

THE BUCHENWALD CHILDREN AND OTHER CHILD SURVIVORS

By: Robert Krell, M.D.

We have outlived fate and survived survival. And it has been left to us, in these, our later years, to come to understand one another. For although our stories differ, the Shoah has cast its shadow on us and complicated our lives immeasurably. No matter whom we deal with, whether the aging survivor or those who survived the Shoah as children or the children of both the older and younger survivors, we must listen respectfully to one another's struggles and concerns.

While adult survivors, those aged 17 and older at liberation, found their voices earlier, demanded and commanded the attention of the world, and somehow forged ahead even in Displaced Person Camps to start new families, to grieve and mourn, to emigrate and find work—another survivor population went virtually unnoticed. The children. And they were so few.

A strange attitude prevailed after the war. Surviving children, particularly the youngest, were not considered to have suffered very much. Adults who survived the unimaginable torment and suffering accompanied by total comprehension of what was happening assumed that younger children were shielded from the terror. Adult survivors said to child survivors: "You were so lucky. You probably don't remember anything. You were too young to suffer. Lucky for you, you did not know what was happening." It was an assumption. It was not mean-spirited. The knowledgeable survivors of the worst could not imagine a suffering comparable to theirs. Fair enough.

What is really puzzling is the attitude of postwar mental health professionals. Steeped in psychodynamic theory for several decades, they believed that even a single trauma in the developmental years had a strong and lasting impact—most of such traumas requiring prolonged therapy. Strangely enough, the professionals did not establish massive mental health programs or even provide skilled interviewers to examine the children, listen to their experiences, and guide them toward health. Of course, there were first priorities—food, shelter, searches for family—but it took forty years to begin to listen to the children.

The survivors aged 16 and under were essentially told to put the past behind them and get on with life. Not a bad suggestion. It worked for many, for a time. But it is precisely the past most of us cannot get past without retrieving it, examining it and placing it in perspective.

Given that adults told us we were lucky not to remember, perhaps we should talk a little about memory: mine.

To this day I remain in dialogue with the daughter of my rescuers. Let me explain. When I was 2 years old, through a miracle I was placed into hiding with Mr. and Mrs. Munnik and their 12-year-old daughter, Nora. I spent nearly three years with them in The Hague, Holland. All are inscribed as Righteous Gentiles at Yad Vashem for saving my life.

My mother and father survived each in a different hiding place. In 1945 they came to collect their 5-year-old son. Of course I protested, I yelled and cried. A new experience for I had not raised my voice for three years, nor cried—ever.

Another miracle. When we had abandoned our home and all possessions in order to hide from the command to be “resettled in the East” everything was lost. However, a family photo album mysteriously reappeared, left by a kind stranger in our fur store under our new home. The pictures convinced me I was theirs.

Therefore, in May 1945, the Krell family was once more intact, or so it seemed. It did not take long for the situation to unfold in all its horror. Survivors of Auschwitz returned via our living room and told their stories.

My father found my first cousin Nallie, playing on a street. He was the son of one of his murdered sisters. Then my mother’s first cousin returned from Switzerland with his wife and daughter, Millie. So what did I learn over the next few years? I learned that my parents were orphans, without parents, brothers and sisters; that my first cousin Nallie was an orphan, that second cousin Millie’s mother lost two sisters and a brother and her father lost two sisters, a brother-in-law and their children.

Death was everywhere. It was in the air. I studied Hebrew with a teacher who had been in a concentration camp. Is it any wonder I could not learn from him? My piano teacher was a ray of light, a non-Jew, so we all thought. Years later we learned not only that he was a Jew but had survived Dachau. No one knew. He did not talk.

Forty-five years later I offered my recollections to a writer for a book on hidden children. When my sister Nora read it she asked where in the world I had gotten my information. And so began the dialogue. Nora is ten years older, speaks many languages, is very bright and challenged my memories as a 3-4 year old, with hers as a 13-14 year old. She affirmed some of my memories as accurate even after first discounting them. There was a problem both of perception and interpretation.

Fifty years after liberation, on a visit to Holland we went to Westerbork at my request. On the way there she asked why I was so preoccupied with the Holocaust since all went so well for me and why did I want to go to Westerbork. My answer was simple, to say Kaddish at the site of deportation of my grandmother and two aunts. Nora seemed unaware of the impact of this. For her, the liberation of Holland returned life to normal. For us, liberation turned into years of anguish and despair.

Last year I sent to Nora my book of lectures to child survivors, including some of mine offered throughout the 80's and 90's; its title *Messages and Memories*. It was inscribed to her parents,

my Vader and Moeder, and to her. She read it and sat down immediately to write her own memoirs.

Her recollections are of course, more vivid and superbly expressed. While I thought I was inside most of those three years, Nora insists I played outside, went on outings with her family, saw my mother every two weeks and that my life was normal. When I asked my mother how often she saw me during the war, she replied “twice, once in January 1943 and once in the Spring of 1945. And she remembers much for she cannot stop talking about the war.

