

## Introduction

The study of the Holocaust has taken many turns and directions over the past two decades, generating a plethora of scholarship across a wide range of orientations from historical analysis to the social-psychological effects of mass trauma on individuals, groups, and society. Within this extensive and far-reaching field of research, the intergenerational transmission of trauma has become a particularly significant area of study that continues to inform the way in which scholars address and understand the reproduction of trauma-based knowledge and emotions across generations. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the children of Holocaust survivors have been recognized as members of a unique population who have “inherited” the psychic markers of those who lived through and survived a horrific past. Early on in the study of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, the psychological studies in the field confirmed that the suffering and wounds of genocide do not end or disappear when the threat of death and annihilation no longer exists. Rather, the research found that the traumas of the past remain embedded in the psychic life of victims whose emotions, memories, behaviors, and thoughts are passed on to descendant generations. According to the plentiful and diverse scholarship in the field, this process of traumatic transference has resulted in the creation of successive generations of trauma carriers whose lives and social actions remain deeply connected to the genocidal history of the Nazi regime (Bar-On 1995; Herman 1997; Baranowsky et al. 1998; Binder-Byrnes et al. 1998).

In a departure from the heavily psychological orientation of previous research, the primary interest of this book is on the social structures through which the trauma of the Holocaust is conveyed to the children and grandchildren of survivors who today constitute the first and sec-

ond generation of Holocaust descendants. Through an exploration into family narratives, belief structures, and social relations, this work reveals the multiple social forces that shape and inform the worldviews of descendants and the diverse ways in which descendancy is understood and expressed by succeeding generations. Using the social frameworks that highlight the study of relationality, social interaction, and the transmission of family memory and history, this book offers new perspectives on the social meanings of the Holocaust and the formation of “communities of memory” (Kidron 2003, 515) among both first- and second-generation descendants who retain the knowledge and feeling states of a terrible past.

Expanding on the extensive psychological literature and the foundational sociological scholarship (Gottschalk 2003; Stein 2009a), this volume contributes to the field of genocide and Holocaust studies in a number of important ways: (1) through an exploration into the social structures by which the experiences and memory of trauma are transmitted across generations; (2) through an examination of the social relations of traumatic inheritance among survivors and their adult children and grandchildren; and (3) through an investigation into the formation of trauma-based identities among Holocaust carrier groups. Significantly, the book comes at a crucial time in the study of genocide and the transmission of Holocaust trauma. As the number of survivors has vastly diminished over time, their children and now their grandchildren are seeking ways to better understand and connect to their families’ traumatic past. This work sheds light on this growing trend among Holocaust descendants and the social impact of descendancy on the preservation of Holocaust memory for the wider society.

## Descendants as Research Participants: Methods and Respondent Backgrounds

The research for this book began more than a decade ago, when I undertook a qualitative study of children of Holocaust survivors. Initially,

my contacts with descendant populations began with two Children of Holocaust Survivors organizations that met regularly to share their experiences and to create friendships and social support systems with others who had grown up in a post-Holocaust family environment. In approaching the organizations, I explained that I was interested in studying the intergenerational transmission of trauma and, if permissible, would like to attend their meetings and interview members of the organizations. Both groups were open to my research and invited me to their events and social gatherings. Additionally, the majority of group members agreed to be interviewed individually. From these initial contacts with first-generation descendants, snowball sampling led to an expansion of the research population and to the inclusion of grandchildren of survivors who, as an emerging generation of Holocaust culture bearers, currently represent a new and important descendant carrier group.

Altogether, I interviewed seventy-five descendants: sixty children of survivors (thirty-three women and twenty-seven men) between the ages of forty-six and sixty-two and fifteen grandchildren (nine men and six women) between the ages of twenty and thirty-two. Among these, two of the respondents crossed categories. In one case, the respondent was both a child and grandchild of survivors and in another the respondent was both a survivor and a child of survivors. The vast majority of interviews took place in one of four regions in the United States, including the East and West coasts, the Midwest, and the Rocky Mountains. Although most of the participants had been raised in the United States, four of the participants were born in Europe and emigrated to the United States during adolescence or young adulthood. Six others were born in displaced-persons camps in Germany and came to the United States as young children. Three participants are citizens of other countries. Of these, one respondent lives in the Balkan region of eastern Europe, where the interview took place, and the other two are Israeli and were living in the United States at the time of the interview. In close to three-quarters of the cases, both parents or grandparents were Holocaust survivors, a demographic that is consistent with a postwar trend in

which survivors tended to marry one another. In two cases, however, the survivor married into a family with ties to Nazi Germany and thus the extended family of the participant included war-time Nazi sympathizers, although the marriage took place after the war had ended.

