

## From Holocaust “Intrusions” to Holocaust Research

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While visiting my parents a few weeks ago and feeling bored (since they were playing with my daughters), I started going through one of my photograph albums I had kept as a child. Unlike my daughters whose bursting digital albums have documented their every step from infancy, the fact that I was born in the 1970s meant there are pictures mainly from birthdays, trips, and holidays. Since I’ve often looked at them throughout the years, I remember most of them. But this time, one of the pictures caught my eye. In it I’m four or five years old, in kindergarten, and we are celebrating Hanukkah. For the first time, I noticed that the kindergarten teacher had pinned an ornament on my blouse that was the spitting image of a yellow star. I guess my career was determined right then and there, without my even knowing it.

I grew up in a Holocaust-free home, at least until my maternal grandfather came to visit. My partner and I once talked about the little subterfuges he developed regarding food as the grandson of a Holocaust survivor. She used to stare at him while he was eating, making sure he would finish everything on his plate. He explained it was a lose-lose situation: If he didn’t clean his plate she would scold him. If he cleaned his plate, she thought he was still hungry and would rush to refill his plate. He eventually developed a successful strategy: After he finished everything on his plate he had a couple of seconds to push the plate away so she would not refill it. I never experienced anything of the sort.

My paternal grandparents lived in a small town on the Polish-Russian border. They escaped to the USSR during World War II, were sent to Siberia, and survived. I don’t think they considered themselves Holocaust survivors. After the war they settled in Poland for a

few years, where my father Avi was born, and they immigrated to Israel in the 1950s. They never told my father about their past, and like many members of the Second Generation he did not ask them, but he also didn't feel that they were hiding a big dark secret. This differs from many homes of survivors who chose not to talk, in which the Second Generation reported that they grew up feeling a sense of concealment in their home that created distress. As in many survivor families who did not talk, my father regrets not having asked them about their lives before they died, and thus he knows practically nothing about their past and his life as a child in Poland. For me they were simply the grandparents I loved, who were ordinary hard-working people. My grandfather Shlomo was a carpenter from the age of eight until he was eighty. A strong man, who did not talk much. His favorite game when we were children was to pick me up along with my younger sister Michal, one of us in each hand, as if we were a picture to hang on the wall. My paternal grandmother Mania was a housewife, and I enjoyed looking at her while she put on lipstick, accompanying her to the grocery store, or running away to her when I fought with my parents. Only a few days ago, for the first time ever, I was able to (approximately) reconstruct her tomato soup which I loved.

My maternal grandmother Guta, who survived Warsaw ghetto and Auschwitz, died when I was a child and I hardly remember her. My maternal grandfather Moshe survived the Lodz ghetto, was imprisoned for several weeks in Auschwitz, and was then transferred to work in a factory. He thought he had lost his whole family. After the liberation he was sent with other refugees to Prague. One day while entering a restaurant, he saw a pretty waitress who looked Jewish and they began to talk. Her name was Guta and she, too, was a survivor. Moshe and Guta travelled together to France and later, separately, to Eretz Yisrael (pre-State Israel). Guta entered on a British immigration certificate; lacking a certificate, Moshe boarded a different ship using false documents. Finally, they were reunited. After arrival, Moshe also accidentally discovered his younger brother Chanoch, thus learning that he had

survived. Although he was underage, Chanoch volunteered to fight in the 1948 Israeli War of Independence War and was killed in battle at age seventeen.

Guta and Moshe got married and had two daughters. My mother had the heavy burden of being called “Thia” (in Hebrew: revival). Her sister, who was a couple of years younger, was given the less ponderous name of Avivit (in Hebrew: Spring- like).

