7, Connection with Jewish Identity.

Response to direct questions.

In the interview with B1a, a female survivor, the interviewer asks, 'Did you tell your daughters about your experience in the war?' She responds:

Yes, I always spoke freely about it. I spoke when it related to something – and I would explain why I object to that. And only as much as they were able to absorb at the time, and how it related to their lives, and to our lives. I didn't sit down and point blank, now let me tell you about the Holocaust from A to Z. They only got pieces here and there as it was relating to life around us. But I never kept it from them.

Her daughter N, concurs:

It was at my own pace. They didn't really talk to me about it that much. It was just there. It was all around me. There were books all over the place. And I looked at the books. I learned a lot. And my mother told me her own personal story, little by little.

Included in the interview with female survivor G2 is the following:

INT: How did you deal with the war with your children?

V: [...] I didn't speak about it, but C, the older one is always very inquisitive and she got a hold of one bit of one snippet of conversation either between my husband and myself or with my mother. And she pressured and pressured and pressured and then finally one night I sat down on her bed and I started answering questions and got deeper and deeper and deeper into it and at 2:00 in the morning I was still sitting on her bed. And then she cried impossibly, and I think I've always blamed myself for part of what has made her life kind of difficult and that is she is hypersensitive. She is extremely leery of the non Jewish world [...]. But in the meantime I think that I, I put a lot more emotional baggage on her than she was ready to take and yet it was question by question. So the only way I could have avoided this is to refuse to answer questions.

Often these first three motives come up in families that are considered generally open in their communication. There are, however, exceptions. Sometimes the talk about the Holocaust is more heavily laden emotionally and psychologically.

Self-revelation.

Sometimes the survivor reports her/his experiences incidentally as they come up, but sometimes it is a part of her/his life that the survivor wants the hearer to know about. COS ML says:

My mother never spoke about what hurt her, what she did not have, or what she lost. She never spoke about the missing pieces. She always spoke in ways she became a hero, and she, for the sixth grade graduation, the topic was heroes. My son wrote about his hero, who was his grandmother, and my daughter in Jr. High School, wrote pieces about interviewing my mother. So the way we were taught about the Holocaust was never a burden, it was very important, it has been very directive in our attitudes, but it wasn't a burden, and a lot of things that we've done because of it, I think were positive things.

Occasionally there is some bravado involved, as the survivor may anticipate some admiration or respect for being a survivor. Consider this example:

INT: You said growing up your father never talked to you about the war?

H: No, everything I knew, what I heard, the stories I knew about my father were from my uncle, or when I heard him tell stories with his friends. But when he told stories with his friends, they were like macho stories, like hero stories.

Obligation.

In some cases, survivors promised that if they survived, they would tell the story. At times this served to fulfill parents' directive to keep the faith and survive, to never forget what happened to them and to prevent any other Holocausts from occurring. This has heavy psychological loading. Female survivor D:

I was in the labor camp. But before my mother was shot, she was detained someplace for a day or two. Somehow or other she managed to scribble on a little piece of paper, a note, and I don't know how I got it, but I wish I had it. And she said to me, "My dear child. You are young. Hopefully you will survive. But when you survive, remember to tell the world how the Germans treated the Jews and how we suffered." And I think, if it weren't for that note, I couldn't speak today about it. It's almost as if I had a message from her. As much as it hurts, as painful as it is, you must tell them, hopefully to prevent another genocide.

In the example that follows, the child felt obligated to be obedient to the parent. This involved a sense of obligation to the survivor parent and a sense of responsibility on the part of the child. Again we hear from COS H:

COS H: I don't remember, but it was ... a story [of] how when they went to the camps they suffered. But then after the war she met my father, and then when I was born, everything was okay because I made it all worthwhile for them. So I always knew...

INT: You got the message very early.

COS H: Very, very early. Yeah, it was always hard, very hard... [I]t was sort of my job to keep them happy... I remember feeling good that I could make them happy, But I didn't realize what that meant... It's hard. You know, there's one thing about Holocaust survivors... And because of that [the survivors are] owed. And no one's going to give them [that] but their kids... And it was the kids that had to sort of give them credibility... You know, I had to do for them because they were Holocaust survivors.