While all of the participants identified as descendants of survivors, the nature of survivorship varied across families. For the purposes of the research, the concept of survivorship included a broad range of experiences that reflect the descendants' varied understanding of what it means for a parent and/or grandparent to have lived through or in some way been directly and personally affected by the Holocaust. In a small number of cases, family members survived through immigration, escape, hiding, and passing as non-Jews. In a larger number of cases, family members had been incarcerated in labor and/or death camps. The differences in the backgrounds of the survivor families were further evident in their varied nationalities. In this respect, the parents and grandparents of the respondents included Jews from Poland, Russia, Germany, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, France, and Italy, an expanse of Europe and eastern European countries that is a stark reminder of the extent to which Nazi domination threatened the survival of European Jewry. Further, the sample population included one non-Jewish first-generation descendant who strongly identified as a child of Holocaust survivors. This participant, who was born in a displaced-persons camp in Germany, was the daughter of eastern European parents who had been deported to a Nazi slave labor camp, where they remained until liberation. When I first came into contact with this participant, she explained that she had previously attended Children of Survivors meetings. I chose to include her in the study to illuminate the diverse cultural links that exist within the history of Holocaust trauma and its transmission across generations, religions, and nationalities.

In addition to these background differences, the religious upbringing of the Jewish participants was also varied and diverse. Nearly half of the respondents were raised in Conservative Jewish homes. Among the other half, eighteen of the respondents were raised as Orthodox Jews;

sixteen as Reform Jews; six without any denominational affiliation; three as atheists; and two as non-Jews. At the time of the interview, eight of the respondents identified as Orthodox Jews; eighteen as Conservative Jews; fourteen as Reform Jews; six as followers of Jewish Renewal (a modern-day egalitarian movement that has its roots in Hasidism); and twelve as Jewish spiritual seekers who had not yet found a synagogue or movement with which to affiliate. Eight described themselves as unaffiliated Jews and four claimed no religious identification. One Jewish respondent identified as Catholic, two as Unitarian, and two as Buddhist. Regardless of current religious affiliation, however, all of the Jewish respondents identified as ethnic if not religious Jews.

In conducting the interviews, I used a life history approach. Following a semi-structured interview format, the interview schedule included open-ended questions about family history, knowledge of the Holocaust, religious upbringing, and current spiritual beliefs and practices. Participants were also asked how they first learned of their families' survivor backgrounds and who in their family passed on the knowledge and memories of the Holocaust to them. Other questions focused on their perceptions of themselves as descendants of Holocaust survivors and their connection to the traumas of their parents and grandparents. The interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality and generally lasted between two and four hours. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

The majority of the interviews took place in the homes of the participants. Because of the familial location of the interview sites, the respondents frequently shared photographs, family documents, and family artifacts that had survived the war. In some instances the process of sharing led to tours through a participant's home, as he or she pointed out framed photographs of parents or grandparents before and after the war and of other family members who did not survive. At other times, respondents produced surviving Nazi documents, such as identity cards, or carefully assembled scrapbooks that chronicled the family's ordeal and survival. Thus, the settings of the interviews

were, in many cases, field sites in and of themselves—spaces of memory and family culture where recollections of the past and narratives of childhood were enhanced by familial surroundings that enriched and recalled the respondents' ties to loss, survival, and catastrophe. In two instances, descendants shared videos they had made while visiting sites of terror with family members in Europe. During these viewings, the descendants narrated the videos, recalling the feelings they experienced during these tours and the physical spaces that these sites memorialized.

