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Shaped By Shadows, A Psychiatrist and Poet Explores His Holocaust Heritage

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This autobiography begins before I was born. My parents met in the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, Poland in 1939, and were married there in 1942. They survived the 1943 ghetto revolt, deportation to a "work" camp, escaped, and hid above and below the streets of Warsaw until the Russian Army liberated them in January of 1945. I was born in 1946 in a US Army field hospital, the first Jewish baby born in that part of Germany since it had been declared Judenrein ("pure of" or "cleansed of" Jews) under the Nazis. We arrived in New York City in 1949. As I grew up, I heard fragments of what my parents experienced, and silently struggled with my feelings about them. For me, recognizing the emotions I saw them display, and then trying to understand how what they had endured affected me, turned out to be a life-long project. Since my teens, writing poems helped me deal with the brutal facts of my parents' experiences and my own conflicted feelings about the Holocaust. I hope that my poems make it easier for a reader to imagine some of my parents' emotions, and how they influenced the key choices I eventually made in my personal and professional lives: an interfaith, intercultural marriage, civil rights and anti-war activism, service in the Army Medical Corps, and a forty-year career in clinical and academic psychiatry, including studying the intergenerational transmission of trauma using dialogue groups. The groups were initially limited to adult children of convicted Nazi war criminals and adult children of Holocaust survivors, but later expanded to include Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, South African Whites and Blacks, and Palestinians and Israelis. After retirement, with the help and encouragement of family and friends, I wrote this book to illustrate how one child of survivors struggled with his unusual heritage over his lifetime.

Excerpt: *(First nine pages of paperback format)*

Chapter 1: Intergenerational Consequences of Trauma

My mother and father endured five and a half years of Nazi terror in the Warsaw ghetto and Poniatow concentration camp, under conditions too unspeakable to be fully described by any artist, poet, or writer. Thinking or writing about the murder of so many of our relatives among the millions who did not survive is still painful for me. Years before I became a psychiatrist, I found that writing poems took me to the borderland between what I now would call my conscious and unconscious mind, and helped me to find words to better describe and ultimately modify my feelings from initially inchoate, confused emotions, to thoughts, images, and metaphors I could understand and deal with in the real world.

I asked myself existential questions at a very young age: how could the Holocaust have happened? Is there really a God? Is there an after- life? What is my purpose in life? Who am I? Etc. As I got older and my loyalties to my parents and to my own development began to come into conflict, I wondered how I should decide which was more important. Does the fact that my parents were Jewish Holocaust survivors take priority? Were my dilemmas different from other people's? After reading this memoir, you can judge the answers I tentatively arrived at.

House of Many Languages

I grew up in a house of many languages
And many silences, many cultures, and many tears.

There was laughter and rage,
Anguish and sweet forgetfulness,
Wishes to share and wishes to shield,
Pride and memory, mystery, and honesty.

How long it took to understand that when

The old newsreels showed
Those piles of corpses,
Not everyone searched among

The mounds of dead and tortured faces

For family resemblances, as I often did,

Or for a last glimpse of lost love,
As my parents surely did.

For survivors and their stock, such pictures of dead children

Are not just screen images, they are blinding explosions
Of memories with faces and names,
And stories shared with touch, smell, sound,

And the awful, ever-aftertaste of overwhelming hurt.

Thus, a single such photo can be a multimedia event
For those who were touched by the flame.
Anyone not so burned cannot fully know its searing tongue.

How I envy such ignorance,
Though we Jews are great lovers of languages.

So when we refuse to let the grisly images die,

And look again, in desperate hope that
We all may somehow learn,
Suspect, if only for an instant,

That the cost to us may be greater than your discomfort.

Yet our pain is no better than yours.
To be human is to know that word in any language.

Those of us who have been crushed,
Who have come back after running away,
Who have survived, may yet prove
Strong enough to give back something precious,

Something beautiful, in return for the gift of life,

Cradled in shadows, but nurtured in sunshine

Inside a house of many languages.

…..…….

To even approach an understanding of its horrors, and what it can tell us about its victims and its perpetrators, the Holocaust must be broken into small pieces and digested slowly. I hope that each poem, photo, and essay included here will function like a brushstroke on an impressionist canvas. Each dab of color is of some interest alone, but in the eye of the beholder all can merge into a remarkable picture, even as the fuzziness of the brushstrokes helps soften the overall brutality of the image.

Organizing the poems, stories, photos, and documents for this memoir was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle without a picture to guide me. Contemplating the bits and pieces of my heritage in papers scattered on my writing table, I struggled to fit them together coherently. In the process I did make some connections that were new to me, even if the overall picture is not yet complete.

I hope that this memoir can answer some readers' questions about the long-term effects of the Holocaust on survivors and their families. The Holocaust colors the lens through which they see the events of daily life. If my poems and writings help you, the reader, to imagine looking through such an emotional lens, they will bring us closer to mutual understanding.

