

Essay: Return from Exile: An Intergenerational Journey through the Lives of Child Survivors

• André Stein •

Résumé: Dans cet article, André Stein s'exprime en tant que psychothérapeute et survivant de la Shoah; il examine, de l'enfance à la vieillesse, l'évolution psychologique des enfants juifs ayant vécu dans la clandestinité durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale.

Summary: In this essay, André Stein writes as both a psychotherapist and a Holocaust survivor, offering us insights into the psychological lives of hidden children in their roles as siblings, children, parents, spouses, and grandparents.

Infantilized Adults: The Phenomenon of Reversal Care

During the first half of the '40s there came a day in the life of every European Jewish person under the age of sixteen when he or she woke up knowing with the visceral wisdom of endangered children that life as they had known it was for ever gone. What was going to replace it? We did not know. It was impossible to know, for that version of knowledge was not within the emotional means of a child. You cannot tell children that there is a law against their staying alive just because they were born Jewish and expect them to stay innocent, not as the opposite of guilty but as the antithesis of pure. Children marked for extinction become contaminated with inappropriate death, where the adjective "inappropriate" is most certainly redundant.

Imagine that you are the mother or the father of such a Jewish child in Amsterdam, Warsaw or Budapest in the early 1940s. To a greater or lesser degree, you have already been introduced to the idea of an impending doom for Jews. You either did not or could not believe that anything dramatically

untoward could happen to ordinary, peace-loving, god-fearing (or at least god-tolerating) simple folks in the most civilized and cultured time and space of human history. Yet, intuitively or otherwise, you cannot totally chase the threatening clouds from your mind. What if madness will abscond with serenity? What if indeed, hateful adults grow hungry for the blood of Jewish children, their children? MY children? Imagine such deliberations whispered under the cloak of every night's darkness in countless Jewish bedrooms throughout Europe. What if... What if they will really kill every Jew in Europe: our neighbours, our friends, our parents, our children, me? A nocturnal diet of such hallucinatory deliberations ends up reducing otherwise competent adults to the vulnerability of young children.

In other words, the parents of the eventual child survivors of the Holocaust one day discovered that, for the first time since childhood, they feared and trembled before forces that were too vast to confront with ordinary resources. They needed extraordinary powers to face the enemy of life. Instead, they had been drained of the customary competence required to face the human monster. Can we say safely and responsibly, with Bruno Bettelheim, that these overwrought, bewildered and often demoralized Jewish parents regressed to an infantile state without dishonouring them?

And the children knew that their parents had lost their magical powers and had become sort of children. Mom and dad were scared a lot, they cried a lot, and later, others, often total strangers, were telling them what to do and they had no choice but to do as they were told. Their children's version of the Jewish Question was, "what is it about being Jewish that converts strong, scary but loving parents into terrified childlike creatures, and what is it about being a Jewish child that would have earned us the fate of getting evicted from life as we knew it, or just life itself?"

Many European Jewish children in those days and those places tormented themselves with such questions. The answer: a slap in the face by the hostile night. I know it. I was one of them. In a very real sense, I am still and will always be one of them. The Nazis had marched us out of our lives between 1940 and 1945; by doing so, they made sure that we are never rid of our newly-constructed identity: child survivor of the Holocaust. Mark my words, I am not complaining; it would be in bad taste in the context of 1.5 million graveless Jewish children whose unburied spirits are still hovering over the killing fields, our livingrooms. Yes, I was one of the lucky ones. Which until recently meant this: stay silent, take care of your poor parents and other adults who are overwhelmed with what they have to face for themselves, for you. Don't pay attention to your fear; you are just a child, you don't count. Or as Ada, one of the child survivors I have written about in my *Hidden Children: Forgotten Survivors of the Holocaust* said, "I wanted to trade my life for my mother's life. She was an adult, I was just a six-year-old Jewish child, I was nothing."