Because more than half of the first-generation descendants had some affiliation with Children of Survivors organizations, they constitute a self-selected group of participants who have been part of an ongoing social movement that recognizes the noteworthy role that children of survivors play as carriers of Holocaust trauma both for themselves and within the larger culture. The origins of this movement have been tied to the collective identity movements of the 1960s and 1970s, when the children of survivors began to examine their distinct experiences and perspectives as the descendants of Holocaust survivors (Berger 1997; Stein 2009b). Since then the Children of Survivors movement has grown into a widespread social network with national and local affiliates that serve as support groups for descendants of Holocaust survivors and as liaison organizations for Holocaust commemorative programs and ceremonies (Kidron 2003; DeGloma 2009). More recently, grandchildren of Holocaust survivors have also begun forming their own groups and currently have a Facebook page. A portion of those who affiliate with these multigeneration descendant movements self-identify as second- and third-generation survivors. Others, less comfortable with the term *survivor*, prefer to be called children or grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, or descendants of survivors. With the exception of quoted material where participants used the term *survivor* to describe themselves or others of their generation, the participants in this volume will be referred to as children, grandchildren, and/or first- and second-generation descendants of survivors.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, I also conducted participant observation at Holocaust commemorative events to observe and gather data on descendants as social actors. For the most part, these events took place in large and small synagogues in communities across the United States and in schools and universities in the western region of the country. Immediately following my attendance at these events, I recorded copious field notes on participant interaction, ceremonial acts, and my own impressions of Holocaust remembrance as it is observed and performed in the United States. During this period of data collection, I documented the structure of the commemorative events, the visual and narrative representations of the past that these events highlighted, and the role of survivors and descendants in shaping the memory of Holocaust trauma.

Other fieldwork sites included museums that exhibited descendant art and eastern European Jewish community centers. In addition, I studied descendants' memoirs and published writings. The diversity of data that I collected for this research (in-depth interviews, participant observation at Holocaust remembrance events, descendant writings, and artistic production) reflects the breadth and depth of the descendant phenomenon and the value of the social investigation into traumatic transference within a multigenerational framework.

### Researching Traumatic Inheritance: Bonds of Ethnicity and Kinship

My interest in the intergenerational transmission of trauma evolved from my research on memorialization and collective memory. Having spent a number of years investigating the monuments and memorials to Nazi terror across the European landscape, I was keenly aware of how trauma becomes embedded in cultural narratives that reproduce for future generations the memory and events of genocidal suffering. Less clear to me was how the trauma of genocide, in all of its incomprehensibility, lives on within the culture of survivors who pass on these

traumatic legacies to their children and grandchildren. Reaching back into my own childhood, I recognized that I was drawn to the study of traumatic transference in part because of my shared ethnicity with European Jews and in part because the Holocaust provided a backdrop to a Jewish upbringing that was quietly but persistently affected by the specter of loss and tragedy that the Holocaust evoked.

As a Jewish child born into the postwar culture of the United States, I found the Holocaust to be both overwhelmingly present and conspicuously absent in the Jewish community in which I was raised in the 1950s and 1960s. At Sunday school the Holocaust was the subtext for creating ties to the nascent State of Israel, and Sunday school was also the place where survivors, having only recently experienced the horrors of genocide, came to teach suburban children about their Jewish heritage. In this postwar Jewish community, survivors were also shopkeepers who ran delicatessens and bakeries that featured the kinds of food and delicacies that were reminiscent of their prewar lives and of a European Jewish culture that had been nearly destroyed. Thus, while the Holocaust was never far from the consciousness of this suburban community, the truth of the overwhelming tragedy was mostly left unspoken. These were the years before the advent of Holocaust commemoration, when a tattooed forearm, if acknowledged, was signified with silent gestures or whispers that alluded sorrowfully to “the camps,” the word *camp* itself a code for a catastrophe that could not be named or described.

In my family, it was my maternal grandmother who indirectly and with little context referred to this silenced history. When I was not yet of school age, she would at times remove a tattered photograph from her apron pocket, pointing to two young girls with braided hair. Shaking her head, my grandmother would sigh heavily, speaking a combination of Yiddish and English phrases that I understood to mean “gone, all gone, the ovens, they’re all gone.” To this day, I do not know who these children were, though I have a vague impression that these young girls were sisters and their names may have been Anna and Rosa. I also remember my grandmother’s looking at the photograph and then at me, as if I were

somehow a reminder of their loss. But these recollections are not facts, only hazy memories of a little girl who felt her grandmother's despair and whose images of these forgotten children resurfaced as I delved more deeply into the study of Holocaust descendance. As the research progressed, I recognized that I shared with the participants my own but much less defined and far removed traumatic inheritance, a kinship tie that remains at the heart of my personal connection to this work.