Thia, my mother, and Avivit, my aunt, grew up in a house where their mother talked about the Holocaust and their father said nothing. My mother tells me that Moshe only began to talk after Guta passed away. I do not remember the silent times, only the talking, and I feel guilty and sorry, but I must be honest: it was very hard for me to listen to his stories. I didn’t want to hear anything, didn’t want to know. He didn’t just talk, he engaged in long stream-of-consciousness monologues, and often began to cry when he described his family members and their fate during the Holocaust. Whenever I had the opportunity to leave the table and escape these stories I did. When I was there, I developed my own subterfuges: I blocked out what I was supposed to hear, sealing myself off completely. He talked, I nodded, but I heard nothing. My behavior was accompanied by a mixture of anger (why is he forcing me to hear this?) and guilt (Here he is, this wonderful man who suffered so much and just wants to share his story, and I cannot even bring myself to listen. I’m such a lousy granddaughter).

Moshe was a gentle man and worked hard all his life, sometimes on three jobs simultaneously. He was known for his munificence. For our birthdays he would bring us 1970s-style over-the-top cakes decorated with tons of cream and margarine that we never ate during the year. There wasn’t a person in distress whom he didn’t rush to help, buying paintings from artists who couldn’t make a living. We used to joke that the beggars on his street are the wealthiest beggars in Israel. In his spare time he was an artist, painting and sculpting, and he also became an amateur historian who read every historical Holocaust book

he could get his hands on. In addition, he became an amateur genealogist and drew up our family tree that goes back to the middle ages. I guess that was his revenge.

These were the only Holocaust “intrusions” in my childhood which was a happy, lower-middle class average childhood of the 1970s-1980s in Ramat-Gan. It included many hours of playing outside with neighborhood children, climbing trees, or watching TV at specific and limited hours.

At first, I didn’t fit into the educational system. When I was three my mother enrolled me in pre-school, and every day I would climb the fence and scream so hard that she had to quit her job and take me home. I didn’t like kindergarten either. I always tell myself that it was probably because we didn’t study enough, and without studying, kindergarten meant nothing to me. In elementary school and high school I flourished. I really loved learning and even enjoyed doing homework (my daughters always look at me as though I am completely crazy whenever I tell them that story).

Another major Holocaust “intrusion” took place when I was twelve years old. In Israel, seventh-grade students are required to write a report about their family history. The project is called “Roots.” and there wasn’t a chance in the world I wouldn’t get a straight A (as in my other classes), but this time there was an emotional price to pay. I couldn’t run away, seal myself off, or not listen. I had to sit down, listen carefully, write down every word, and later process it into a coherent narrative. It was a nightmare. It was the first time I saw strong, silent Shlomo cry as he told me about his past. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t escape when Moshe began to cry, and I even had to ask questions in order to understand his stream of consciousness. I was frightened, helpless. I just wanted to get it over with. I still have the report and keep it where I can easily find it. It was a great report, but it drove me even further away from the subject.

Aside from that, my parents didn't talk to me about the Holocaust. My father had no personal stories about his parents to share, and my mother, who was probably scarred in her childhood by her mother forcing her to eat while force-feeding her Holocaust stories, didn't discuss it with me either. I was always a good student and loved history, but I cannot say that the Holocaust interested me during my high school years. When I meet academics at conferences they often recall how the Holocaust always fascinated them, how as children they "devoured" books about the Holocaust. I was never like that. I learned about it with the same curiosity as I studied any other historical period. When a delegation from my high school went on an educational trip to Poland I didn't want to join. I guess I didn't want another Holocaust "intrusion" in my life. I loved to learn, I loved to party, and that was enough for me.

As these were my indeed partying days, I decided that when I enlisted in the Israeli Defense Forces I'd ask to be stationed close to home. This choice landed me with two depressing, gloomy, and particularly boring years. I was stationed in a civilian office outside a military base. Everyone there was too "grown up" for this eighteen-year-old. I couldn't stand the two soldiers who worked in the same office. I was in a prison and was suffocating. One of the things that drove me crazy is that for the first time in my life my superior was stupid. Throughout my experiences in educational system, the people with power, in other words, the teachers, had always been smarter than I was. Every day I went home after having learned something new from them. Even those who were not so bright enriched my knowledge. I liked them and never showed them disrespect, even those at whom we used to laugh. My two years in the military were the first time I was subordinated to fools. I didn't respect them (and in fact hated them with every fiber of my being). After those two awful years were over I decided two important things about my future. The first was that I would never work in an office. The second was that I would never work for somebody stupid.