Without realizing it, many of the children slipped into a reversal care mode. Silently, we took care of our overwhelmed parents by hiding from them our fears, our needs, our pains, and all too often, our laughter and playfulness. "What also vanished was the smile on the adults' faces. And little by little, we the children, stopped playing as if daily existence had become a continuous funeral waiting for worse to come. The adults whispered feverishly uttered words at night. Every night. The children learned to whisper without even being told. We were stunned to silence. None of us ever cried" (*Broken Silence* 3). Or in the words of my sister, Agi, "The adults were always either silent or whispering. I thought they had something to hide. This was awful. It was so terrible to be a child, especially when the grown ups seemed to be in trouble. They didn't know how to reassure us. There was no one I could turn to. I just had to be quiet and hope that mother would notice that I, too, was in trouble. I could have faked being sick, that always worked for attention. But somehow I didn't think that would have been right those days. Mother was so sad looking that I couldn't trick her" (personal communication).

Fabricating the Right Lie

According to many of the adult survivors who returned from the hell of the Holocaust landscape, the very young weathered the atrocities of a life beyond abandonment and betrayal with few or no scars. Some helping professionals gave their support to this spurious optimism. My clinical work does not seem to support these claims. Neither does the work of Drs. Judith and Milton Kestenberg, foremost clinical and epidemiological researchers in the area of child survival. This is an excessively optimistic perspective that the much-abused adult survivors adopted to alleviate their guilt for having left the little ones behind (as if most of the time they had a choice!). Paraphrasing Primo Levi, when we cannot live with the wrong truth, we fabricate the right lie, one that permits us to go on living with the image of ourselves that is indispensable to remain self same. For an alumna of Auschwitz, it is a life-sustaining necessity to think that her child is not only alive but that what she lived through was well within the confines of life appropriate for her small child. For a torture victim who had survived a daily diet of beatings, starvations and deprivations, to learn that his tiny son has lived through the atrocities without anyone stealing the sun from his soul was essential to be able to abandon himself to the grief over his private tragedy. And the children, even the very young, came through for these returning strangers in whom they often didn't recognize their mom or dad for they were too young to remember them from before. The little ones sensed what was required of them without being told. In those days, Jewish children learned fast and the very young learned very fast what they had to do to survive.

Domesticating Trauma

The price was onerous for the little ones with their meagre inner resources. The older children, say seven years or older, had greater cognitive awareness and a larger repertoire of experiences and memories from the pre-Holocaust version of their young lives. On the other hand, three- and four-year-olds went through the mimicry of what they sensed was good for them, or was expected of them. But, most often, they didn't know what was happening to them for they had neither a previous stock of knowledge, nor an already grounded optimism and trust in the benevolence and power of their parents. I am reminded of little Robbie hidden in The Hague by a Christian family who afforded to the young boy the best possible care. But, because they were not his parents, and because those were not ordinary times, Robbie, at two and a half, was keenly aware of having to take care of his foster parents lest they threw him out. Thus, he kept to himself his bewilderment over his captivity. For at age two and a half he was a captive: "Trips to a playground, promenades in the street, for that matter, outings of any kind, were out of the question ..." Yet despite the restrictions, Robbie seemed at peace with the world. At his age, he was too young to understand his situation." But he was not too young to sense that there was something profoundly wrong with his life, that there was something extraordinary about who he was because, hidden behind a curtain, he could see across the street children of his age playing freely in the park. As Robert Krell, today a prominent professor of child psychiatry at UBC, learned later from his rescuers, he often looked sad without any apparent reason. Despite their best efforts and deepest affection, "I had a clear sense that there was danger in the air. No one told me that the world outside had declared war on Jews, even on the children. Besides I did not know what it meant to be Jewish. I sensed rather than knew that I was at risk" (*Hidden Children* 4-5).