I completed this book in the same year as the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Nearly 300 survivors attended this major commemoration at Auschwitz, which was extensively covered by the international media. From thousands of miles away, I was able to observe a moving ceremony where aging survivors sat alongside their children and grandchildren as they listened to European dignitaries confront a regretful past and express hope for a better future. Having spent more than ten years interviewing the descendants of the survivors of Auschwitz and other Nazi camps, I was struck by the presence of the children and grandchildren who watched as their parents and grandparents recounted for the world, perhaps for the last time, a history of violation and dehumanization that reverberated throughout the memorial grounds of this iconic monument. In viewing the televised commemorations, I was brought back to the first interview I conducted for the study. The respondent was a woman in her fifties whose mother had survived Auschwitz as a 17-year-old girl. I remember clearly her first words, "My mother was a survivor of Auschwitz," and my unexpected response. For the first few moments of the interview, I felt as if I were sitting across not from the daughter of a survivor but from the survivor herself. The way in which the respondent told her mother's story, bringing the history and imagery of Auschwitz into sharp relief, created a slippage in time and place while I listened intently as she narrated her parent's traumatic past.

This initial experience was repeated time and again over my many years of research. Throughout the period of data collection, I was consistently struck by the depth with which the descendants spoke of the

survivors' histories. Although not every participant could recount the exact details of a parent's or a grandparent's harrowing life during the Holocaust, a surprising number appeared to know when and how they were deported, what became of other family members, and how family members were able to survive under the most extreme and threatening circumstances. While, admittedly, there were gaps in these recollections, I was continually captivated by the emotional tone and historical knowledge that the descendants brought to the research setting. Typically, the respondent's engagement with the family history was all-consuming, revealing the power of memory, suffering, and self-awareness among descendants. Further, in reading and rereading the transcripts of their recorded narratives during the analytic phase of the project, my emotional engagement with the material grew in intensity as I gained a greater appreciation for the importance of trauma as an inherited legacy of an unwanted past.

### The Scope of the Project and Thematic Content

Drawing on a diverse and multifaceted academic worldview, the overall content of the book focuses on the phenomenon of traumatic inheritance in a number of different areas of study that pertain to the social transmission of mass trauma and the legacy of the Holocaust among descendant populations. In bringing together an analysis of the social structures that affect the intergenerational transmission of trauma with research on the transference of emotions and identity between survivors and descendants, the work situates the scholarship on traumatic transference within a broadly construed sociological framework that draws on theories of identity formation, psycho-social development, interactional dynamics, memory, and trauma. As each of these areas of inquiry is developed and examined, the importance of gender to these social processes is considered along with a feminist perspective on the interdisciplinary nature of Holocaust studies. Within this wide-ranging

and inclusive approach to the study of traumatic inheritance, a variety of themes and observations are presented throughout the book.

The first theme, which is elaborated in chapter 1, investigates the relationship between narrative and identity formation. Drawing on sociological theories of narrative and identity, this chapter analyzes the impact of survivor narratives on the construction of the descendant self and the tropes of victimization, heroism, and moral agency that characterize Holocaust storytelling. Chapter 2 then looks at the role of ritual as a vehicle for the exchange of emotion between survivors and descendants, highlighting the way in which feeling-states such as anger and sadness permeate ritual observance within survivor culture. Through an analysis of self-in-relation theory, this chapter examines emotional connectivity and the process of separation within the realm of ritual practice and innovation.

Following the discussion of ritual and emotion, chapter 3 considers the construction of spirituality and religious belief systems among descendants. In this chapter, the theme of alternative spirituality is explored and the principles of feminist theory are brought to bear on the descendants' disillusionment with biblical Judaism and the omnipotence of a patriarchal God. In chapter 4, the research turns to the social relations of attachment and connection among children and grandchildren of survivors. This chapter addresses familial tensions, extended family relationships, the realm of the supernatural, and the significance of place, as each of these dimensions of connectivity illuminate the types of attachments that give meaning to the socio-emotional lives of descendant populations.

Expanding on the importance of place in the consciousness of descendants, chapter 5 considers the role that sites of terror play in restructuring identity and attachment among descendants who engage with monuments and memorials to Nazi atrocities. Through an examination of immersion experiences at sites of terror, the findings illuminate how interactive spaces of memory shape identity, foster acts of mourning,

and strengthen empathic attachment between descendants and survivors. Chapter 6 then looks at how the intergenerational transmission of trauma across a diverse set of socio-cultural factors contributes to the formation of carrier groups whose members become important social actors for the representation of the Holocaust to the wider society. In this chapter, themes of public discourse and memorialization are explored through an analysis of Holocaust commemorative events and the cultural production of Holocaust memory by descendants. Finally, the Conclusion elaborates on the social meanings of traumatic transference and the shifts in descendant representation that are taking place as the “message” of the Holocaust is being reframed through a more global and universalizing worldview.