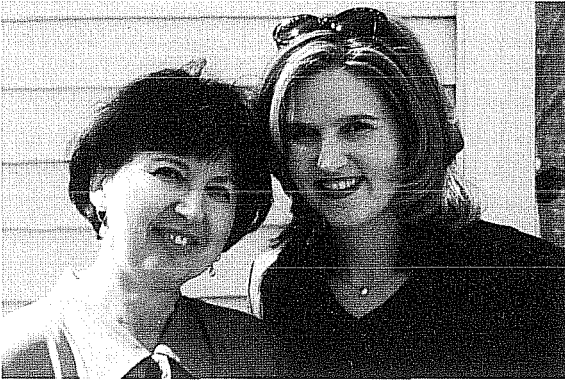


# *“The Question Child” and Passing on Intergenerational Tales of Trauma: A Conversation with Elaine Kalman Naves*

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• Judith P. Robertson and Nadene Keon •



*Elaine Kalman Naves with her daughter, Jessica*

**Résumé:** J. Robertson et N. Keon analysent la dynamique psychologique que vivent les enfants lorsqu'ils découvrent l'horreur qu'ont subie leurs parents. Elaine Kalman Naves, auteur de *Journey to Vaja*, et Jessica, sa fille, ont partagé leur expérience à ce sujet avec Judith Robertson. L'analyse s'appuie sur les concepts psychanalytiques de symbolisation et de sublimation pour expliquer l'aptitude des enfants à surmonter l'épreuve d'un apprentissage traumatique.

**Summary:** This article grows out of the authors' attempt to understand and describe the psychological dynamics involved in children's introduction to familial horror. Elaine Kalman Naves, author of *Journey to Vaja*, and her daughter, Jessica, offer candid insights on this subject in their conversation with Judith Robertson. The article draws on psychoanalytic notions of symbolization and creativity to frame insights about children's ability to sustain direction and hope in traumatic learning.

## The Question Child and the Scene of Holocaust Narration

We — the latecomers to the experience of the *Shoah* — shall never be able to fully grasp the abysmal suffering and despair of the survivors. And yet, not only do we share with them a scene of narration, but our participation in this scene of narration may have become the organizing principle of our lives and our own historical imperative. How, then, are we going to face up to this task?... How ... are we to dispose of the knowledge conveyed by survivors' narratives? How can we integrate the lesson of their testimonies in our historical project ... a project in which 'get involved' has come to replace 'look the other way'? (Avni 208)

This article focuses on how to meet the questions of children who inquire into family stories of persecution and death, and how narrativization in the face of knowledge of horror can work to help children sustain direction and hope. Observing the effects that can be set — unwittingly — into motion when tragic stories are told, Richard Lewis has written that, "The story is a kind of melodic line that has a built-in need for response. So when the story brings out questions, it has started a melody which has to be continued by the hearer in some way ..." (69). However, as Ora Avni points out, the charge of disposing of the melodies of dismay conveyed by survivors' narratives, and integrating the lesson of their testimonies into children's lives is anything but straightforward.

It is immeasurably difficult to master the din provoked in our minds when we imagine children's initiation into horror. Torn between desires to repress and desires to elaborate difficult knowledge, adults experience uneasy conflict in the face of "the question child."<sup>1</sup> The child's natural and spontaneous curiosity ignites a jumbled harsard that feels anything like mature or self-assured response. Fear, shame, grief, and uncertainty may inspire the desire to flee from the scene of narration, or even to deny the obligation to incorporate its lessons into our work. How, then, might we begin to describe and theorize such a scene? When the nightmare has actually touched the lives of family members and inscribed its haunting melody of pain on survivors, questions of how to answer the powerful demands of young family members "to know" becomes even more entangled and confused.

In the interview that follows, the question of how to pass on intergenerational tales of trauma is explicitly engaged by Canadian writer, Elaine Kalman Naves. Author and journalist for the *Montreal Gazette*, Naves is the acclaimed winner of the 1999 Mavis Gallant Prize for Nonfiction for *Putting Down Roots: Immigrant Writers of Montreal*, the 1998 Elie Wiesel Prize for Holocaust Literature, and recipient of the prestigious 1997 Canadian Literary Award for her personal essay, "Hair." Her best known work is *Jour-*

ney to *Vaja*: *Reconstructing the World of a Hungarian-Jewish Family* (1996). A haunting evocation of her Hungarian Jewish family's roots in the "golden, buttery images" of *Vaja*, "a dot on the map of Hungary," the narrative portrays the richly textured nuances of daily life before Naves' family's decisive and horrific encounter with Nazism.

Elaine Kalman Naves is the daughter of survivors, and the mother of two children, one of whom, Jessica — once "a question child" and now a teacher — is present in the interview. The worry pursued throughout the interview and analysis that follows is implied in the meditation by Ora Avni, above. That is, how should education face up to the task of supporting the learning of "the question child" who is persistent in her demands "to know" aspects of her ancestral narrative, even when such knowledge invokes an initiation into horror? With brave insight devoid of romanticization or rancour, Elaine Kalman Naves recounts her own painful habitation in scenes of testimonial witnessing as a child. She, too, was "a question child," whose past and present are one insofar as her negotiation of difficult knowledge as a child very much informs her work today. Naves's candid reflections, alongside those of her daughter, Jessica, present a stirring evocation of how the children of survivors may variously experience and symbolize the tribulations of living in the presence of the "uninvited guest" of Holocaust memory, and how symbolic elaboration of that scene enables children to sustain direction and hope.