My only ray of light in this dark, dark time was when I met Eran, whom I married eight years later. This was the first time I realized that something in me categorizes people based on what I think they would have done during the Holocaust. Eran was clearly a partisan – vigorous, active, a big mouth, and hot-headed (but in a good way). I fell completely in love with him, and his presence in my life really helped me get through my last months of military service.

Unlike the vast majority of my friends who had started to plan their gap year trip to Asia or South America, I was interested only in one thing – University – where I could do what I love to do the most: learn. This meant freedom. Gathering up what was left of my broken spirit I enrolled in Tel-Aviv University which was more exhilarating for me than any trip around the world. There, in the Humanities Department I began to recover. When I enrolled in the 1990s, TAU had just opened a program in the humanities where students could take core courses in various humanities fields and later decide which one to major in. I took courses in literature and general history, and as much as I loved studying, there was no specific subject that particularly attracted me.

Suddenly, everything changed. I had a free period between two classes and reluctantly decided to take an Anti-Semitism course in the Department of Jewish History taught by Prof. Dina Porat. I guess it sounded general enough not to scare me. After one lesson I knew this was it. Nothing was more interesting than what I was studying. The topic I had run away from came back to sweep me off my feet. And swept away I was.

Being an excellent student, I never spent too much time at the University sitting in the cafeteria or outside on the grass. I was too busy enriching my world. I would come in the morning, rush to the cafeteria for a quick coffee, wave hello to my friends, go to classes and the library, and go back at lunchtime to find many of them still sitting there in the same spot. I would sneak food into the library and would sit there for hours. I might as well have put up

a little tent there with a bed so I could rest from time to time. I got an A+ on the final exam and Prof. Porat asked to meet me, this “strange” student. The door to the academic world had opened. After I completed my BA it was clear to me that I would continue on to graduate school.

I never wanted to be a lecturer. Since my first years at University I knew I wanted to be a researcher. I began as an assistant to two professors at the Jewish History Department (one of whom was Prof. Porat) working hard at my coursework while working for them. After a while the department secretary asked me if I could assist the Chair, Prof. Ya’acov Shavit. I knew him from my undergraduate years and didn’t like him. While sitting in his class what I saw back then was an elderly professor delivering a stream of ideas and thoughts without any coherent order, who was arrogant and never stuck to the syllabus. But money is money and I agreed. When I met him again I saw I had been completely wrong. He was a soul mate: a true renaissance man, brighter than most people. Of course I couldn’t understand him as an undergraduate. I wasn’t smart enough. Now I discovered a brilliant, kind-hearted, tactless (but oh so funny) man with no manners, whom I came to love dearly. We spent our time yelling at each other and then laughing. I borrowed books from his personal library and got to know authors I would normally never have read. I met his family and loved them as well. In the cold academic world I had found a playmate.

Back then Eran was studying cinema in Jerusalem, and it fascinated me. Whenever I wasn’t at Tel-Aviv University I spent my time at Hadassah College in Jerusalem where Eran was enrolled. The teaching staff there knew me and let me take part in productions. To understand the theoretical part of cinema I spent hours in their library, possibly more than the average student who actually studied there. My schedule was more than full. When it came to choosing a thesis topic I decided to combine my two loves of Jewish history and cinema and

wrote an MA thesis under the supervision of Prof. Porat on Holocaust representations in cinematic Zionist propaganda in the State of Israel.

Moving on to a PhD was the obvious next step. I began taking courses in the Cinema Department at Tel-Aviv University where I met Prof. Nurith Gertz. She was teaching a course on Zionist cinema and after the first class she called me to ask how I knew more than her cinema students. I was so intrigued with Holocaust-related Zionist propaganda that I decided to conduct a comparative study of Holocaust representations of Zionist organizations in Israel and the United States, which I wrote under the supervision of Profs. Porat and Gertz. At that time I was completely clueless about finances and thought this would be a great way to make a living – I'd study all the time, engage in research, and earn money to support the lifestyle that Eran and I shared. I didn't know that just being a researcher doesn't put food on the table. A couple of weeks later I received a phone call from Nurith Gertz telling me that she was sending me to teach cinema at the Open University. I loved her and didn't want to disappoint her so I reluctantly agreed.