INT: Did they say that, or did you get the message subliminally?

COS H: Oh yeah. Like, "I can't take it. I've been through the war. I can't take anymore." Like if I ever did anything, you know. You get it subliminally. It's in the air you breathe. It's in the food you eat. It's in the clothes you wear. It's so much a part of who you are... You owe to make it good for them. You have to make it good, you know? No one else did.

Instill courage and character development; connection to personal or Jewish identity.

The lessons of the Holocaust are many, but sometimes the talking about experiences is a way to perpetuate the lessons across the generations. Male survivor E puts it this way:

Those memories are very, very hard. That's something that never leaves me. And I don't know if I'd want it to leave me. Fifty-five years to my children, it's like 2,000 years. But I tell them it's been in my lifetime, some terrible things have happened. I tell them to be strong, to be secure in themselves, and never to take anything from people, anything anti-Semitic. Just not to take it.

Frozen in time.

Occasionally, the children report that their parents demonstrate a lack of perspective, and share obsessively. This can occur early in life, as in one son who recounts that his survivor parents and uncle talked about the Shoah all the time in the home, or later as in K7, who reports that as her mother's Alzheimers disease progressed, it was like a 'screen lifted', and stories that the daughter had never heard poured out.

Preparedness.

One often hears the phrase, 'never again', although it's meaning can be taken in different ways. In this motive, we saw it as the survivor putting the listener on alert, to be aware of anti-Semitism and the dangers of prejudice, and to take appropriate measures to prevent horrendous treatment of human beings.

Gratitude and appreciation.

On a more positive note, survivors often wanted listeners to appreciate what they did have now. COS H ruminates:

I never remember not knowing..., I don't know when she first told me... I remember when I was a little girl, my mother feeding me and telling me stories about the war. Like certain things, and it always had a happy ending. The happy ending was that I was born, and I made everything okay. Which has its own issues [Laughs].

O, a female survivor replies:

I always felt I didn't want to tell my children more than what they could comprehend at their age, they knew very early about the Holocaust because they would ask questions. "Did you have any brothers?" and I would tell them yes, they wanted to know what happened to them "where are they?" and I would say that they died, that they were killed in Germany during the war. I also wanted them to make sure that they love and appreciate this country, because this is the country, I think is the best on earth.

'Unload'.

Often, at the end of life especially, the survivor has a personal need to review, describe, and sometimes evaluate past events. It is not clear how this motive dovetails with others. Continued coding of interview statements may enable us to re-order the motives into a more logical pattern of organization. For now, they reflect the frequency with which we saw the motives in the sample coded.

The reasons for talking about one's traumatic experiences may be many, and are usually complex, tied to relationships, self-esteem and other important factors. As we have said, we are still in the preliminary stages of coding the data. As we continue with the coding, further research will show how the motives may be grouped together. Initially, we started with 15 motives for sharing, now we are down to 11. We believe that there is one additional motive, one we titled 'Ethical', which may occur as a motive to talk *and* to be silent. In this case, the survivor doesn't want children to learn to hate, or wants the listener to know the dangers of prejudice. Next, we turn to the explication of motives for not sharing.

Motives for silence/not sharing

1. Emotional Protection
 - a. of self
 - b. of others
2. Not asked
3. Failure of memory
4. Anticipated negative perception of listener toward survivor
5. Don't dwell in the past

Motives for silence/not sharing

Our list here has shrunk as well. We originally speculated 12 different motives for remaining silent about Holocaust experiences, but closer examination of the data used in this study revealed that some of these categories could be collapsed together; others were not substantiated in this data set.

Emotional protection.

By far, the most frequent reason for not talking about Holocaust experiences is emotional protection from discomfort. Children fail to ask their parents for fear that they will get upset. Survivor parents fail to talk for fear they will upset their children or get too upset themselves. For instance, when asked whether he has spoken publicly about his experiences, male survivor S7 replies that he protects himself:

No, no. To single people, yeah. In fact, one time the president in our synagogue was asking me, they have a Sunday morning breakfast, to tell them something what I went through. I told them, I cannot do it because I'm getting emotional on this stuff from here.

