

Telling the Stories of Life: A Mother's Memories, A Daughter's Reflection

• Sylvia Solomon •

Résumé: Selon le Dr Solomon, les enfants doivent apprendre, dès leur plus jeune âge, que le monde est un lieu sécuritaire baignant dans l'amour. Les récits de la Shoah font prendre conscience de ce qu'il peut être lorsque le Mal domine. S'appuyant sur son expérience d'enfant nourri de tels récits, l'auteur insiste sur la nécessité de mettre en valeur les aspects positifs de la vie des êtres chers qui ont péri dans la Shoah plutôt que s'attarder à l'horreur de leurs derniers jours.

Summary: Children need to learn, in their early years, that the world is a place of safety and of love. They need to learn to trust others and to believe that good things are in store for them. The stories of the Holocaust are illustrations of what the world looks like when evil dominates. From her personal experience growing up hearing Holocaust tales, Dr. Solomon makes a case for focusing on the goodness of the lives and spirits of those who once lived rather than the horror of the ways in which they died.

I never walk alone.
Beside me I can feel
the presence and the absence.
Around me I can always hear
the cries and the whispers,
the tortured voices
calling out to me ...
'Don't forget that we are here.
Don't forget that we are gone.
Don't forget
you never
walk alone.'

Sometimes at night my mother sits beside me on the living room couch and tells me stories about her childhood. My friends only get stories from books, stories about make-believe lands, stories with pictures and animals that talk and sweet children with golden hair who are almost always loved. My stories aren't written in books; they come from my mother's memory and from her heart; they are filled with strange names and strange places and they are told slowly and quietly.

Once upon a time, in a country far away, in a small city, a child named Rose lived a peaceful and happy life. She lived with her mother Alta, her father Mordechai, her sister Golda, and her grandmother whose name I never knew. Life was simple and life was pleasant. Her life was not too different from mine. Rose went to school, she played with other children who lived nearby, she shared her sandwiches at lunchtime with her friends. In the morning her mother would brush her hair and put it into a long, dark brown braid. Sometimes she would go to the park in the evening and her mother would sit and watch her play with her friends. Sometimes they would go to the market and buy fruits and vegetables. Sometimes they went to visit their relatives, and she would play with little baby Zena, her cousin.

And then one day it all changed. "You have three hours to be out of town" the Nazi soldiers told them. And so they gathered what they could and began to walk.

On the way out of town they had to cross a bridge. On either side of the bridge the soldiers who had told them that they had to leave were standing with guns and playing a game — they were shooting at the people as they walked across the bridge. Rose, her mother, her sister and her father stood around her grandmother, placing her in the middle of their circle to protect her as they walked. Slowly they walked across the bridge, never going faster than her old grandmother could walk. When they were safely on the other side of the bridge, Rose looked back to the town where she was born, the streets that she had played in — but with people crying and dying it just didn't look the same any more. And so life went.

They wandered from place to place. Sometimes they found food to eat, and sometimes they went to sleep very, very hungry. Sometimes they slept in the forest, and sometimes they spent the night hiding because they were being hunted. Sometimes people were shot at, sometimes people were chased by vicious dogs, and sometimes they were pushed onto trains and disappeared.

Most of Rose's friends disappeared. Years later, when the war was over, Rose found out what had happened to them. They had been carried, in those crowded trains, to death camps where they were tortured and killed. They had to stand for hours in the cold, until their feet were frozen and their

tears formed beads of ice on their faces. Children were taken from their mothers and thrown away — tossed into fields and tossed over walls and tossed into the air so that soldiers could shoot at them.

Stop! Please don't tell me more. Stop! I'm only a small child, and I just can't hear your stories. I can't hear them because they trap me. You are my mother, and I know that you would never tell me a lie; that you wouldn't make things up and tell me that they were true. You are my mother, and I know that I can trust you.

I am a child. I can't believe that people would torture and kill each other as a game, for fun. I can't believe that babies could be thrown away, that my best friend would lead killers to me, that everything good and safe in life could be torn away in a minute. I have to believe that the world is a safe place, that there are people I can trust and things that I can count on. I have to believe that people are good and that they care for each other.

I am trapped. If my mother is telling me the truth, and people are good, then what part of this story am I misunderstanding? What is wrong with me, that I can't find the key to these tales, that I can't make sense of this? Or is it the words? Perhaps they are to blame. Yes! That's the answer. It's not my mother that I can't trust, it's words. It's not people I can't trust, it's words. Maybe it's words. Maybe it's me. Maybe it's you.

Even believing that the problem is in the words — easier than believing that the problem is you or me — what do these stories leave me with? Years of thinking that all Germans are Nazis, that all Poles are evil, that secretly everyone wants to kill all Jews. Years of struggling not to hate. Years of believing that at any moment everything I love and value will be torn away from me. Years of nightmares. Years of ghosts.

Please wait with these stories. Please wait until I know for sure that life is filled with joy, that people can be trusted, that I don't need to be afraid of the dark or of the neighbours. Please wait with these stories until I know for sure that life is an adventure full of good people and happy moments. Please wait with these stories until I am strong enough to hear them.

What can you tell me about the aunts and uncles and grandparents who are missing? You can tell me stories about their lives — tell me what they did for fun, tell me about their favourite songs and their early loves and their hopes and their dreams. Tell me about the fun that they had. Make them come alive — not as tortured victims but as thriving, loving men and women. Make them into real people in real places, instead of ghosts and shadows. Help me to see them, and to hear them, and to love them. Help me to feel proud that they came before me. Tell me stories so that I know that they would love me, and hug me, and tell me stories and make me laugh if only

they were here. Help me feel the love that was taken away with their lives.
Save the stories of their deaths until I am sure, until I am safe, until I am older.

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Beside me I can feel
the presence and the absence.
Around me I can hear
the laughter and the whispers,
the loving voices
calling out to me ...
'Don't forget that we are here.
Don't forget that we are gone.
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