To my great surprise I found that I really enjoyed teaching and the student evaluations indicated that they liked me as well. I taught several classes, studied for my PhD, and Eran and I tried to have children. It was exhausting. Apparently this getting pregnant business wasn't so easy. Prof. Gertz was developing an interdisciplinary course about Holocaust survivors in Israeli cinema, literature, and culture and asked me to coordinate it while writing the study guide. I watched and read everything I could about the subject. This course became my main anchor at the Open University. Other courses in the undergraduate and graduate programs followed, dealing with various interdisciplinary aspects of culture, cinema, and Zionism. I was completely engaged in all the topics I had previously run away from. I wasn't afraid any more. I focused on post war period, on how the Holocaust was represented, but in



order to deal with these topics I had to learn the basics – so I jumped back into the black hole of the Holocaust. Now I just wanted to know more.

In 2006 I gave birth to my eldest daughter Almog, just a few months before I was awarded my PhD Summa Cum Laude. Eran was working as a cinema teacher in a number of places. I got pregnant again, and a year and a half after Almog we had Ya'ara. When I became a mother I began to realize what had never been clear to me before. Studying and teaching about the Holocaust is not a nine-to-five job where you go home and leave your work behind. It infiltrates your soul. I don't know whether the "memorial candle" skipped a generation in my family, I just know that on top of looking at people around me and asking myself what they would have done during the Holocaust, Holocaust anxiety had now infiltrated motherhood. The hard questions about the human race and its capacity for cruelty, the inability to trust others, and the lack of faith in authoritative figures that clearly exacerbated as I went ever deeper into the subject, took its toll on motherhood. I became a "helicopter Mom" guarding my daughters at every turn.

This realization didn't happen all at once. My daughters are now teenagers, and it took me time to understand what had happened. But understanding doesn't necessarily mean changing. My pessimistic perception of the world is so strongly embedded within me that it's hard to let go. I do my best. My eldest daughter just went on a two-day trip with her middle school, and I didn't call her (I just texted her a few times, but that doesn't count...). In terms of my daughters' education I feel the obligation to teach them to be strong, fierce, and stand their ground. It is always there. Even in little things. The other day I cooked pasta for Ya'ara and put it in the fridge. The sauce sunk down, and when she heated up a plate for herself she told me it was a bit dry. I had to explain to her that one must stick the spoon all the way down to the bottom where the sauce and the good stuff are. As I explained it, I was quite

uncomfortable to note that I couldn't let go of the observation that this type of knowledge helped people survive.

My daughters' upbringing has gone hand in hand with my career. In 2009 when Prof. Gertz set up a Culture Department at the Sapir Academic College, she took me with her. It was and still is exciting. I got to know the residents of Israel's southern periphery, discovering new worlds of cultures, ethnicities, and ideologies which I had only known of in a perfunctory way, as I had only lived in Israel's central region. But working at two places, teaching dozens of students, cultivating my research, and raising two daughters took its toll. It took me time to understand that Eran and I were growing apart. Finally, when the girls were in elementary school, we got divorced. Throughout our marriage we were really good friends and fortunately we have been able to maintain that friendship although we are divorced. We live a few blocks away from each other and are raising our girls together. Eran remarried and has a beautiful daughter named Omer whom I adore. We decided that until she grows up we would tell her that I'm her aunt, and when she calls me "aunty" she melts my heart.

Then I met Boaz, a Third Generation Holocaust survivor who, among the many things he does, also guides students on educational trips to former concentration camps, ghettos, and mass killing sites in Poland. People who meet us for the first time ask if the Holocaust brought us together...well...I'm not sure about that but I do know that when meeting him I found signs of change and maturity within myself. First, as someone who often categorizes people in terms of what they would have done during the Holocaust, I told him I laugh when I think about what he would have done. He is someone who considers things carefully. His friends and I joke that whenever he has a problem to solve, his mind turns it into an Excel chart with the pros and cons laid out in neat columns. When I look at him, I think that by the

time he would have finished deciding whether to board the train or not, the Holocaust would have been over...and I'm fine with that.