COS R's response involves protecting both self and parent:

As a child I never wanted to know anything, and my parents fell apart. They were too vulnerable; when ever anything was raised... It was not presented as matter of fact information – it was loaded – and that was too much for all of us.

ER, a survivor, is sensitive to her daughter:

Quite a few times I started to talk with my daughter, but every time I would say honey can we sit down somewhere I would like to talk to you about something, she would say, Mom you are not going to tell me something about yourself again, eh, because I really don't want to know.

Not asked.

Next in order of frequency, interviewees respond that they were not asked. The 'conspiracy of silence' right after the Holocaust has been well documented. Survivors say they would have talked, but were never directly asked, and didn't think others would want to hear what they had to say. Male survivor J says: 'Well, one thing, I haven't been asked. (pause) It's very painful to talk about. It's easier to talk to a stranger in some ways'. When asked if his son asked what happened in the war, Survivor D articulates:

No. Well, he's heard it. Again, when you're living together... he knows it. He's read the book. He saw the tapes. My in-laws never asked me. And I used to be hurt that they didn't. And they were afraid. They were protecting me.

A R., a male survivor claims:

I have not one friend from American people, Jews from America; all that I associate with is only people from Europe. Americans didn't want to know. Nobody asked us. And they said to us in the beginning, "And you went through what?" So we could not communicate with them at all it was just impossible. Nobody would say I would like to listen to the story of what you went through, nobody.

Not asking or talking about the Holocaust is at times part of a general pattern. This seems to be related to the not asking and emotional protecting that goes on. COS MB says:

[W]hat I remember in my home is, what I remember is a weight. There was always something hovering over the house. They were never more than a conversation away from recalling something in the Holocaust. Ever. And it was that way my whole life. Now I make the place sound like it was a funeral home. It wasn't at all. Not in the least. But there wasn't a holiday, there wasn't an occasion, where a memory wasn't stirred about something that took place there. There wasn't a holiday where there wasn't a *yahrzeit* candle lit, because for some reason or other, there were always roundups of Jews or pogroms or something that coincided with a particular holiday. And until I got married ... I never realized that holidays were supposed to be happier times than they were in my house. And I'm making it sound like it was very morbid. It wasn't at all. Hardly. But it was just very, it was unusual. It was always there. It was always there.

INT: Spoken or unspoken?

N: Oh, both. They were very free talking about their experiences. But I never asked. Because I also, and the reason that I never asked about it was I knew how difficult it was, how painful it was for them to talk about it. So why force it?

INT: So it was hard to ask.

N: Well, it wasn't hard. I just didn't. They would have answered. That wasn't the problem at all. They were very open and free about it. They certainly weren't ashamed of anything, of their experiences. But I just never asked, because I knew it was too painful for them to talk about, so I didn't.

Failure of memory.

Survivors sometimes cannot or do not want to remember. GR, a male survivor puts it this way:

There is nothing to say [about thoughts and feelings during the Holocaust] because I don't really recall. Everybody reacts differently to moments of stress, and my reaction is very simple. I close up and ignore it. And therefore I really have no recollection.

Anticipated negative perception.

Here, the survivor wants to be seen as valuable and whole, not as a victim, and/or expects that the listener would not be able to believe or handle the information. Female survivor L says of telling others:

My friends were immature. They were silly teenagers and the most important thing was the latest song or dance or color bow in their hair. And they knew nothing about the Holocaust. It would have been of no interest whatsoever for them to hear about it. And if I would have mentioned it, they wouldn't have believed it.

Survivor V says that she tried to talk to others:

I did very shortly after we came here, within the first year and a half or so, [when] I could handle the language a little better, a little more competently. But... the reactions I got were like an icy shower and I clammed up, after that I spoke to no one.

Don't dwell in the past.

