The Role of Memory – A Third-Generation Perspective

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By Anthony Levin

Distinguished guests, dignitaries, Ladies and gentlemen: I'm honoured to be here today to join you in commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day and the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In the context of this year's theme, in which we honour the Righteous Among the Nations, I am here to speak to you about the role of Holocaust memory from a third-generation perspective. That is, as the grandchild of Holocaust survivors.

The first time I came across the term "third-generation" in relation to grandchildren of Holocaust survivors was probably late in 2008. At the time, I was living in Italy, on sabbatical from work as a lawyer here in Sydney. My writing teacher recommended that I read *Lost in Translation* by Eva Hoffman, a Polish-born author and the daughter of Holocaust survivors. The reasoning behind her recommendation was straightforwardly familial: having listened to me relate some of my impressions of what it was like growing up as the grandson of survivors, she felt I might benefit from reading the writing of someone who had also imbibed macabre images from an early age.

It was a personal watershed moment. What followed was a period of both rapidly unfurling naivety and intense critical engagement with

the Holocaust. The process eventually lead me to complete my Masters in Contemporary Literature & Culture in the United Kingdom, focusing my research on post-Holocaust fiction. In the course of that research, I sought out a number of other members of the so-called third-generation, in Europe and North America, in an attempt to gain insight into my own relationship to the Shoah. I also felt compelled to understand how it was possible to co-exist for so many years with stories of immense loss without actively working-through their psychological effects. And why after all that time, did I suddenly feel that such working-through was necessary, indeed indispensable, to my identity as a lawyer, a writer, a teacher – or more fundamentally, a human being?

At this point, many of you may be asking – Why? Why do we need the third-generation perspective at all? For almost forty years the second-generation has pioneered the way for descendants to speak with legitimacy about what it's like living in a survivor-family. Beginning with Helen Epstein's seminal memoir *Children of the Holocaust* published in 1979, and continuing with literature by Art Spiegelman, and scholarship by Aaron Haas and Alan Berger, second-generation writing is now an established feature of Holocaust and Memory Studies. Although Epstein herself did not use the term, critics tend to cite her memoir as the work that established a sense of cohesion for such children. Two other events also helped to solidify a generational identity for children of survivors: one was the screening of the mini-series *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* in 1978 which reached 220

million Americans; the other was the creation of the world's first video archive for Holocaust survivor testimonies by psychoanalyst and scholar Dori Laub. The archive was based on the premise that "every survivor has a unique story to tell" (Yale).

But not every survivor is willing or able to tell his or her unique story. For every family in which a survivor speaks openly to their children about their experiences, there are those for whom silence is the only conceivable or possible response to the trauma of the Nazi genocide. The genealogies of such silence are varied: the silence of private reflection, the silence of the unspeakable, the silence of the dead. When we commemorate on an occasion such as this, we are enveloped by it. It is this relationship between silence and speaking, survival and death, which arguably marks the third-generation.

However, I am mindful not to make too many generalisations about the nature of this grouping. Firstly and anecdotally, our experiences tend to be as unique and heterogeneous as those of our survivor grandparents. I have interviewed "3Gs" who have never met their grandparents because they passed away before they were born; I've met others who grew up close to them but never asked any questions. This was certainly not my experience – nor was it my sister's or my first cousin's. Ours was an environment of exchange. I *asked*. I *inquired*. But even before I could properly articulate my curiosity, I have memories of my grandmother and late grandfather volunteering

information. Every meal, every news story on TV contained the psychic triggers for a traumatic memory of hiding or the camps.

"Camp is not so much a place as a condition" says the child-narrator of the novella *Nightfather* by Carl Friedman. For me, that novel encapsulates some of my most unsettling feelings about the transgenerational legacy of the Holocaust. It is a poignant, tragic-comic story about one survivor's experiences in the concentration camps, seen through the eyes of his children. And yet it is written by a second-generation Dutch author. Here is another excerpt:

> "I've had camp" he says. That makes him different from us. We've had Chicken Pox and German Measles. And after Simon fell out of a tree, he got a concussion and had to stay in bed for weeks. But we've never had camp.

For those of us born after, we've never had camp, and hopefully we never will. Such knowledge and such hope is deeply embedded in the psychology of the survivor-family. Yet it means something different to each generation and it is worth probing further to discover the nuances which might distinguish child from grandchild.