Second, I've spent the last twenty years writing numerous articles and books. The minute I find a Holocaust-related subject that interests me, I get completely submerged in it. But throughout all this there was one thing I refused to do – to travel to Poland and Germany. Growing up, my grandfather Moshe repeatedly told me that the Poles were worse than the Germans. I blocked out his stories, but this observation stuck with me. The funny thing was that as a Holocaust survivor he received restitution payments from the Germans that included stays in a resort home in Germany once a year. And he went. Every year. As a child I couldn't grasp it. How could he? He could. But he never went back to Poland.

Even though I tried to resist it, with this type of influence I couldn't even think about going to Poland. By the mid-1990s, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, Israelis began taking trips to Eastern Europe. By the 2000s these trips had become bon ton in Israel, but I kept on refusing to go. I had to meet Boaz to work up the courage to go, and so I did. Walking for the first time in Auschwitz-Birkenau was less scary than I thought. I did it. On other trips we went to other former camps. I realized that I experience something similar every time: I wander through the places, I look at the exhibitions, everything seems fine and then at some point I feel I have to get out of there. And so I do, leaving everyone behind. This is my way of dealing with it. Not a great way, but my way.

A profession that involves researching a trauma that is biological, national, and universal, manifests itself in strange responses. For instance, I'm a great fan of throwing away food. I remember one time when my grandfather Moshe saw me peeling potatoes. He was shocked. I was in my twenties, just learning how to cook, and the peels were pretty thick. Of course he scolded me about this not being the right way to peel a potato. Since then I've learned to peel better but I've noticed that the delight I get in throwing away food is too

great...a bit more than ordinary. I love cleaning the fridge towards the end of the week so I can throw out the leftovers (which drives my partner crazy) and leaving the fridge spotless. Hygiene is another thing. Another story I picked up from my grandfather (when I was not listening...) is the importance of hygiene during the Holocaust. According to my grandfather, this is what kept him alive. He didn't eat garbage, and he washed whenever he could. As a teenager these things didn't matter to me. My parents spoiled me and my sister. We hardly did any chores at home. But when I moved out and lived with Eran I found out that my house has to be spotless, otherwise I would get upset. I had never cleaned before but got the grasp of it fairly quickly. Every one of the cramped rented apartments we lived in was spotless. I think it has gotten worse with time, as I find myself disgusted with more and more places that don't meet my standards.

I think a lot about the future of Holocaust memory, and am researching the various ways that the younger generations remember. It fascinates me to see how memory changes and develops with each generation, how the narratives are altered, how the nature of commemoration varies, and how to acknowledge its upsides and downsides. I'm aware that we are entering a new era. Some call it the "post-witness" era, but, in my opinion, this is a misnomer. Since the 1980s, Holocaust survivors around the world have been documented in various ways so there won't be a "post-witness" era. There will, however, be a post "flesh-and-blood witness" era in the not-too-distant future.

For a long time I didn't want to deal with the Holocaust, or take on this enormous responsibility to commemorate. I remember a conversation with late Nava Semel, the talented Second Generation author who dedicated a great deal of her work to the Holocaust. She told me that since she began to write about it, she often stopped and asked herself, "Why me?" I completely relate. I don't think this question can be answered. As the saying goes, "It is what it is." I was drawn to Holocaust memory almost unintentionally and understood that there I

should stay. It was not easy when I began my academic career, and it is certainly not easy today. I remember talking to Prof. Porat as a doctoral student to complain about the stress, the endless work. She laughed. "It's just the beginning," she said. I thought to myself she must be wrong, but in fact it was I who was mistaken. This is what I want to do. This is what I should do. I believe it is a mission and a privilege to remind people what happened, to discuss the depths of human nature, and to explore the ways we remember and forget. I wish to ensure that the next generation, my students, those who read my research perhaps transmit the memory, will not forget. That my constant work and multiple writings will help, even slightly, to remind people about that period of human suffering and the multiple ways in which it can, and should, be remembered.