

Lessons from Survivors

by Sheila Luecht

Holocaust Survivors

What I remember about one of the survivors I met was that she seemed not very old. It was back at a Shabbat dinner in the Hillel on the NIU campus around 1977 or so. I was deep into my Jewish immersion. I was a student of Mar Chady who came from the Spertus Institute to teach Hebrew at NIU. I know that this makes no sense to most, but I was really on a journey to try and understand and feel what it might be like to be Jewish. To be found out to be Jewish after all would have been a bonus to me as I continued to explore the context of the religion and the race. Most people cannot understand that kind of empathy but something had happened long ago that pulled me into a spiral of continual learning that others only thought about. This was no assignment or credit class for some educational purpose as it was framed than. It was almost an obsession of who, what, where, and why, fired by a curiosity of some obscure reading and facts tossed about and a fateful visit to a concentration camp.

While a student abroad I had visited a concentration camp in Austria, called Mauthausen. This experience was unique in that at Mauthausen some of the actual rooms where death had occurred in such grotesque fashion and untimely manner were still standing. The meat hooks and cement surgical table were still there, as were the scratches on the walls of those who tried to escape in their last dying moments from the shower room. I stood in those rooms almost paralyzed by emotion. Not just my own emotion, I have come to feel, but the emotions of those who passed there before me. Each person who stood in the same place as myself, and each soul who left the earth in that place, each essence somehow, still present in the air, the walls, the stone, the dirt, all there. Can that attach itself to you?

Can you become the vessel of some of that pain, astonishment, fear....

So, when I met this woman, her name that I do not recall, I was transfixed by what I knew and her experiences. I vaguely remember her face. I remember dark hair, curly to the top of her shoulders. The end of the war had been only some 30 plus years since her visit. I think about that now, how times flies and what I was doing 30 years ago, I now have a reference of the closeness of the past, the vividness of it, what a young person cannot possibly understand. Grasping this concept now what I remember about her is vivid. So too would be the memories of someone at that time who had survived the holocaust. The pain, the fear and the experience could all be overwhelmingly fresh.

She started her story out simply and that is what I remember, not much more about it. The details of her incarceration have been lost by my memory and are clouded with the thousands of words and accounts that I have read through my years of reading and research on this subject. I did not have the wits about me then to record the details of her story, let alone keep them for thirty years. When you are young and inexperienced you do not think of the potential of your knowledge. What you can think of then is not on the level of this introspection in writing. It is somehow an experience which leaves an impression on your psyche but nothing more, unless you are schooled to record it. Fortunately there are youth from then and now that had those skills. I was not one of them. I did not savor this moment by writing it. It embedded itself within in a more emotional way. It marked me.

I remember the food that night. I remember the noodle kugel. How odd I thought making noodles sweet, what a new way of looking at something, ordinarily so insignificant that I would have dismissed it. How the kitchen was laid out, where I sat, how hard the noodle dish was to clean. The lighting in the room, the tables,

the lunch room look of the tables and the chairs. The first words that she spoke as she began the story.

Who would know that now at my age I can still hear them. Me, an aging baby boomer with increasingly poor eyesight and short term memory issues, who can hear this woman and see her memory.

We were a happy family. We were at the beach on the shores of the Baltic Sea for our summer vacation. Snow White was in the movie theaters. We were having such a good time. The vacation, the breeze, the sea and our loving family. The next summer the memory of it was unreal for we, what was left of us, were in a concentration camp. The paradox of the memory of that time and the present were overwhelming but the significance of the memory sustains me, the normalcy of it, the love of my family..

What did that teach me, all these years later, what does it still teach me, the value of family love, the appreciation of family, the lasting gift of memory, the importance of happy memories, the role of working to make happy memories and the way each of these efforts contributes to living in the present. I cannot quote this woman, I do not remember her exact words. I can only give breath to her feelings which I remember, what may have been her main message, and her essence. I am only a painter of memory, mine and others; I am an artist of life. I cannot experience to the core someone else's existence, their joy and pain, but I can breathe in the essence of those existences and spin them out in various ways to demonstrate my understanding of them. She told the story and she could relay the drama of the two summers side by side in her memory. What an inconceivable notion, a summer at the beach, the sand the water and then a summer with no water, no food, no family, no humanity, and more summers and winters and springs and years of the same.

I can paint what I translate of their feeling, I can write it, I can speak it and I can act it and I can relate it at any conceivable level with my own twist on it. This skill is the essence of my own humanness, the ability of my special gift of empathy, the key to those who are creative and thinking with the left side of their brain.

This woman, alive or dead now, I cannot know. I can know that she created a framework of existence within that I have practiced living with my own family. It is to appreciate the moment, to give love, to hold those you love as close as possible. Our focus must be to spend time, to give time, to be generous in spirit, to have joy and give joy. Tomorrow is unwritten and time can only march on. We cannot know how we will be asked to live and what we will be asked to live through. Therefore we must find some joy in memory to sustain us. In order to find that joy in memory we must actively work to create it now.