### The Storyteller and the Question Child

*Journey to Vaja* opens with a simple line whose undeviating directness resonates with Old Testament authority: "In the beginning there was me and my father." It is Budapest in the early 1950s, and a "rotund, middle-aged man and a small, brown-haired girl [pace] hand in hand." The father is telling the little girl a story: "I feel sorry for you because your world starts only with me and Mummy." It is an exemplary beginning, not only to a story but also to a life. The child is Elaine Kalman Naves, and the knowledge put to her by her father is a knowledge that is shaped by what it cannot know. The paradox must be both satisfying and frustrating for the child: for in the absence of history and of historical time decreed by her father, how will the child formulate a vision of herself (who is very much alive in the present) and the world (which is very much alive in her imagination) that is adequate to the place that cannot be fixed or assigned within her father's narrative?

The child becomes a woman and writes *Journey to Vaja*. In this historical "narrative nonfiction" ("fictionalized but not fiction")<sup>2</sup> the storytelling daughter responds to her storytelling father regarding unanswered questions of their shared past. The book pieces together two centuries of Naves's Hungarian Jewish family history. It is the story of the Weinberger family,

who had lived since the 1800s in the remote agricultural village of Vaja in northeastern Hungary, wedged between the Carpathian mountains and the Great Hungarian Plain. In her imaginative rendering of the inner and outer lives of family members, history invades the present without obliterating dignity or hope. The author does not shirk from a wrenching depiction of Holocaust atrocities, where 34 members of her family entered Auschwitz and only one returned. At the same time, *Journey to Vaja* reverberates with vivid accounts of the triumphs and tribulations of the every day. The author explains how the saga of her family, a story of her "ancestors who lived and died in normal ways before the world went mad," came about as the result of a long and painful psychological struggle.

Born in the shadow of the Holocaust in Hungary and a child of survivors, Naves became interested in her family history as a young six-year-old girl. Accompanying the daughter and father on their Sunday strolls around Budapest were the haunting ghosts of Vaja. The little daughter developed a consciousness of that honeyed world that included the knowledge of pain. She speaks of developing a sense of ancient time whose dimensions of obduracy and terminality somehow predated her. At the same time, as her father's testimonies belied the existence of an ancestral past that she could directly claim or understand as her own, his pity in combination with his graphic accounts of this complicated, ambiguous and complex world became determining forces in her ongoing struggle to define herself.

In trying to recall how she became aware of her family's story, Naves says it seems that she always knew without being told that the people she gazed on in the photo albums had died during the war because they were Jewish. What effects did this knowledge have on one so young? Naves confesses to a range of conflicting emotions: a sense of being told too much too soon; of feeling burdened and dispossessed, internally resistant to enlightenment that was not liberating and that inevitably arrived unbidden and at the wrong time. Naves engages in no finger pointing in these revelations, as she works through issues of her painful initiation into Holocaust knowledge. She freely admits that there is no one right way to admit children to its horror. So at the same time as Naves admonishes adults who rob children of emotional freedom by burdening them with too much knowledge, the author reflects on other children of survivors who fault their parents for just the opposite. Having been protected from family stories of atrocity, these children are burdened by expressions of silence, denial, or withdrawal that also say more, and say it more terribly, than knowledge itself can grasp.

Elaine Kalman Naves enlists us to think carefully about the multiple and cumulative effects on children of Shoah narratives and silences. Should Holocaust narratives be told to children? What particular stories should be passed on? Is there a right way to frame the historic and referential aspects of Nazi atrocities? And for "the question child" who persists in her right to

know, is there ever a right moment or a right way for knowledge not to stumble?

As a young adult, the love of history stayed with Naves, but not the love for her father's stories. Struggling internally to free herself from "the terrible baggage of the part of the world [she] came from," she first turned to studying Canadian history at university and eventually worked as a professional historian. Then her daughter was born, and Naves experienced a profound desire to make available to Jessica the story of their personal and collective ancestral past. But how to do so and what to say?

Gusti, her father, was a master storyteller, and became a willing participant in the construction of a legacy. Naves began collecting her father's oral testimony, painstakingly translating the passages from Hungarian to English. Excitement soon turned to anxious doubt. Her desire to record these stories had been to make available to her newborn daughter a rendering of the past. What she was not prepared for was that the effects of the past invade the present, and that the crisis invoked by this shattering of values and world views would have to be met emotionally and creatively in any conjuring of the story of Vaja. There were times of enormous doubt, as, plagued by images of death in her father's re-telling, Naves retreated from the project to ask "[Is] this the legacy I [want] to pass on to my children?" For a time, the author's transcripts, collected in brown, spiral notebooks, gathered dust.

What eventually pushed Naves out of immobility was the arrival of a written article from Israel, describing the history of one prominent branch of her father's family. In her mind, this stranger's historical account validated her efforts to come to acknowledge and symbolize her past. Naves imagined that it was her lost uncle speaking to her through the article, and this fantasy stimulated her in many ways. She was finally able and ready to impose some order on the chaotic legacy of Vaja. "The family had a history and I was a historian," she remembers. From this point on, the young author never turned back. She taped interviews with her now aged and ailing father. She went to Hungary on several occasions and interviewed remaining family relatives and friends. She poured over hundreds of intimate wartime letters, some between loved ones who were never to meet again in this world. And she surrounded herself with photographs of long-ago relatives she never knew. The ultimate requirements of her undertaking demanded that she make a journey to Vaja, and it was at this point that Elaine Kalman Naves began to see the shape of the story that would be her legacy to her children.

