

Memorial candles

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Abstract. The author is a daughter of Shoah survivors. In her testimony she describes her personal relationship with her mother and her uncle, Edith Bruck, an Italian Hungarian writer who survived to Auschwitz.

Keywords. Edith Bruck, Children of the Holocaust, Shoah, Witness.

I am a daughter of Shoah survivors. Together my mother and her sister Edith, lived through the horrors of six different Nazi concentration and death camps.

When Edith Bruck and David Meghnagi invited me to take part in this initiative I felt it was both a privilege and a duty to give an account of my experiences as the daughter of survivors and Edith's niece.

This personal “journey” has not been an easy one for me, but it has helped me to face my demons.

The second generation of the Shoah survivors share this tragic heritage that has been passed on to us through our parents. We have grown up with their stories or their silences and with the indelible burden of their eternal grief.

Helen Epstein, daughter of survivors, in her book, *Figli dell'Olocausto* (“*Children of the Holocaust*”), describes her inability to talk about this oppressive legacy:

«For years it lay in an iron box buried so deep inside me that I was never sure just what it was. I knew it carried slippery, combustible things more secret than sex and more dangerous than my shadow or ghost.» (Epstein, 2010, p. 19).

Her book came from her need to share the contents of this "iron box" with many other survivors' children, in the search for a mutual recognition of a collective phenomenon, the second generation syndrome, which had scarred them in different ways: from denial or the desire to free themselves, to total identification or the need to compensate for their parents' losses, to constantly soothe their open wounds.

Dina Wardi, the Italian-Israeli psychotherapist, in her book *Le candele della memoria. I figli dei sopravvissuti dell'Olocausto* (*The Memorial Candles. The Holocaust Survivors' Children*), takes as her central theme the intergenerational transmission of the traumas caused by exile and extermination.

She writes that many survivor parents have assigned one of their children the role of “memorial candle”,

«entrusting them with the task of infusing content into the emptiness of their hearts, of reassembling the hidden, shattered pieces of their inner mosaic» (Wardi, 2013, p. 34).

This is an onerous and destructive task, causing pain and suffering.

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«From birth many “memorial candles” live with a deep sense of semantic confusion and complete fragmentation of their own identity.» (*ibidem*, p. 106).

Nevertheless, these children's psyches struggle to develop an independent identity which is personal, social and even historical.

I quote from Edith's book, *Il sogno rapito* ("*The Kidnapped Dream*"), in which the main character is the daughter of survivors:

«It seemed and still seems that (my mother's) songs and tears belonged only to her, inconceivable even for a daughter, because it is her past, her memories, not mine, and no blood ties can allow this complete sharing...» (Bruck, 2014, p. 84).

And in another paragraph:

«She won't understand that my fears are not hers, that my life, my era, is simply mine, like my ideas and my motives, however right or wrong. She's convinced, as perhaps all Jewish and non-Jewish mothers are, that her love is all enveloping, filling every empty space in her children; and what else can you expect from a mother who lives only for you, who would throw herself into the fire to save you?» (*ibidem*, p. 100).

Most of us are emigrants' children who, having lost everything, their loved-ones, their homes, their roots, had to start a new life elsewhere, taking with them their painful memories of the Shoah.

After the war and the camps, my parents, who were born in Hungary, left for Palestine. However, before reaching their Promised Land, they had to wait many long months on the island of Cyprus.

There they lived as refugees, and they got married there, like so many other orphaned survivors.

A few years ago, an art historian friend of mine found a letter in the archives of the Bezalel Academy of Arts in Jerusalem. It had been written in Hebrew by my father, who had sent it to them in 1947 from Cyprus, where he had been for the past six months. He mentioned being a survivor and all the suffering he had undergone in the various camps in Germany. He talked about his studies in painting at a fine art school in Budapest and (naively) asked if they could send him some oil-paints so that he could start painting again. He also expressed his desire to be accepted at their school in the future.

This letter is the only record I have of his experience in the camps, and of his previous life. He never talked about his past, or about his parents and little sister who had been killed in the death camps.

I have recounted this episode as I feel it is symbolic of the expectations that the Shoah survivors had of their new life in Palestine. They were hoping for a home, a family welcome, warmth, sympathy, to be listened to and supported...

Instead, they were destined for more tents, more make-shift camps, in a country at war that needed fighters, not “lambs sent to the slaughter”.

Nobody wanted to hear about their suffering.

In 1948, a few months after the war of independence for the State of Israel, my brother was born. They called him Chaim, which in Hebrew means Life, because their first-born had to release them from their memories of death; and Shalom, which means Peace, after his grandfather who had died of hunger and exhaustion in Dachau.

I was born a few years later. I was the only girl in the family and so they named me after my

grandmother, Dvora, my mother and Edith's mother, who had been sent to the gas chambers and the crematorium of Auschwitz.

In the new-born country, those who were unable to adapt to the extremely complex situation and to the deep economic recession were forced to look for security elsewhere.