Since the returning parents could neither emotionally nor physically afford to hear the tragic tales of some of these young children, once again, they learned that silence was not only smart but also necessary and safe. And as usual, these prematurely old and wise children were right: those who spoke out were often threatened with abandonment or were meted out other versions of abuse, such as being told that they were lying or that they should be ashamed to complain — after all, whatever happened to them, had to be a romp in the countryside compared to the parents' experience. At eight, exceeded by the burden of my silence and the invisibility that my father's lack of interest in my story bestowed upon me, I told a neighbour that my father just passed away that morning. My father, a tortured survivor, not realizing that his son was signalling his need for his dad to witness and validate his story, packed his suitcase and decided to abandon his two young children without a mother or another adult caregiver. Only after he had dragged his two children thirty feet desperately hanging on to his legs, and

after my sister fell half a flight of stairs because of his intransigence, did he change his purpose and break down, cursing his bad luck for having survived instead of his wife. His thirteen-year-old daughter could never go back to school in order to be his eyes. She said, "Being his eyes, meant that I could not enter high school. And that unlike other kids my age, I could not return to my childhood. I had to share Father's dark world of silence. What choice did I have? I had to become old before I really had a chance to be young" (*Hidden Children* 254).

In short, we the children not only had to domesticate our sustained traumas and their sequellae after liberation, but we had also been afflicted by the traumas endured by our elders. Witnessing the adults' helplessness, anxieties, their multiple hurts, griefs and disorientation, had a compounding effect on our exceeded psyches. And consequently, rather than basking in the warmth of empathic care, we had to reach deep into our emotional and physical pockets to pull out the hidden resource of reversal care for our undone parents, during and after the atrocities.

The Permission to Remember

Others were ordered by their parents never to look back. My sister and I were not only evicted from our childhood but also from our feverish memories. When our father came back from forced labour, a shell of a man, he sank into a lifelong depression. Whenever I brought up the past, he'd say: "I don't remember anything, and you'd be better off forgetting everything, too, enough is enough."

Child survivors often need a sense of permission to begin to recall. This can come about in a number of different ways: attending gatherings for child survivors and hearing the accounts of how and what others have recently recalled, joining a support group for child survivors, going into therapy and obtaining the explicit or implicit permission (not suggestion!) of the therapist that it is now safe to remember that which had to be banished decades ago. For others, like myself, that permission came upon the death of a parent or both parents who had compelled the child to forget and to remain silent.

I began to retrieve knowledge I never had about my experiences shortly after my father died in 1976. Until then, he was tenaciously faithful to refusing to remember anything. His diatribes against remembering were also injunctions against my memories. The last time I saw him on a hot August evening in Budapest sitting around a table in a restaurant, all of a sudden he began to recall in great detail the day of my birth. I asked him if he wanted to talk. He said yes. And talk we did. He said little, and what he did say about the Holocaust reminded me of non-contiguous pieces from the same jigsaw puzzle. Nevertheless, when I said goodbye to him, I felt significantly unbur-

dened, even though I was sadder than ever to part with him. For the first time, I felt his permission to remember those dark days. He passed away three months later. Shortly after his death, I began to recall incidents that had to do with perceived threats against me, but not from the Holocaust. None of these were life-threatening; nevertheless they had menaced my sense of safety at a time when it was not yet solidly in place. But each of those recalled memories had increasingly intense emotional content as if to let me know that with each re-owned memory I was getting emotionally stronger to eventually recall some of the traumatic ones from my earlier childhood. Eventually, the flood gates opened and the bottom fell out of my life for awhile as memories of atrocities emerged during a training session at the Gestalt Institute of Toronto.

The Value of Siblings and Strong Families

And there were other children, too. They fared better than most. First, there were the older kids. They had the good fortune of buttressing the edifice of their survival on the strength of several years of solid family life, under the roof of caring, loving and wise parents, who had put in place for them a shield made of inner strength, optimism and competence. Others, who were lucky to go into hiding with one or both parents, felt less the burden of abandonment and betrayal. They had daily tangible evidence of the value of their lives since mom and/or dad shared their fate rather than leaving them with strangers, however benevolent.