As a child, Naves was exposed to the graphic images of death and loss, at the same time as her young imagination was enfolded in the life-sustaining images of Vaja. As a storyteller, she works to incorporate her painful knowledge of human suffering and loss within a larger and gentler story of family relationships built on loyalty, good faith, and humanity. To-

day, Elaine Kalman Naves lives and works as a distinguished writer and literary journalist in Montreal. In addition to her 60-minute radio documentary entitled *Journey to Vaja* for the CBC series, Ideas (1996), Naves's publications include *The Writers of Montreal* (1993), *Other Voices: Essays and Conversations with Montreal's Multicultural Writers* (1997). Projects in progress include *These Storied Streets: A Literary Guided Tour of Montreal* (coauthored with Bryan Demchinsky), *Letters from Budapest* (memoir, a sequel to *Journey to Vaja*), *The Waters of Babylon* (a historical novel), and *Putting Down Roots: Immigrant Writers of Montreal*. Complementing this work are over 200 articles, reviews and fiction pieces that have been published in a variety of periodicals and scholarly journals.

We present now our interview with Elaine Kalman Naves and Jessica Naves, based on conversations with the author and her daughter throughout 1997 and 1998.

**JR:** *Could you reflect on how you first became interested in writing **Journey to Vaja**, and what experiences stand out for you in writing the book?*

**Elaine:** In a real way, I have been writing this book in my head since I was a little kid. I never actually thought that I would be a writer. But, eventually, the thought occurred to me that if I was going to write something, I really did have a story. I write about this experience in the book ... how I have been hearing stories of Vaja and variations on these stories for a long time. Then what happened was that Jessica was born. Her birth made me realize that I had a story to pass on to her, and that if I did not tell this story now then it would be too late, because the people involved in the story would be gone. There would be no one left to ask anymore. There was a sense in me that I'd come from this place and somehow I was connected to it, and here was this little tyke who was never going to know about this place unless I could make it real for her. Now the interesting thing is, if I start to think about it, why should this little tyke know about this place, anyway? You know, what does she have to do with it? But making the story available to her in this way was really the idea behind the book.

I remember saying to my father, would you like to tell me about Vaja? He was really thrilled and I did seven tapes over the summer that Jessica was a toddler. She was about fourteen or fifteen months and we would go to my parents' house on Sundays and spend the day. We would do about an hour of taping. It was a very family kind of thing. There was my daughter fiddling around with the mike ... on some of these early tapes you can actually hear her cooing away in the background. And there was my father, who was a really good storyteller. At first, he was kind of self-conscious and then not at all. Over that summer my brown spiral notebook grew. I actually transcribed those first tapes into Hungarian, which was quite a feat for me. But at that

time I was not really thinking about writing a book. I was just a little older than Jessica is now and I'd done some scholarly publishing. But the Vaja project was not to be like that at all. That story was just to for me to *have*.

What I really wanted was that somehow my daughter would one day hear the stories as my father told them. This was my desire. It was not a very realistic thing and it wasn't completely thought out. By the end of the summer there was a lot of pain. Of course I'd known about the Holocaust, but it was not what I had expected my father to talk about. You have to have known my father. He did not talk about that. He always idealized his family a great deal, and wanted to get the essence of what was important from his background, from his family. So the Holocaust was not what I was thinking I was really going to get. Every once in a while these stories took on the character of something terrible. And that's somewhere that you really didn't think you were going to end up. It was heavy, it was really heavy. And finally it was enough. I just finished it and put the tapes away for many years.

That summer I talked to my aunt Zsuzsi in Toronto. I had one conversation with her about what I had been doing. And then what happened was that the question arose in my mind of how might that story become a book? Several years later along came this letter to my father from his friend Andrés — about whom I write — from Tel Aviv. The letter was accompanied by an anonymous article, having to do with what turned out to be his side of the family, the Weinbergers. That wasn't why I suddenly decided to write a book, but a combination of factors — the letter and my awareness of time passing (I was now 31) — made me realize that this is really something! This is something I could write about.

**JR:** *Jessica, do you have memories of these days with your grandfather?*

**Jessica:** I can't really remember the early days. Although he used to tell stories, they were not in English. He had a stroke when I was probably about eight or nine. After that he hardly spoke English at all. I mostly know my grandfather's stories from the book.

The only recollections I have are from what my mother told me. Her stories are different stories. When I visited Hungary I met a lot of the people who were in the book. And this was before I had actually read the book, so when I read it, it was so much more meaningful. There were also other stories going on at that time because my mother was doing the interviewing for the CBC radio program, *Journey to Vaja* (Ideas).

**JR:** *Do you speak Hungarian?*

**Jessica:** No. Not at all. I can recognize and understand a little bit, but the Hungarian that I had always heard was all mixed with English, so I used to get the gist of what was going on by the few English words that were thrown in.

**JR:** *When you read **Journey to Vaja** after you made the trip to your ancestral home, what did you think about?*

**Jessica:** I discovered that my family had a really important history. I already knew about the Holocaust. It seems like I always knew about the Holocaust. I always had questions. I was curious about it as soon as I learned about it. As a child, I was always reading Holocaust literature, but *Journey to Vaja* allowed me to see there was a life before the Holocaust, and that it was a very different life. In a scary kind of way, if the Holocaust had not happened, I would not be here, because my family members would not have come here. My mother never would have come here and met my father.

**Elaine:** It never would have happened.

**Jessica:** Exactly.

**Elaine:** That's one of the things that I write about in an essay, "The Sister I Never Had."

**Jessica:** And so there was this wonderful life before. My grandfather was a part of a big lovely family and he had many brothers and sisters. The book really opened my eyes and made me realize that I come from a different world. I think everybody has a personal story, everybody has this line that stretches back, and this line cannot be preconceived. But I found it so reassuring that my mother was able to go back and repossess it. My grandfather got sick before I really had a chance to know him. I was young when this happened, so I really only knew him as a sick man. It meant a lot for me to get to know him better, and to get to know the relationships within his family. It was really special as well because my grandmother is still here, and so I have also come to know her in a different way.