It is a mysterious discrepancy between the minds of two very bright people and the mind of one very young child. And why is it important? Because this is what we children struggle with – the fragments of memory which frequently make little or no sense. And the fragments that are retained because of the powerful affect associated with them, are often challenged or negated by adults. And how does one shape an identity without verifiable memory?

Recently, my sister visited with us and our dialogue continued. She reassured me that she understood my errors in memory as those of a youngster and that what I did remember as the product of unusual circumstances, perhaps the nervousness and tension of the adults around me.

I of course recall being forbidden to look out the front window in order not to be spotted, she recalls that it was for one day only. In other words, the tension that day made me feel the warning was never rescinded.

Nora told me that the biggest trauma for her and for me was the return to my parents. There was a three-week moratorium on visits so I could readjust. This she feels was my Holocaust-trauma and suggested that because my first cousin’s parents did not return and Nallie stayed with his hidens permanently, that he did not suffer later consequences like I did. In other words, she did not consider the loss of Nallie’s parents to be a trauma.

I had disappointing news for her. Life as a Jewish orphan with Christian parents was not without unsettling complications, to this day. And so I explained to my sister that all Dutchmen, from those in the resistance to those in forced labor camps—they returned to family, work, school and a familiar home. Even having endured personal torment, their family and work lives were intact. But what awaited the returning Dutch Jews, the pitiful remnant of 3,500 of 108,000 deported, and the rest emerging from their places of hiding? She is thinking about it.

While my remarks so far have been directed to child survivors in hiding, let us also consider the child survivors of concentration camps and remember one major difference. Children in hiding could survive if they were under age 10. Children in camps could not, with very few exceptions. Because child survivors of camps are older, generally adolescents, they have pre-war memories upon which to draw for the recapture and rebuilding of identity. But they were so few, those children from the camps.

Dorothy Macardle estimated in her 1949 pioneering work titled “Children of Europe” that two million Jewish children had died as a result of war and persecution. She writes, “Not to be explained by fear or provocation or uncontrollable passion of any kind, the systematic slaughter

of innocents stands out in history as the most coldly vicious proceeding that has ever emanated from human brains.”

In nearly every concentration camp in existence at war's end, some children were found, spared through the extraordinary efforts of a few adults, frequently themselves under sentence of death, such as the political prisoners of Buchenwald. According to Macardle about 500 children were found in Terezin, 500 at Bergen-Belsen, and 800 at Buchenwald. Two hundred children under age 16 from Dachau ended up at Kloster-Indersdorf, a sixteenth century monastery only 10 kilometers from Dachau which was converted into UNRRA's only International Children's Centre. In Belgium, 3,000 children were saved but of 4,363 Belgian Jewish children who were deported, only thirty-nine returned.

Israeli and Polish scholars estimated that 3,000 sets of twins passed through Mengele's hands in human experiments. Perhaps 200 twins survived, less than 10% and they were “protected.” The Russian Army found 160 in a barrack on January 27, 1945 and later, an additional 30 to 40.

The historian Deborah Dwork stated that 11% of Europe's Jewish children remained, implying that one in ten were spared. Perhaps that is so when the kindertransport children of 1938-1939 and the Nazi failure to occupy all of Russia are factored in. But in the heartland of murder, one is hard-pressed to find more than several thousands of children who survived concentration camps and fewer than 50,000 in hiding. For if the periphery, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, Rumania, Bulgaria and Russia yielded some child survivors, the slaughter in Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Germany/Austria after September 1, 1939, Czechoslovakia and Hungary (save Budapest) was near total.

What happened to the Jewish children scattered about Europe and gradually funneled into locations and sites for recovery and education? Some of the surviving children were spirited away to England, 732 young concentration camp survivors including about 80 girls were placed in residential hostels throughout Great Britain. About 250 of them were boys from Buchenwald.

The majority of children described in Martin Gilbert's book, *The Boys: Triumph Over Adversity*, were 9 or 10 years old when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. It is these 426 children from Buchenwald that intrigued me for many reasons. The numbers alone represent perhaps 10% of all surviving concentration camp children. Since they came to Écouis, France by train and were listed by name and place of birth, all are known. And a woman who is admired and loved by many of the Buchenwald children, Judith Hemmendinger (Feist) wrote about them in her thesis in 1981 titled “Rehabilitation of Young Camp Survivors after the Death Camps.” She received her doctorate from the University of Strasbourg for her dissertation. It is a captivating and important chapter of Holocaust history.

The gathering place of Écouis became the site of important decisions and observations. One of the boys, my friend, Romek, recalls a psychiatrist or psychologist telling the assembled boys that they would never recover. Romek admits they were wild and enraged, broke all the furniture and foraged for food. He admits it took time to settle down from the rage they felt. But settle down they did. Then a splinter group demanded Kosher food, separating those who wished to remain observant, from the others. It was this group who came under the care of Judith and her

colleague Niny Cohen (Wolf). Nearly one hundred boys came to stay at Chateau d'Ambloy to begin their recovery.