Second, there were those little ones who hid in the company of an older sister or brother. Inevitably, the older ones looked after their young siblings. Regardless of their hiding conditions, they often found in these prematurely competent adolescents powerful allies and valuable surrogate parents.

I was one of these fortunate ones. My reliance on my thirteen-year-old sister, Agi, was the most trustworthy relationship of all. My sister never left my side; she took better care of me with her meagre resources than anybody else. Although she was a very young and naive thirteen, she intuitively rose to the occasion and took charge of me in a way that often successfully staved off the ghosts of panic and terror. She somehow knew what to do and I knew that. It was so much easier that way. She took charge at times when I would have sunken into the bottomless hole of abandonment and betrayal.

I propose that my commitment to building a large family is a tribute to this childhood memory. When all failed in the world and at home, my sister Agnes was there, solid as a rock. I wanted to hand down this wisdom to my five children. They are five strong. Because of the role my sister played in my survival and in the quality of my life as a temporary orphan, I taught to my children the importance of sibling support. And they honoured my les-

son. When one of my children is in trouble, the others tend to rally really fast. And it gives me solace to think that when I am not able to be there, they rally for each other.

There is also another concern here: siblings are the true witnesses of our lives. They stay with us throughout our life-span, for a lot longer than our parents or our children. The older ones can validate the stories of the younger ones. Without my sister, I would have not only lost my benefactor and my main source of affection, but also my early life would have been swallowed by the night of time and volatile memory. When my sister died in 1985, I felt that she took part of my story with her to her silent grave. Luckily, I had recorded as much of my story as I could recall and she authenticated it prior to her death. But since then more than a decade has gone by and other shreds of memories have floated up to the skin of my consciousness. But she is no longer here to tell me if those bits and pieces of narratives are hallucinations, toddling attempts at mastering a childhood riddled with darkness and fire. Children in large families will most likely never have to face such a cruel dilemma.

And yes, there is also a selfish side to the project of family building. It helps the child survivor parent find peace in the knowledge that they had created a reality for their children that is essential in the context of their private history and in the absence of all extended family. Such a choice is made on the strength of values coined as a consequence of familial deprivation during and after the Holocaust. Furthermore, it is a matter of values also because the children in large families are likely to end up with smaller material legacies.

For many child survivor parents in the New World, there is a painfully organic component to this version of building a thriving family community. Vast distances scatter many families in North America. I, for one, contemplate with awe and anguish the prospects of my children building their homes wherever their opportunities take them. I believe Hilda, a Hungarian child survivor client of mine, spoke for many of us when she said,

A silent scream shuttles in and out of my heart more often than I would like it: I want to shake my children up: 'Be careful, don't scatter the family, what will happen to you?' But inside me, there lingers a bitter and anxious question, one that I will never utter in front of my kids: 'and what will happen to me?' I can't help but feel the fire of anger: the Nazis and the Commies did that, too. Without them, we would have stayed in our tiny country where even if you live in opposite corners, you are never further than a few hours from each other. I torment myself at times: did I make a blunder by coming to Canada, should I have stayed in Western Europe where the distances are friendlier to families?

Living with Trauma and Living without It

When I speak to people who have grown up in the US or Canada and whose families are stretched from sea to sea, I ask them how they feel about getting together only once or twice a year with the rest of their families? Many respond with resignation: "What else can I do? Most of the time that is enough! Sure, I miss them but we speak on the phone." Few North-American born contemporaries have said to me so far: "I ache for my brother or sister, my mother or father, my uncles, aunts, and cousins." But in the narratives of child survivors I often detect signs of grief, anguish and fear. We cope, we make a good face and hurt inside — we are experts at all three — coping, making false faces and hurting in silence. Indeed, these are three of the most important survival skills we developed half a century ago when life often depended on coping, smiling and keeping our pain so private that at times even we could not feel it thanks to the numbing protection of premature pragmatism. Because, please be aware, an adult who was fortunate enough to grow up without significant traumas in early life can afford to live spontaneously. He or she assesses the events of the day in the context of the present. Whereas the contemporary of such a person who had survived sustained childhood trauma engages in all significant actions as a conscious or unconscious mastery of the tormented and at times still-tormenting past. People without trauma in their childhood bleed more often than not roll with the punches. On the other hand, child survivors anticipate the punches and do whatever they can to avoid them, and to be sure, aim to do the impossible to shield their children from pain and suffering. Sometimes, we succeed; at other times, we don't. Sometimes our children are grateful, and at others they scarcely contain their frustration or downright anger at being overprotected. We did our best, like most parents. But for most people the best is good enough. For us, it is a challenge because we grew up with the tragic consequences of our parents' best efforts that just did not do the required job. When all is said and done, we have come from a childhood drowned in abandonment and betrayal. We have done our best to swim to the surface. And for many of us, that past keeps catching up with us. Especially when we think of our children and the roads they have to travel.