**JR:** *What other effects did reading the book have on you?*

**Jessica:** Every chapter produced a different sort of feeling. There was a deep sense of connectedness with these people — but I think that other readers feel that too, so it's not unique. My own experience was a feeling of being connected with the family, but it was really a sort of broadening. My horizon has been broadened by this experience of reading and feeling connected to Vaja. I'm able to write and identify with other people whose families have suffered. The book was really important also because it had to do with me.

**Elaine:** One of the things Jessica said to me after she read *Journey to Vaja* is, "I found these people, and I loved these people right away." But she was not talking about the Holocaust. She was talking about all of the generations. She was talking about my great grandfather Yakab and all the rest. It would not have been possible for her within her life span to ever be acquainted with such individuals. So there was a sense of the passage of time and character. I was very gratified when she said that, because I did not want this book to be only about the Holocaust. That's something that I find difficult. When peo-



ple say it's a book about the Holocaust, it reduces what I am trying to do. Everybody knows that with the Holocaust, we are going to get into heavy stuff. And you think you know what that heavy stuff is going to be. So I wanted to go back before the Holocaust, to the other issues that prevailed before that time.

When Jessica read the book, she said, "There was Yakab and there was Herman, and there were all these people. But now they all are gone." Of course, but they would've been gone anyway! That's life. But I felt that what was interesting was not just the people that you perhaps expected her to know more about, my parents and her parents, but that she found she was learning a lot about an earlier time.

**JR:** *There are many remarkable moments in the book that are compelling and richly drawn. Can you reflect on what moment was the most memorable for you in your journey back to Vaja?*

**Elaine:** There were many, many things, but I guess a lot of it has to do with the people, the people who were still alive when I travelled back, some of whom are no longer alive now. We had left Hungary in 1957, and my husband and I were married in 1968. In 1969 my parents went back for the first time, and they took my sister. My husband and I went independently that year as well. We were going to Europe for four weeks, and we spent a week in Hungary. We returned to Hungary on vacation in 1969. My great uncle Zoltan was still alive then, and I met my cousin Agi as an adult for the first time. Going back on my first research trip in 1983 meant meeting new people and making new acquaintances. I wrote Agi and tracked down another cousin of my grandmother, Uncle Shumi, who was in his late eighties by then. I had not met him before. I was going to be introduced to him. Shumi had written down a lot of his memories earlier, and before I went, I read in Hungarian his recollections. There was a lot of that that did not end up making it into the final version of the book. For example, the story of Samuel's Sukka was in the book originally, but it had to go. Now a lot of that stuff came from Uncle Shumi, so meeting him was a tremendous highlight.

What I found troubling was the idea that I was going to have to tape those people and that they would be burdened by memories. I felt that I was imposing on them so much. Consequently, it was really a mind-blowing thing for me that they welcomed me and thought the project was wonderful. Not only did they think it was wonderful to try to capture those memories, but that I was going to try to write a book. Remember that at that point it was just an idea. I was going to try to write a book. There was nothing automatic about it. But my aunts and uncles and cousins loved talking about the possibility. And it was so rich, the talking about it.

I want to comment also on the interviewing process, what it is like to ask people questions. Sometimes they just don't know how to respond, or

they can't express themselves. It's not an automatic thing that you are going to interview somebody and find that there is a gold mine. I have to say that I have had some of those experiences, too, when you draw an absolute blank. There can be many factors at play. Perhaps the person is not into it, or the person is not articulate, or the person has forgotten, or it's not very important to the person. Such difficulties arise in oral testimony. But it was absolutely not my experience for the most part. I found that inside each of these people was a world and that these worlds complemented each other. Or sometimes they contradicted each other. But their story worlds enriched each other's immeasurably.

Now one of the people who reviewed *Journey to Vaja* said that I don't evaluate the information. That I take at face value what people tell me. I do not believe this to be true. At the same time, perhaps I don't make my methodology explicit enough in the book. Certainly, I weighed the recollections of my interviewees very closely. What I found perhaps was that two people out of three would have one sort of take on a particular character. But then the third person's take would colour my view. Now, in writing the book, I did not feel it was necessary to burden the reader with all those details related to my evaluation of the oral evidence. There were all sorts of things that I was finding out about their worlds, and about the world itself, that were not all that wonderful. That was a very big thing for me. My father's presentation of this world was not necessarily the way that I would view it. It was not the way that I would view it, first of all, because of my sensibility from a later generation, second as a woman, and third as someone who was not brought up in a religiously orthodox environment. I wanted to mirror back that world: a very complicated and ambiguous and complex kind of world, of which you could not wholeheartedly and necessarily approve. At the same time, you could probably say that of any time and place. So, it was personally broadening in this respect; I was being expanded by this experience all along. I was being broadened by the personal contacts, by the actual people, by my connection with Hungary, and by other people now whom I have come to know who are not family, but with whom I have connected as a by-product of the book. It's been a big life experience.

**JR:** *Jessica, this life experience of Vaja and your mother's storytelling, how has it touched your formation as a teacher? How do you think coming from this family and having such a special knowledge about your family connects with the way you teach?*

**Jessica:** I come from a family of writers. Not only is my mother a writer, but my aunt is a writer, and my uncle is in publishing. Even I have had an article published in the newspaper. These things have really made me value the importance of written communication; of reading and writing. And so these are the kinds of knowledge that I would strongly value in my teaching. I think that teaching literature, not just popular literature, but any kind of

literature is important. Creative writing would be a strong part of my program. In my teaching of reading and writing, I would definitely bring in historical models.