Survivors wanted to move on with their lives, sometimes not looking back. Consider this excerpt from an interview with male survivor J:

INT: I'm wondering about the fact that [you've]... lived, essentially as a non-Jew for so many years. During those years, [was the] Holocaust ...out of your awareness?

Male Survivor J: It was neatly suppressed. ...I ran across an old girlfriend [from college]... [S]he mentioned that [I didn't talk] about the Holocaust and what happened to [me]. She said, "I wondered why you never talked about it." She said she could remember asking questions, and I would give her answers, but ... not volunteer any further information. So I guess what I did was I suppressed all that. But again, that was by example, partly. My father didn't talk about it a whole lot... Maybe because the business of getting on with life was all that pressing that you know, as they say in Hebrew, "ein breichah, [sic. Ein breirah]" You have no choice. You go on. You do what you needed to do to survive, and to keep on going. And it's tough surviving in this country. It's tough enough for me... .

Female survivor O says:

I sort of felt that we wanted our life to move on, and we wanted our children to have a very normal life, and not have to pay the price, emotionally, for what we had gone through, so my main goal was to provide them with a normal upbringing.

Female survivor R2 sees the future in her child: 'I didn't feel the need to talk to anyone about what I lived through, because from the moment my daughter was born I had someone to live for. The rest did not matter'.

Sometimes this motive could be paired with a desire to assimilate into American culture. Moving on entails acting like an American and not dwelling in the past.

Additional motives.

Recall that an initial list of motives was developed based on the extensive familiarity of the research team with the entire pool of interview data as well as scholarly literature and memoirs of the Holocaust. The research team suspects that there are additional motives for remaining silent, but we have not yet found examples from the sample coded to date. We suspect that survivors may feel that they will not be understood because of a language barrier, either wanting to express themselves in Yiddish or another language and listeners would not understand. Further, survivors may feel shame because of actions they had to perform or things that happened to them. They may feel guilt because their survival or their action is not seen as justifiable. The larger TTP team has been attempting to unpack the notion of survivor guilt in recent meetings, but nothing is written up as of yet. In addition, we suspect that survivors may feel paranoia or deep fear that it would be dangerous or threatening to share their experiences. Finally, similar to a motive for sharing, survivors may see an ethical reason to *not* share, that is, that they do not wish to burden the listener, so that the listener will not learn to hate the perpetrators and others.

The issues of communication about the Holocaust are far more complicated than simply talking or not. 'Never again' is an overly simplistic way to explain the motivation for making sure that people knew what happened, just as 'I didn't want to cause more pain' is a strong, but insufficient motive for remaining silent.

We look forward to coding the additional families in the TTP database, to discover additional texture that will round out the present picture of why certain choices about communication were made, as we continue to unpack the ways in which people transcend the Holocaust by building new lives.

Notes

- 1 Bea Hollander-Goldfein, Ph.D. directs this longstanding research project under the auspices of the Council for Relationships. The authors wish to thank Gail Morgenstern and Emilie Passow for their help on this research paper.
- 2 Leo Eitinger and Ellinor F. Major, 'Stress of the Holocaust', in Leo Goldberger and Shlomo Breznitz (eds), *Handbook of Stress: Theoretical and Clinical Aspects*, 2nd ed., New York, 1993, p. 634.
- 3 Shalom Robinson and Heinrich Z. Winnik, 'Second generation of the Holocaust: Holocaust survivors' communication of experience to their children, and its effects', in *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 18, no.2, 1981, p. 106.
- 4 Mayer Waxman, 'Traumatic hand-me-downs: The Holocaust, where does it end?', in *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* 81, no. 1, 2000, pp. 59-64.
- 5 Debra F. Okner and Joseph Flaherty, 'Parental communication and psychological distress in children of Holocaust survivors: A comparison between the US and Israel', in *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 35, 1988, pp. 265-273.
- 6 Anne Adelman, 'Traumatic memory and the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust narratives', in Albert J. Solnit et al., (eds), *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 50, New Haven, 1995, pp. 343-367.

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