The Empty Nest and the Anguish of Abandonment

Some child survivors are tormented with the bitterness that trickles through their broken spirits when they think of the empty nest. The syndrome is well known to most North-American-born parents. On the one hand, they feel disoriented by their sudden uselessness as functioning parents — if they had done their parenting well they had raised competent people who want to go on loving, respecting and honouring their parents but who don't need them to guide, council and rescue them. Such suddenly unemployed parents

are often riveted on their inexperience with a version of life that does not include the organization of everyday existence around child-centred matters. Others, in the same group, are delighted to be free of responsibility, financial burden and worry. They can now go out and spend their children's inheritance gleefully. Child survivors, on the other hand, often feel that their lives have become a little or a lot less meaningful once they are no longer active parents. They also feel, next to the pride and the relief that they have done a good job in raising their kids, a gust of anguish — the anguish of abandonment. Now that they are inching towards second childhood, will the same sad story of abandonment and betrayal be waiting for them again? Will they have to learn, again, to fend for themselves? As silent and invisible children, they were vulnerable and dependent; what will it be like being vulnerable and dependent as seniors? Once we had to stare death and dying square into the eyes with very little hope of surviving. This time around, however, the odds are even worse. Thus, many child survivors dread being bookended between those two solitudes. It is also a time when child survivors, having a lot more time available for intro- and retrospection, revisit the childhood losses, and memories are finally free to roam. The children are old enough to cope with our stories and if they are not, or they do not or cannot witness them, we have other options.

Parents vs. Grandparents

Our grandchildren, for example. We do not have to shelter them from the nightmarish realities of our stories the way we thought we had to safeguard our young children from them. Grandchildren are always delighted by their grandparents' stories, especially when they come from another shore. Besides, grandfathers and grandmothers are almost mythical creatures, with near magical powers: after all, they raised mom and dad, didn't they? Thus, as grandparents, we are almost guaranteed a committed and benevolent audience. The fact is that grandchildren don't have to live with their grandparents, they have their parents as buffers, and grandma and grandpa are not the ones who lay down the law, a law that is largely informed by their tragically dark childhoods in evil kingdoms. We are less likely to drive our grandchildren crazy with our fears, or to convert their dreams into nightmares. On the other hand, telling our stories to our grandchildren is safer for us, too. The danger of enlisting them as living tombstones erected to our martyrs in the Holocaust is less acute. Our children were too often enslaved to the spirit of a killed mother, father, previous child, sister or brother. They were most vulnerable to having to live perfect lives. For many child survivor parents, the experience of their children having a toothache, or failing a test in school, or losing a gymnastics competition, let alone the horrors of an inflamed appendix were heartfelt and painful challenges. We who have sur-

vived otherworldly torment, get weak-kneed at the thought of our children having to have their tonsils out. In short, the children of the Holocaust were often reduced to living in subhuman depths; consequently, their children had to aim for superhuman heights. Some of the children were loving and confused enough to try to achieve that. None succeeded.