I would introduce students to Holocaust literature. Of course, such decisions depend on what group of students I have and what their backgrounds are. I know that it's not so easy to teach about the Holocaust to people who don't know anything about it. What's really hard is that there is no way I could ever transmit all the things I know about the Holocaust, not even if I had 50 years! The event and my knowledge of it are things that have been ingrained in me partly because of where I live, and of who my relatives are, but also because of who I am, and what I choose to read and to think about. I can't make those choices for my students. The only thing I can do is to provide them with questions, and open them up to different things, different time periods, different events, all the different ways of life. But learning about the Holocaust is something that I value, and I would probably include lessons about the Holocaust every year in some form, depending on the group of students and the kinds of classroom activities I'm doing. I would bring it in in a way that would be meaningful to them. In this way, it is always going to be distinct because it has personal meaning for them. I believe that students have to be open in order to make the personal connection with what the event is and who they are.

I taught a lesson in my teacher preparation year about the Holocaust. I had one day only to teach the lesson because I was in the classroom for only a week. I wondered about how to make the Holocaust meaningful to them. Most of the children were immigrants. You can't start by just telling them, so what I did instead was to make the connection to myself. I connected the Holocaust with my grandmother, and then I was able to talk a little bit about my personal knowledge. That was the way that I was able to reach them and even though I didn't really have much time, I found the response was very positive.

**Elaine:** They sent all these wonderful letters to my mother.

**Jessica:** I started off by telling them I was going to read them a story about a Jewish girl. In trying to imagine this character, they came up with all the usual stereotypes that are supposed to typify Jews. So I explained to them that a Jewish person could look just like anybody else, and the reasons why a person doesn't "look" Jewish. I told them I was going to read about a girl named Anne Frank. I had a story that would tell her experiences: how she was placed in a concentration camp; how a lot of different people went to the concentration camp; and how my grandmother was one of these people. I explained that my grandmother went to the camp called Auschwitz and that there were many sad things done to Jewish people there. I explained that there were other times and places when bad things were done to other peo-

ple in other countries. We had a long question-and-answer period because they had so many questions. Some of the questions were right on. They really tried to make sense of it. I made some reference to the fact my grandmother was still alive. Then I suggested that they write a letter to my grandmother and ask her any other questions they might have, and tell her what they were thinking about.

We were also at the same time talking about Remembrance Day. They would have been watching films about the Second World War. So I said that the Holocaust was something else that was happening at the same time. They were watching films about the Canadians in World War Two. I told them that there were different things that happened in this time period, not just the events being highlighted in the films. I was always looking for the opportunity to teach about the Holocaust.

**Elaine:** I remember I had a long distance phone call with you at the time. I asked you why you felt you had to teach that. I said, "Why? You are here for a week. You don't have to bring the Holocaust into everything. It is going to be Remembrance Day, that's okay. You don't have to bring the Holocaust into it." It's not like I have to tell her about what she should or should not be teaching, but I thought, "Why bring it into everything?" But I guess that's what she means to do because it's very important to her.

**Jessica:** I found teaching that class so compelling. This is probably because it was connected so deeply with me, and it is important to me that other kids connect with it. I wanted to make it meaningful to those kids at the time. When I was young, I was always thinking that such a thing would not happen. It could not happen, this thing won't happen to me. Then I learned that it did happen to my grandmother.

**Elaine:** What interests me is what Jessica said about how she always knew about the Holocaust. Now, it's clear to me that I always knew about the Holocaust. But I made a very conscious effort *not* to tell my kids about the Holocaust for a long time. It was an issue for me about when it would be okay to tell them and in what way to tell them. I was thinking about this last night in preparation for the interview today. I was thinking, "What did I actually do?"

Now the problem is that I can't remember exactly. I only know that telling about it was very much an issue. It was something that my sister and I spoke about a lot. We discussed what was desirable in terms of telling the story to our children. Consequently, it's interesting to me that Jessica should say that she always knew about the Holocaust. And it makes me realize that I, too, can't remember when I first found out about the Holocaust.

My sister, who is six years younger than I am, was eight when she learned about it. A cousin of my father came to visit from New York. This cousin had left Europe as a young man just after Belgium was occupied. He

found his way to Havana and eventually to New York, where he and my father were reunited for the first time. There, this uncle of mine, cousin of my father, met my mother, who is a very extroverted person, and whose story was very different from theirs. My mother had been at a concentration camp, whereas my father hadn't. During my cousin's visit out came the whole story of what had happened to her in very graphic detail. And there was this little eight-year-old kid — my sister — listening and finding out what happened to her mother, the totality of the experience, at the age of eight. I was fourteen.

I don't remember this incident — my sister remembers it, and has told me about it, and it did have the effect of blowing my mind away at the time. This is because I had heard my mother telling about her war experiences many many times. Something would trigger her. Something would get her going, and out would come some facet, some incredibly awful facet of something or other, with her outpouring. I don't remember there ever being a first time. The most I can remember is my father's stories, as I write about in *Journey to Vaja*. But the context for Vaja was almost biblical in the sense that it was not about atrocities, but about long ago. Somehow you knew that these people were gone. They had gone down into some fearful black hole. I know that I always knew about this terrible thing.