One of the youngest boys at Écouis left the group soon after liberation. Lulek, age 8, had a brother waiting in Palestine. Lulek's story in part answers the questions of what a young child is capable to remember. After all, Lulek being a Polish Jew was already caught up in the war in 1939 at the age of 2. He was a child who had seen too much. Like children who were expected to act way beyond their years, Lulek had lost the privilege of having a childhood. He was one of what I have called "elderly children."

I had first heard Lulek speak in Israel in 1981. He was then Chief Rabbi of Nethanya, now he is the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel. This is an account he offered in a lecture in Vancouver in 1994:

I want to share with you some experiences, starting with April 11, the day of our liberation from Buchenwald. I speak not of April 11, 1945, now, but of April 11, 1983, in Washington, D.C. at the Second World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors. I was then Chief Rabbi of Nethanya and invited to come as the youngest survivor of Buchenwald on the day of liberation. They had arranged for me a meeting with Rabbi Herschel Schachter, a liberator. From 1945 to 1983 I had carried with me a memory which I thought was my imagination until I had it confirmed at the Gathering by Rabbi Schachter.

Rabbi Schachter was in the first jeep to enter the gates of Buchenwald. The Germans had gone, the gates were still closed and there was a pile of corpses near the gates. I stayed behind the pile of bodies. The gate was broken down and the jeep entered. Rabbi Schachter was frightened; he could not believe his eyes. He saw eyes watching him, took out his gun and walked around the corpses, where he discovered a little boy with not even one tooth. He understood this must be a Jewish child and gathered me into his arms. Now I was afraid. He was a man in a uniform with a gun. For six years I had seen the uniforms of the SS, the Wehrmacht, of Einsatzgruppen. He saw how frightened I was. First he wept, then he smiled and asked in Yiddish for my name. "Lulek, in Polish they call me Lulek." He said, "How old are you Lulek?" I would not have believed it if Rabbi Schachter had not told me this. He was a soldier, a Rabbi and I was less than 8 years old and yet I said, "I am older than you." So he asked why I thought so. I answered, "Because you behave like a child. I haven't laughed or cried for years. I am too strong, too tough. I don't cry any more. So tell me who is older, me or you?"

The boys at Ambloy sorted themselves into enclaves by geographic origin, not by age. The younger ones did cling to the older ones who came to represent older brothers and parents. It was a sad day when the older boys were sent to Paris to learn a trade while the younger ones resumed schooling. After three months, they moved from Ambloy to Chateau Taverny. Gradually the boys found their way to Palestine, to America and Canada, to Australia and South America. Others remained in Paris.

In 1965, some of them invited Judith and Niny to a reunion, which gave Judith an opportunity to ask about their lives and what they recalled of the children's homes. Most were working, had started families, and were active in their community. Very few had talked to anyone of their experiences. By 1981, Judith had collected more information and in a few published articles

reported that the majority of the boys had married, that most marriages had lasted and she reported in 1982 on the psychosocial adjustment of fourteen of the children, eight who lived in Israel and six in France. Of the fourteen, only one was divorced. Their occupations ranged from a high government official, a Rabbi, a children's home director, to teachers and office workers. Anyone familiar with the personal histories of these relatively young concentration camp survivors might have agreed with the earliest observations that perhaps they were beyond help and hope. Somehow, on the scraps of memory and tradition, many have rebuilt a life, perhaps beyond our wildest dreams, and theirs.

On April 11, 2000 I joined my Canadian friends, Robert Waisman of Vancouver, Jerry Kapelus of Toronto, Stanley Weinstein and Eddie Balter of Montreal at the fifty-fifth reunion of the boys of Buchenwald. It is astonishing to hear of their lives and accomplishments. There are successful businessmen, artists, writers and physicians. In France there is an orthopedic surgeon and a psychoanalyst, a plastic surgeon in the United States and a medical director in Israel. I know of three Rabbis, two nuclear physicists and we all know one Nobel Laureate—Elie Wiesel.

From the very edge of destruction, many of the 426 boys succeeded to rebuild constructive and productive lives. To my knowledge there were no criminals although there are rumours of one person linked to the mob. This rumour is offered by some with a degree of pride. How is it possible that they did not resort to a life of crime or of vengeance? How did they manage to climb back from the abyss? And if so many talented individuals can be counted amongst this small group of surviving children, what talent was lost with the murders of a generation of Jewish children? The music not written, the medicines not invented or discovered, the thoughts not expounded. I often think of those un-lived lives. It is our responsibility to remember them.

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A longer version of this talk was prepared for the 1939 Club, and delivered in Los Angeles on Wednesday, November 1, 2000.