Like so many other survivors, my parents emigrated, for the second time. In 1961 they settled in Argentina, where my mother rejoined two of her siblings. Argentina, like many Latin-American countries, was under a military dictatorship and anti-Semitism was rife. I grew up with my mother's nostalgia for my native land (Israel) and her regret for having brought me to Argentina. Following the death of my father, we returned to Israel in 1975, shortly before the military coup in 1976.

In contrast to my father, who was very quiet and reserved, my mother was very effusive and sociable. For good or for worse, she was unable to keep her suffering from us.

As my aunt wrote, I “sucked the milk of Auschwitz”, together with her tears and nostalgic, heart-rending songs. The grief which had never been dealt with and the burden of those horrific experiences were passed on to us, not only through “osmosis”.

I grew up feeling I was different, not only because of my Jewish identity, but also because of my parents' tormenting memories. I had a deep feeling of having been uprooted, together with a profound sense of inexplicable sadness.

For my mother, being a survivor was her identity card, her way of introducing herself to the world. “I come from the Lager” she would often say to people she met.

She once wrote in her note-book that on the day of her liberation from the camps, she “was born for the second time”.

Using the words of Imre Kertész I can say, that my parents “tried to survive their survival” and that happiness was unattainable for them:

«After Auschwitz happiness is no longer possible.» (Kertész, 2007, p.127).

I was, perhaps, 11 or 12 years old the first time my mother talked explicitly to me about the camps. I was so distressed that I could not listen any more.

I had always been aware of her suffering, and I already knew that her parents and a brother had been killed. I knew that she had been brutally separated from her mother and that she and her little sister, Edith, had been left on their own.

I knew she adored and worshipped her mother and expected me to love her in the same way, and in the same way that her mother had loved her. I was like a young Edith for her, and she had to protect me against life's dangers.

Yet, the descriptions of her experiences were unimaginable, unbearable, together with the indescribable suffering. I could not conceive of such cruelty!

Some time later, perhaps it had been suggested to her, she gave me *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

When I read Edith's first autobiographical book, *Chi ti ama così* (“*Who Loves you Like This*”), I was overwhelmed by her strong and lyrical words, by the almost physical sensation of being there, experiencing the smells, the voices and the deep, mounting feeling of anguish, desperation, impotence and solitude; and I found the missing pieces to my mother's stories.

I found my family and their small house in the village on the banks of the Tisza river. It was a life of poverty but there were also happy moments, until they were violently ousted from their home. Edith describes their gathering in the synagogue, becoming prisoners in the ghetto, and finally arriving at Auschwitz crammed into cattle wagons. The most harrowing account is of her terrible, brutal separation from her mother, who was sent to the gas chambers and crematorium.

Alone in the hell that was Auschwitz, Edith and Zahava (who were 13 and 17 years old) looked

after one another. My mother always used to tell me that she had promised her mother she would take care of Edith, whatever happened, and that she would take her back to her safe and sound.

This conviction was vital for my mother in the moments when she had lost all strength and hope. It gave her the courage to defend Edith, as a lioness defends her young. She had a reason to fight for life.

This great need they had of each other gave them both the strength to go on living. In another book, *Lettera alla Madre* ("*Letter to My Mother*"), Edith writes:

«Neither of us wanted to live without the other. We had never been so close, we'd never loved each other so much.» (Bruck, 1988, p. 14).

On 15 April 1945 the Anglo-American soldiers went into the Bergen Belsen camp and freed them from the hell.

They were freed, but not from their suffering, their grief and their sense of guilt. At that time, the term "survivor syndrome" did not exist. Only many years later, in the early 1970s, was research begun into the trauma suffered by Shoah survivors.

In Israel, with the Eichmann trial, they began to talk about the survivors and thousands of them testified publicly. It was not until the early 1980s that survivors' children began to face the issue of the Shoah, through debates, novels, plays and the visual arts.

For us, the survivors' children, the burden of this memory, is also the feeling that we have to restore meaning to life.

My mother and Edith bear witness to immense courage and strength to endure, an inner strength that drives them towards life; a great imperfect love that my mother poured into her children and grandchildren, who symbolized the possibility to deliver herself from her painful past. For Edith this love is expressed through her great vitality and the passion she puts into everything she does, from cooking to writing a book. Her books are her children: for her writing is an existential need, a creative expression of her anguished self. She manages to transform this pain into hope and a love of life, which we, her niece and nephews, have always so admired.

Whenever Edith and my mother met in Israel or in Rome, they would forget their different attitudes to life the moment they started remembering and reminding each other of their experiences in the concentration camps. And these memories were interspersed with others of their childhood in the small village, and from their sacred voices came old melodies, like lullabies, that carried you to a far-away place; a world that no longer exists. These were old Hungarian or Yiddish songs that their parents had sung, and maybe even their grandparents and great-grandparents before them.

I would like to end with a recording that my son, Ariel, made during one of these meetings. This song is sung by Edith and is for Edith, who I consider not only an aunt and writer, but also like a mother and a sister, an inseparable part of me.

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