**Jessica:** For whatever reason, Grandma does not have these graphic outbursts in front of me. I never heard her say what happened to her. Never. Not even when I had a project for Hebrew school on the Holocaust. I always asked, and she would say nothing. Nothing. I wanted from day one to know exactly what happened to her. I would not be satisfied until she told me everything. She gave me a few highlights: the potatoes, how they shared the potatoes. I was always curious and maybe that was what made me keep working to know, because I was not getting the essence of understanding that I wanted from her.

**Elaine:** In terms of my mother's story, you have to bear in mind the events of the war in Hungary. The significant event for them was March 19th, 1944. The Holocaust and the war in Hungary came at a very late date. My mother was in Auschwitz. The state of my mother was not the same as that of some other prisoners of Auschwitz, because she was there for four to six weeks. From there she was shipped to several different work camps in Germany. She was in many places in Germany, and under conditions sometimes that were horrific. Germany was being bombed and Jews like my mother were also getting it, because they were doing skilled work in ammunition factories. That was how she lost one of her sisters. But they were not always badly treated under those circumstances. Of course they were on a forced march towards the end, which was horrendous. They experienced bombing attacks and just terrible things. Even though they were no longer in Auschwitz, it did not mean that they were out of danger. In fact, they were sometimes in the

most dangerous situations at the very end of the war. At that time, she and one of my aunts were together, but they lost cousins and their sister.

So now, it is in the totality of her experience. For example, perhaps we will be talking about a graduation, and up comes the story of my mother's graduation from teacher's college. (Jessica comes from a long line of teachers.) But the circumstances of my mother's graduation from teacher's college are that right after war had been declared, she went to write her examinations in a Czechoslovakian city. Then war was declared and she had to come home. It was then that she found herself snared in the most harrowing journey. What happens now is that — we're sitting here having a happy celebration — and she is reminded of this experience. And I find I can't take it. I just can't take it. I can't take it that it's coming up now in what should be a happy unshadowed moment. But it doesn't bother my daughters in the same way.

**Jessica:** It doesn't bother me because I'm aware that it's always been like that. Probably she came out with these stories before I was seven. That is why I know about it. Little kids pick up on these things. I think that's what I mean when I say I always knew about it. In these instances there is always some unspoken something. The child asks, "Why is this person here and not another person?" A child picks up on these missing things, why some people are not coming to this occasion. You get some sort of answer, but there is always a bigger story behind it.

**JR:** *Jessica's reflections relate to the question of passing on intergenerational tales of trauma. Elaine, can you talk a little bit more about your desire to protect your children from the pain of the truth of the Holocaust? What appears to me to be an incongruity here is that your daughter is not expressing such a fragility or reluctance to listen as you perhaps would have anticipated.*

**Elaine:** I think it's wonderful if my daughters are not fragile in this respect, because it means that somehow the way that we have gone about teaching them is valid. What I mean is that our telling and their learning about the Holocaust is not the only thing in their upbringing. Helen Epstein and other people who have written about growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust present examples of how this event was not talked about in their family. (Epstein is the author of the seminal work, *Children of the Holocaust*.) I think this is the experience of at least a significant and perhaps a majority portion of children of survivors. The crisis of the Holocaust is in the background and unspoken. It's not talked about in the family. I greatly admire Epstein's work. If I recall the image correctly from *Children of the Holocaust*, for her the Holocaust was like a black box in the back of her head. And she carried this black box around with her always. What made it so burdensome was the double weight of her awareness and the unspokenness of it.

This was not the case in my family of origin. In my experience, the Holocaust was always there. It was there like a guest at the dinner table. That

sense of someone present at the dinner table remains for me a very significant kind of image. One of the ways in which my family observed the holidays was for my parents to say, "We are just a pale reflection of what was." Every pore of my mother would say this ... how we celebrated Purim *then*, how many people would be at the table and so on. And this would be in a context of not a table by today's standards, because by now our family has enlarged, but a table at which only the four of us were sitting. At these times there was this sense of great loss, even though we are not talking about atrocities here at all. And I grew up with this lasting sense of loss. According to my sister, who has thought a lot about these things, too, and who writes about them in a very wonderful way, we *knew* too much. Whereas for Epstein, the knowledge burdens because it is unspoken, for my sister and me it was just there. But it was knowledge that was there at the same time without being totally complete.

What I'm trying to say here is that there is somehow the feeling in what I have read that if only we could figure out the right way of teaching the Holocaust, it would be all okay. But the problem here is that there is no kind of hidden access route to the truth of the Holocaust. There is no key that permits easy entry. There is no way of teaching it that is going to be okay, because it is not okay. It is sick and terrible. And a lot of trouble today stems from the fact that we all live, whether we are aware of it or not, in a world that followed this event, shades of which keep on happening.

I don't want to relativize what happened in the Holocaust. Nor do I wish to present other events as shades or reflections or distortions. There was only one thing like the Holocaust, and we all live in the world in which that happened. Families that came out of it are going to feel it all that much more. Thus, in retrospect, there is no way that my parents could have done a better job, because there is no way that we could *not* have known too much. Or — in the case of Epstein — there is no way that her parents could have done a better job so that she could have known enough. There really is no right way in which I could pass this knowledge on to my children.

So the feeling of ambivalence is there for me. On the one hand, you say, "Forget it, okay? I don't want my kids to know about this." Or, "I don't want my kids to find out about it because I don't want their world to be made insecure by that." On the other hand, I do want my kids to know about it. Still, I ask: "Do they have to know everything that happened? Do they have to know about it from me? How much do they have to know? And how active do I have to be in this knowledge?" The ambivalence is there for me. I don't want my kids to be overburdened, like I was. On the other hand, the very reason for writing *Journey to Vaja* was that I do want my kids to know. I want my kids to know.