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You cannot go back, you cannot go home, you cannot cannot...Only in memory is it possible to travel back in time. We all imagine it. We relive happy moments, sad moments, we exist, time exists and it passes. We cannot stop it.

When I was married to my first husband we found ourselves trying to live in an apartment which would be half way between our conflicting worlds. I worked in the city and he worked on a base. The two were no where near each other. So we struck a point in between and it turned out to be Skokie. Skokie was predominately a Jewish area and based on all my interests and sensibilities this was not going to be a problem for me. It was not a problem for him but he was skating through life on a completely different plain and was focused on completely different things and actually we lived parallel lives it seemed.

It was about 6 years after college at this point and I was still interested in all things Jewish. I had broadened my learning and was not fixated entirely on WWII and had looked at other aspects. I had spent some time learning about the Middle East and while I did not go there, as I had immersed myself in some of the Jewish society and culture, I did so on a smaller but more emotional way with the Arab culture. This interest did not last long as I found the cultural differences to great to identify with and recognized that I was more aligned with the Jews and would always be so. I could appreciate the unfairness and have empathy for the pain that the state of Israel created for the Arab world but I could not abandon the motives and the history which made it necessary to create the Jewish state. I was evolving and as a non Jew I was still a Jew somehow in my heart.

In this old apartment building, from about the 1920's or so, I found an encounter which again impressed me. We had the back apartment on the alley. It was old and big and we never really used the front entrance which faced into a courtyard. Our living room area faced the courtyard and the rest of the apartment windows faced the alley. You went out the front door into the entry way to access the mailbox, but you always used the backdoor to go in and out as you parked in the alley mostly. Across the hall was another back door to the other apartment. In this apartment lived a couple which seemed to be in their seventies or so. The man was taller and thin and he was bald, with kind eyes and countenance. His wife was short, wiry gray hair and a little plump. Both moved slowly and I always greeted them. Finally one day we began to exchange little pleasantries.

Over time we were invited in to their home for a chat. My husband was indifferent, and he came along but without the genuine interest that I had. We sat and they offered us some almond cookies which were the crescent kind with powdered sugar on them and some tea I believe. They knew that we were newly married and

thought probably like most people did that we were happy. That was not true, but we did try to make appearances at times during our short lived marriage. We were friends but should not have married. This is part of what I am sure what they noticed in that encounter.

I was all about them and their life. They were Jews. It turned out that they came from Germany. They had lived there and survived the war. I cannot recall exactly if they were in a camp or not. I know only that they survived and found themselves in the United States after the war. They lost all of their relatives and property. I cannot remember if they lost their children or they came later. I cannot remember if they were married there or when they came here. I am not sure they told me all of that.

What I do remember is the graciousness of the offer to come into their home. The time that they spent bringing out some cookies and how it felt to be welcomed and the story that the wife told are imprinted on experience of that time.

Somehow, again we are on the subject of the holocaust. This is 1984. She tells me that some years back the German government had invited them, and obviously other survivors to come back to Germany, if only for a visit. It was somehow wrapped up with early reparation claims for lost property, etc. You were a guest of the government etc. Her husband did not want to go. He would not go. She decided to go. That was the very least that they owed her. So she went back. She visited the town she grew up in and all the familiar places that she knew so well as a child. It was all the same, familiar, but very different. It was all different. Yet, she walked the very same path to her school, she saw the same things, some different things, but all that she had remembered from her childhood was recalled. Imagine that, what was normal, what was safe. Then marked by what has transpired, to you, to the place. This small little piece of her story, this insignificant little piece, this tidbit,

this mental image of her retracing her steps was profound to me. What was is no more. What is past is only a vivid memory.

I walked the same path. I saw the same trees. They were bigger, but they were the same. It was a long way around a field. I remember the time of day, the sun. Getting home after school, how the sky changed, there it was all the same, but it was now. After. I wanted to somehow take it back, but it was no longer mine.

I have had the opportunity to see things many times in the same way. I recall her words, what I would describe as her sense of loss about her innocence and her defiance about going back and her strength to retrace her steps in the knowledge which could not have been available to her at the time of first steps on that path. She was also describing the indifference of those who knew her fate and had been so familiar. The telling way in which she remembered them before the war, during her period of upheaval and upon her return, was too marked by her defiance.

The message to me here was through life your perspective grows by your experience. You cannot return to the simplicity of childhood because it only exists in your memory. It was neither simple nor all pleasant. It holds many memories, routines and innocence. This is not wrong, but it is not your life now. To live life, you must face all of it, embrace it. To understand it you must acknowledge it. To go back is not possible; to visit the past in memory is not the same as the visit to past places. The place is an empty cup that cannot hold your experience, or others, it can only hold its own. You cannot go back. But in going back to the physical place you can exorcise events of the past or cling to them as you choose. You cannot change them, but you can confront them and process them within your psyche and go forward. Wrongs of the past cannot be undone, but it is possible to find ways to hold wrong doers accountable. The measure of that effort is driven by the passion of the person wronged and their need to find some measure of satisfaction for the wrong. Is it best

abandoned or is in this search for justice that we teach the value of doing right to all?