As recently as 2007, researcher Janine Lurie-Beck wrote that grandchildren of survivors are only now old enough in large enough numbers to enable useful studies of their mental health. She concedes that although there are no *conclusive* findings, grandchildren appear to

inherit some of the disturbances suffered by survivors and their children (29-30). In this respect, the second- and third-generations have much in common. To quote Efraim Sicher, "the memory of the post-Holocaust generation is of not having a memory" (64). In other words, what unites the post-generation as a whole is distance from the event, and in addition, a palpable connection to it which creates a feeling of proximity. We might call this *the paradox of distance*. In its most intimate forms, it may result not only from the transmission of stories but also exposure to, encounters with embodied affects; or touching testimonial objects.

It may seem obvious to speak of shared distance, but that distance – historical or interpersonal or both – is now being complicated by the growing numbers of grandchildren who are engaging in acts of Holocaust remembrance and *telling* stories which are not their own. The third-generation is increasingly being viewed as "the generation that broke their grandparents' silence…" (Massel) having been exposed to countless movies and television shows about the Holocaust. Leading psychologists like Dan Bar-On claim that the third-generation created and normalised a language to talk about the Holocaust with their survivor-grandparents. I tend to consider the creation of such a language as a far more mutual achievement. Certainly, I listened attentively to my grandparents' stories of survival. But it took me well into my twenties to bring any serious critical faculty to bear upon my role as a listener, and to appreciate the role of Holocaust memory in my life.

In America, where the 3G movement is at its most visible and well-resourced, grandchildren are coalescing both in person and online to discuss such issues. They are using social media such as Facebook and Twitter to share information, engage in debate, and – to tell stories. On a weblog known as 3Glegacy, one finds this explanation:

> *The third generation is the last living link to Holocaust survivors, and with this privilege comes the responsibility of owning our grandparents' legacies.* (About 3Glegacy)

Whether the third-generation is indeed the last living link, notions of ownership, responsibility and legacy deserve greater attention. The notion of a legacy is popular among descendants, typically connoting something bequeathed or handed down from the past. However, I would encourage a shift away from the rhetoric of ownership, and towards one of *custodianship*. I am not here to tell my grandmother's or my grandfather's stories. For those who are interested, I can talk about what it was like acquiring the vocabulary of mass murder well before I knew what genocide was. Custodianship conveys the sense of something entrusted to us, to guard, to maintain, not to own, but to pass on again. It concerns our *responsibility to public memory*. Admittedly, that phrase deserves elucidation.

To be responsible to public memory is again not generationally-specific. It applies across the board and entails being more than simply recipients of history and testimony. That word, *responsibility*, is already

pregnant with the need for action, derived as it is from the Latin infinitive *respondere*, meaning "to respond". More pointedly, the word retains the notion of moral accountability for one's actions. When I speak of the responsibility to memory, I therefore invoke at least two branches of responsibility: the first is our responsibility to the story. This is not a new idea. The phrase has been recently coined to encapsulate the ethical issues of narrating human rights abuses (Phillips as cited in Gready). It involves validating the victim through an "attitude of empathy", and validating the story which is characterised by asking questions (Gready 178). In the context of custodianship, we ask questions not so much to validate the story, but to acquire dexterity with its details. But as the onus begins to shift to the new generation of storytellers, such validation will become increasingly important. The third-generation will one day be asked to supplement the archive with memories of their contact with survivors. We are now at a juncture where it is possible to sure up the legacy we look after – by becoming more familiar with the stories behind the objects that remain, by undertaking research, by forging the language required to break silences.

The second aspect of this responsibility is our responsibility to the other. Holocaust memory is now entrenched in public discourse; it also possesses a mutability and a transmissibility which enables it to be transnational and importantly, transgenerational. As Michael Rothberg has argued in relation to the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, public Holocaust memory has the potential to be "a public resource for

reflection on the lines of race, culture and religion that divide groups from each other even as they create new possibilities for alliance" (132). That is certainly the kind of memorial resource which resonates for me as a member of the third-generation. Our responsibility does not end at the preservation of the archive or the recording of testimony; nor does it end with our questions in our living rooms or across our kitchen tables. It begins and extends out. In the context of contemporary violence and suffering, our questions ramify. They augment. Let us ask them unto the next – and unto the next.

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