Above all, I just want my kids to know some of the richness, of which

I didn't have a very strong sense myself. I had a good glimmering of that richness early on, but only a glimmering. I had not yet done all the research. I wanted them to know, but I did not want them to have to bear the legacy of that. I never wanted them to hear the very graphic account. Nor did I want to take them to where my father took me when I was 25 or 26, to the concentration camp at Buchenwald, to learn what had happened to his brother over there. Was this necessary, I wonder? And if it was necessary to make this journey with my daughters, what was it going to do to them?

As it turns out, they are not as fragile as I feared. They are also more removed from it, and that's good, it's okay. Somebody in a radio interview once asked me, "When you have grandchildren, and they ask you questions about where they come from, what are you going to tell them about Vaja?" He was really flabbergasted when I said, "I don't know that I'm going to tell them anything about Vaja." So the question is, "Why not?" It's not that I am telling you that I won't tell them. If they ask me about it, I will tell them. But I don't see it anymore in the sense that I must now pass on and continue to pass on everything that I have learned to the next generation and the generation after that. I wrote *Journey to Vaja* in order that people could know about that place and time if they wanted to. But it's also up to them to find out, not just me to tell.

**JR:** *Obviously it's very difficult because there is an impulse to protect at the same time as to augment children's learning, to give them what is rightfully and personally theirs and at the same time not a preconceived knowledge of where they come from. Was Jessica's curiosity or her desire to know cumbersome to you?*

**Elaine:** Well, earlier I joked about the fact that she goes up to teach for one week in Ottawa, and I say, "Maybe you're getting over your head here. Do you really need to do this work on the Holocaust?" I remember being in Israel in 1992. The whole family went to visit Jessica, who was on a work-study programme. My husband and I went on a bus tour of Jerusalem in one day, and we visited Yad Vashem, the greatest of the memorials to the Holocaust, and other places. It was not enough for me. And one day afterwards I went by myself and took it all in. I saw some books. There were a couple, or at least one that had to do with the Holocaust in Hungary. And so I bought it for her. I still haven't read that book. But Jessica has an insatiable appetite for survivor's stories.

### **Postscript to the Interview: Reflections on Children's Formulation of Difficult Knowledge**

Elaine Kalman Naves and Jessica Naves address a problem that is fundamental to the concerns of contemporary education. That is, how to communicate knowledge that can only exist outside what is knowable about the Holocaust, and how to deal educatively as teachers and parents with "the ques-



tion child." In their struggles to find ways of answering these implicit questions, several important ideas emerge about the strategies children use, and the dynamics at work that enable them to sustain creativity and hope.

Elaine Kalman Naves's account of her parents' stories remind us that the survivors of trauma are at perpetual war with shadows that invade the present. The survivor of Holocaust atrocities insists on being heard. In this case, the survivor refers not only to Naves's mother, who was a prisoner at Auschwitz in 1944, and her father who narrowly escaped Nazi incarceration and death, but also the children of survivors, and their children. The problem that Naves forces us to consider is that, for the child listener (even as an adult) what may be given in the passing down of stories is knowledge of something that they themselves (both teller and listener) cannot bear to know. Naves describes her mother's recourse to re-tellings, and the painful effects that these moments continue to have on experiences of joy and celebration in the present. In describing such scenes, Naves directs the attention of educators to the ways in which Holocaust narratives may be experienced by children as untimely or unwelcome in the sense of always arriving on the scene unbidden and uninvited. In so doing, she implicitly reminds us that the wish to "enlighten" the child with knowledge, as a way of freeing her from the inhibiting power of myth or silence, has to give way to the fact that children may have internal resistances to knowledge that "says more" than knowledge itself can grasp. A central idea here is that adult attentiveness to and care with the implications and effects of knowledge needs to be forged with an understanding that the truth that one wants one's child to know cannot replace its unconscious effects.

Ora Avni has written that the cumulative effect of Shoah narratives determines the linguistic and cognitive tools available to listeners. Initiating children into knowledge of horror through stories imposes on their experience referents that must be appropriated — but the effect may be to invade the space of the listener's subjectivity, or to rob the child of what was previously his or her own experience or fantasy. Avni cautions that the listener "would thus be projected outside his own life narrative into a different one, shared by his community; but one in which he would play a role at which he balks (since it exceeds his fantasies) and, more importantly, into one in which he could no longer recognize himself or his fantasy" (208). It is her painful experience of such unintended symbolic violence and interpersonal wrenching that leads Naves to use deliberate caution and care in her own approach to teaching her children.

Does this danger, then, point to the prohibition of Holocaust knowledge as an educational ideal for "the question child?" Both the example of her own accomplishment as a creative artist, and Naves's own candid struggles around the question of what to tell her daughters should lead us to be suspicious of the outright repression of knowledge as an educational ideal.

At the same time, Naves's personal life history as a writer seems to suggest ways in which, in her own case, simultaneous to hearing the unwanted story, the child listener managed to incorporate (into her mind, imaginatively) a vision of life that unequivocally included knowledge of death, suffering, and loss.

In trying to imagine how this achievement was made, one might speculate that unconsciously and without being able to give words to the experience, as a child Naves annexed onto herself a sense of that tragically absent/perpetually present dinner guest with whom she was personally and irremediably connected. Naves's naming of this presence in her life stands as a remarkable symbolization of the unthinkable. It appears clear that she incorporated its presence from a very young age and this experience profoundly shaped her thinking. Her identity as a writer (what she chooses to write about and how) is in part directly constituted in relation to the intensely relevant company of those absent others, her community. Not elaborated on by Naves, but evident in her story is her need to work through this childhood experience (in the sense of framing the uninvited guest in a way that makes sense to who she is). *Journey to Vaja* shows her doing so in a way that enables her to make the story not only psychically comprehensible, bearable, and symbolically real to herself, but in a way that may somehow effect a congruence with what her own parents, both Holocaust survivors, knew and know.