Repercussions? The Self-empathic Child

I would like to end on a very personal note about healing the wounds of Holocaust immersion by means of showing ourselves (as survivors) the same empathy as that which we show to our children. In preamble, I need to mention, that for reasons that do not belong here, when my oldest daughter was eight, I felt the desperate need to divorce her mother. But I never left my daughter. Nevertheless, as I look back today, in the lap of sad mature wisdom, I realize that, without intending to do so to some degree, I visited upon her a version of unempathic abandonment. At the time, however, I was still in the stronghold of my unhealed childhood; hence, neither her pain, nor that of the child I had been at her age, was consciously available to me.

Today, looking at what had happened through eyes animated by solidarity with the child I had been and the adult that I have become, I have just discovered a version of being and doing that had been completely foreign to me. You see, without being conscious of it, the closer my daughter was getting to the age of eight years, the more I behaved like a child of that age myself. It is quite possible that this was an instance of vicarious childhood palliating for the one I'd never had when I was that age. Could it have been a version of self-empathy — recognizing on some hidden level the invincible need to live as an eight-year-old — something I had never really experienced for I was too busy either just surviving or proving myself lifeworthy? But since I had really no model for what an emotionally and socially eight-year-old does and how, I duplicated the abandonment that had been perpetrated upon me by my parents and the world into which I was born. On the one hand, I abandoned myself to the unbridled, dangerous freedom of a passionately reckless love; on the other hand, I abandoned my child. The former brought out in me what self-abandonment at its best does — carefree, boundless passion, a kind of paradisiac playfulness, with a splash of devilish risk-taking. The latter cast a jealous shadow over my sudden burst of spontaneity and joy. Hence, for the first time ever, the self-empathic child in me put me first, without consideration for the welfare of my child. But that self-empathic child had been banished from my life as soon as my parents discovered their need for living out their respective and shared dramas. As it tends to be the case in most families, their craving for what they called order and silence triumphed over my natural self and imposed their silences and their inner chaos upon me. Thus, they successfully extinguished

my self-empathy, or at least they exiled the fire from my veins into a dark corner of my being not to be heard from again until well into my middle years. It is then that I discovered that I had alternatives to repeating my childhood injuries. Today, I am clear that I've been struggling to allow that child to "grow down" from having lived as a premature grownup most of my life. When I chose to honour the eight-year-old I could no longer do it with the purity of the child contaminated by the false self.

During those heroic times of freedom and exploration I was tormented more frequently than not by the remorse and guilt of revisiting upon my child my own abandonment. I did that on the strength of the information that reached me from what I call "available memory." Had I been able to recall precious material from "extreme memory," and pay sustained attention to it, I probably would not have allowed anything to interfere with my full enjoyment of my belated childhood. Instead, I became emotionally symbiotic with my eight-year-old daughter. But this was not the work of the adult me, but the impulses of the belated eight-year-old me. Thus, my self-empathy was severely undermined by my guilt-driven empathy for my child. She emerged to me very much like the bundle of potentialities that could have been mine, had I not been born to a Hungarian Jew, in 1936.

My memories from my Holocaust immersion constitute a "slumbering memory" whose sleep is reminiscent of the way dogs sleep — in an always vigilant state of somnolence. There is a tangible yet unlocatable place between oblivion and remembrance. In that very private domain one may not recall with the accuracy of an historical document what has happened. But immersed in the moments of spurious freedom from the atrocious past, there is a suspicion that something lingers not too far from the moment's truth, dark enough to cast a shadow over the brilliance of a genuine joy. I wish to close with a brief quotation from my book, *Hidden Children: Forgotten Survivors of the Holocaust*:

Today a father of four daughters and a son, I am frequently bewildered and exhilarated by the impossibility and the urgency of keeping the young boy I was and my children in contact — close enough that they feel the connection and far enough to protect them from the flames of the anger that still animates my memories ... But it is becoming easier to speak to my children about what they and I had lost in the night. I am no longer compelled to drag them into dark places to keep me company. They can contemplate their father's childhood from the sunny side of the street where they belong. (265)

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