My parents rarely spoke of their Holocaust experiences, but eventually shared some stories I wish to preserve for my children and grandchildren. My parent's strength, courage, and resilience during and after the Holocaust were remarkable. If they had lived long enough to see this memoir, they might feel proud of me one more time. In Yiddish, the joyful pride of a parent in the accomplishment of a child is called *nachas*. I did give them some while they were alive, but also some *tsuris,* the Yiddish word for trouble, with a connotation of anguish.

After becoming a psychiatrist, my personal interactions with many survivors and their families eventually led me to question the validity of some of the psychoanalytical theories I had been taught. That questioning led me to explore and contribute professionally to the field of trauma studies.

This memoir may help you glimpse some of the emotions engendered by a Holocaust legacy and imagine what it has been like for those of us who have been nurtured by the love and limitations of our survivor parents.

The Holocaust is an extreme case, but other catastrophes have and will again traumatize families. Better understanding of my generations' experiences may someday help other victims work through the intergenerational consequences of extremely traumatic events.

The Best Revenge

Hitler was a failed artist,
in chagrin destroying all beauty, since he himself could not create it,

turning then to dominion
in a frantic, frenzied flight
from his own humiliation and shame.

I have been a fearful artist,
afraid to fail

or to be found wanting,
for decades not daring

to test my soul on the unforgiving page,

turning efforts elsewhere, chasing dreams
not quite my own, only to wonder
why they remain
just beyond my grasp.

If words like these, placed on paper,

capture some small measure
of beauty or truth, then
they can survive scrutiny,

and outlive persecution.

So if this poem displeases,
accept my regrets that
we cannot commune as I might wish,

but know that my art
does comfort me,
thereby confirming that
creating beauty is, indeed,
the best revenge.

……..

Chapter 2: The Poniatow "Work Camp"

Mother and Dad were married in a traditional Jewish ceremony on the 28 of June 1942, in the Warsaw Ghetto. They survived the April 1943 Ghetto revolt and mass deportation to Poniatow, part of the Majdanek concentration camp system. Mom escaped from Poniatow, and then,

months later, Dad was rescued, just before November 4 - 5, 1943, when all 25,000 remaining inmates were shot and buried in the trenches they had been forced to dig. My parents then hid in Warsaw until their liberation on January 14, 1945.

Poniatow 1943

Dear Listener:

Nine wonderful people organized their own escape

from the Nazi "work" camp at Poniatow, Poland, in 1943.

My mother was among them. My father was left behind.

Dear Listener:

One by one, on different days,
the fugitives were caught,
returned, and each condemned
to be flung into a kind of giant frying pan,

as the assembled prisoners

of Poniatow were forced
to watch the burning, screaming scene.

Dear Listener:

Eight times my father strained to see

if his wife was the one recaptured.

How many dawns did he wonder
if the ninth such day had come?

Months later mother arranged father's successful escape,

though by then he was mute, and almost unreachable.

Dear Listener:

Does this recounting risk
evoking your discomfort or disbelief? must we both deny or forget
to go on, and live as before?

Dear Listener:

Though the breach between teller and told may be as unbridgeable
as this tale is unspeakable,

can we not find ways
around the divide
to share our different griefs
and perhaps recall some common joys?

Can we begin again to begin again?

Dear Listener:

Will the gulf between us
prove different from
those between our parents and ourselves,

our minds and our hearts,
our souls and our secret scars?

Dear Listener:

Can this poem, this tendril of connectedness beget capillaries —

little channels around those remaining wounds,
within and between ourselves?

Dear Listener:

Can we flow together towards an eternal sea

far from Poniatow, but not so far
from the tears and ashes of today?

Dear Listener:

If you can touch
a salt residue caressing your cheek,

we are almost there.

…….

Can mere words, tendrils of connectedness on a printed page, help process the emotions such a horrific scene evokes? It is difficult for anyone to picture being in a situation like my father's in Poniatow. The more I try to imagine myself in his place, repeatedly waiting to see if it was his wife was about to be thrown into what he said was "a kind of giant frying pan," the more tormented I feel.

The breach between teller and told is profound. I do not expect you to experience anything like the intensity of the anguish my father felt in Poniatow. My emotional connection to my father is powerful, so the difference between the anguish I felt writing this poem and the discomfort you may have felt while reading it is significant.

Details about the time my father remained in Poniatow were never revealed to me. Until I became a parent myself, I didn't understand why he refused to discuss his wartime experiences with me. As I was growing up, I felt he was hiding an important part of himself from me, that he was pushing me away. Now I appreciate that he was trying to protect his child, as well as himself.

After Dad's rescue from Poniatow in October of 1943, Mom and Dad lived in hidden rooms, bombed out buildings, underground bunkers, and in the

sewer system beneath Warsaw until January 14, 1945, when the Russians finally entered the rubble of what remained of the city. That day was also my father's thirty-third birthday.

My parents had been brutally and irretrievably cut off from the life they had known before the Germans invaded in 1939. In 1945 their supportive attachments were limited to each other, several surviving friends, the charity of Jewish relief agencies, and the dream of starting a new life in America. By 1946 they also had a child to raise, me, that gave them a new sense of purpose.