But Naves also refers to the threat of disintegration that doing this work of self-definition produced as she learned to give story form to ancestral testimonies. The author makes painfully clear how in the long seasons of narrativization (begun in childhood, and brought to fruition with the birth of her own daughter), she experiences insupportable periods of breakdown. Part of the terrible isolation she feels has to do with her premonition that the story she formulates must be personal, not general. In other words, the estate of Vaja to which her father (in spite of all his stories) was unable to hand her an access key is hers and hers alone. In this way, the storyteller reminds us that her own telling and passing down of the tale must differ from the tellings of her father or mother. The experience of bringing to birth *Journey to Vaja* marks Elaine Kalman Naves distinctively and is her distinctive mark of entry into her ancestral community, the historical absent of her childhood.

Naves's explicit desire to recuperate a history and a sphere of experience that would be otherwise unavailable gains heady urgency with the birth of her first daughter. In order to bring her ancestors into attendance within her daughter's life, it is necessary for her to conjure their lives and their presence before that defining moment in which they disappeared into the "black hole" of the Holocaust. What the author seeks to repossess through symbolization and narration are all the temporal complexities of their lives: moments of eating and worshipping and giving birth and dying and mak-

ing wills and making love and organizing their days in all the myriad small and complicated and imperfect and absolutely real ways that human beings do.

This process of giving a narrative account that may also serve as a form of identification and reassurance for her daughter, Jessica, provides Naves with a life-enhancing sense of strength. *Journey to Vaja* stands as her creative and courageous response to all of those unpresent others who were incongruously both available and unavailable in childhood. The author pinpoints as her authoritative accomplishment the fact that through the book, her own children may be enabled. They can meet and love their ancestors through story form, and not just or only through the legacy of their loss. In terms of the passing down of intergenerational tales of trauma, the measure of the author's accomplishment is in her belief that what she has made possible is a knowledge that was not hers to possess as a child, but that may gestate hope and a sense of connection for her daughters. In this way, as Jessica clearly attests through her own insatiable desire for survivor stories and her incorporation of Holocaust study into her work as a teacher, the author-mother has met the demands of "the question child" in a way that makes knowledge available to her in a way that does not simply burden her with the tragic dimensions of loss or death.

Throughout these discussions, Naves presents a mixed canvas of thoughts and insights on pedagogy. In response to questions of how to support children's learning about the Holocaust, she expresses strong ambivalence about how to tell the story; emphasizing above all that there is no access key to the horror of the Holocaust. Naves anticipates and dreads the ease with which attempts to convey the meaning or knowledge of the Holocaust may be badly met by excessive distrust, easy empathy, resentment, voyeuristic obsession, impatience with pain, indiscriminating identification, or trivialization based on comparison.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite these potential obstacles, she echoes Elie Wiesel and others in her belief that the reality of the occurrence of the Holocaust in the world continues to cast a long shadow over the historical imperatives of the present. While she appears clear in her admonition that such shadows need to be integrated, she forewarns that children's own appetite for knowledge must direct the stage on which response is formulated. Elaine Kalman Naves expresses satisfaction that *Journey to Vaja* has enabled her to illumine some rich dimensions of the much larger story of Jewish history, identity, and memory.

The final remarkable feature of this narrative is that this long line of storytellers and teachers has produced a daughter, Jessica, who is insatiable in her desire to make Holocaust education a part of her educational work and legacy. The task of building a house through words then continues, as the granddaughter actively seeks out her grandmother survivor's knowledge, only to be met, curiously and unpredictably, by something that feels

like never enough. Like *Journey to Vaja*, Jessica Naves stands as evidence that it is possible to structure a fantasy life in which what gets cultivated is a sense of self that is not bathed in hopelessness.

## Notes

We are grateful to Jessica Naves whose compelling presence in PED 1140 (Language Arts in the Primary/Junior Divisions) at the University of Ottawa provided initial inspiration for the article.

- 1 We have borrowed the term "the question child" from an essay by J.-B. Pontalis (translated by Catherine and Phillip Cullen in Phillips and Stonebridge, Eds., 1998, 81-90). Pontalis introduces the term in the essay "Between Knowledge and Phantasy," which was published in *Frontiers of Psychoanalysis*, a translation of *Entre la rêve et la douleur*. In the essay Pontalis presents his reading of Melanie Klein's theorization of children's learning, in which she deals with the question of "what holds the child back" with reflections on the internal resistances children bring to bear on "enlightenment." Our use of the term is meant to draw attention to the idea that "the question child" utilizes life-enabling defences within the mental processes that assist him or her in managing and negotiating difficult or traumatic knowledge. One of these defensive mechanisms is the creative process of symbolization. We build on this notion later in our article by elaborating some ways in which Elaine Kalman Naves (a question child) utilized processes of symbolization to integrate knowledge of ancestral loss.
- 2 Elaine Kalman Naves is often asked to characterize the genre form of *Journey to Vaja*. For example, is it a historical account? An autobiography? A memoir? Is it fiction or nonfiction? The terms we employ here are those used by the author herself in a public reading of her work at the National Library of Canada, Ottawa, April 3, 1997.
- 3 See Schoenfeld (1998) for a discussion of the "Grievous ... offenses committed by the new 'Holocaustologists' against the memory of Europe's murdered Jews."

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