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INHERITED HOLOCAUST MEMORY
AND THE ETHICS OF VENTRiloQUISM

The only pre-1948 photograph in my father’s family is of my father’s father, from before the war, of course. My Uncle Alex had somehow preserved in the death camps a poor fragment of a picture of his father. Once safe in the United States, Alex was drafted and sent to Korea, carrying the fragment still. There, he commissioned a painting from an artist who reconstructed a portrait of his father from a combination of the photograph and the son’s suggestions, in the manner of police artists, and I suppose, from the living model of the boy before him. Although I do not know what became of the original fragment, I have a glossy black and white photograph of the painting, and when I look at this dapper grandfather, I see something of my uncle, and something Asian, too, for the eyes have a slight epicanthic fold.

Children of Holocaust survivors are called the “Second Generation” because everything earlier exists only in memory. There are no things from before our parents came here, and yet the weight in memory of the absent family farms or silver candlesticks or embroidered table linen is formidable. Our inheritance is loss and memory, all of it as overdetermined and refracted by time as the photograph of the painting of the photograph of my grandfather.

Malka Heifetz Tussman’s Yiddish poem “Cellars and Attics” begins with a casual reference to “My friend, the poet Ted,” and she goes on to report Ted’s description of the treasures his children find in his elderly parents’ house near Boston, a catalog of the everyday from copper pots to hymnal, and “Crinolines where / The fishbones poke from worn brocade / Shawls with handmade lace.” The speaker, who observes that “Children are not radishes, / Children have deep roots,” says that she “too, will take my kids / And travel to our old house.” Listing the items that they find there, from “matzo-grinder,” through great-grandmother’s “earrings that she used to wear / For blessing the Sabbath candles,” Tussman’s representation of ritual items and the stuff of daily life makes the reader feel—through things—the difference between two old cultures as they are bequeathed to children who assimilate cultural values by playing innocent games of dress up.
But Tussman closes: “And Teddy asks, / ‘Where is your old house— / Your cellar and your attic?’ And I answer in a Jewish way— / A question with a question, / ‘Indeed, where is / My grandfather’s old house?’” Although the Yiddish poet impresses loss upon us—the loss to children who are more than radishes—the poem itself provides the words that substitute for the lost things. But unlike the material matzo-grinder and earrings, these words place a demand upon the children who inherit them and upon the reader of Yiddish poetry. Preserving and passing on words requires a different kind of work than does the handing down of things; the obligation makes an attic of the mind.

My grandmother, her baby son, eleven-year-old Esther, another boy (older? younger? I don’t remember this child uncle’s name) are pushed to the line that led to the gas chambers. The flames rise to the sky. Dogs bark. SS men shout. Dutifully preserving and passing on words, I write about this fateful day, editing my father’s prose, for a short memoir. I am raised reading Elie Weisel’s fiction, and I too am supposed to be a mouthpiece. I choose instead to be a Victorianist, with a special interest in narrative theory. I avoid the Holocaust in my work. I talk about it in special programs. Give a guest lecture to a course. Participate in a panel. Write an essay. Refuse to read Maus because I am afraid it will be too familiar. I read it. It is too familiar. Fort-da, approach, avoidance.

Echoing the biblical phrase “the children of Israel” (a Religious School student is said to have asked, “How old were the children of Israel?”), the designation “children of survivors” freezes us into position as our extraordinary parents’ children. The “Second Generation” at once occupies a position of privilege, closer to some rupture and origin than those who cannot number their generations, and at the same time, ours is a position of relative mediocrity, emphatically not first. Like Noah’s children born after the flood, we are sensitized to the privilege of being on this earth, yet we know we are here through no merit of our own. One must live up to such survival. I am reminded of an interview with children of survivors in which the interviewer observed that many of us seem to be academics or engaged in professional pursuits with uncertain employment opportunities or other serious obstacles to success. “Sure,” quickly responded a young artist, “we are proving that we too can survive.”

It is emulation founded on some cognitive dissonance, like the leap of faith I imagine the aging Noah’s children might have made when asked to see God’s favorite in the person of their drunken father. Alicia Ostriker speculates that Noah fell to drink because he suffered survivor guilt, leaving his remnant family to a dysfunctional struggle of their own. Harry Brod accordingly complicates the oxymoron “adult children of survivors,” calling us “adult children of temporary survivors” because he says “survivor” implies too much; such survival as there was was often partial, and death often comes prematurely. My Uncle Alex, who survived Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Korea, died of
heart failure in his Long Island home in 1972, at the age of forty-nine. Just as he was merely a teenager when he lost the father whose image he so carefully preserved, so too his own children, though born into the comforts of America, lost their father in their early teenage years.

Yet survivors' children typically resist the idea of partial survival and the ungrateful implication that we have been somehow deprived. We are, the psychologists tell us, peculiarly protective of our parents and defensive, role-reversing in that way. So if we have come to be called “adult children of survivors,” we were once child parents; like other children of immigrants, we shepherded our parents through the culture that belongs more to us than to them. But because our parents come from an annihilated home culture, loyalty seemed to demand that we remain purposefully and respectfully alienated from our own birthplace. We stand caught between the competing impulses to assimilate and preserve. Because what we must preserve is destroyed, we preserve a fading memory; we memorialize absence.

People who carry other people's memories, we are a natural peer group; we find each other in crowds, and we self-identify with names of countries of origin and camps, the way others may be pleased to meet someone who attended their alma mater or the same summer camp, except in our case, most of us have never been to those places. “Poland,” I say, “on my mother's side, though they were in Siberia during the war.” Because “Siberia” is borderline survivorship, I quickly add my paternal pedigree: “Czechoslovakia, then Auschwitz and Buchenwald.”

“When did you first learn about the Holocaust?” I am asked, in a whisper, as a teenager. “I have always known,” I answer aloud, without sentiment. “I guess I was so young that I don’t remember.” We hear about survivors who never talk about their experiences. Others, as Eli Pfefferkorn describes them, are “ancient mariners”; obsessive, they speak of the Holocaust all the time, compelled by the losses. My dad, like Coleridge’s sailor, is most concerned that we get the point of the story, see it his way; he doubts that he has told it well or told it all. He wishes we would listen, wonders why he has never been able to tell us that which he has told us a thousand times. He asks me to watch his video testimony. I do, and I praise his recall, and I tell him that there is nothing there that I have not heard before. He’s not convinced, and he is sure he has left out important details, and he is annoyed with himself because he does not remember everything. So I ask about his three younger siblings murdered in the gas chambers. To his chagrin, it takes him a day to remember one of their names, and he is unsure of their ages or the color of their hair. All memory fades.

I am a kid, and my mother tells me about her having been a particularly small child, a Young Pioneer in Stalinist Russia, and about how she fell in a snowdrift and almost froze, but someone came by and noticed her hat. I see my substantial suburban mother, her hands well-manicured, occupied with
committee work, and I cannot resist saying that it is hard to believe that all these adventures, in all these exotic places, happened to her. She confesses: “I don’t believe it either. They do seem like someone else’s stories.”

My mother’s first languages were Yiddish and Polish; she went through complete schooling from the ages of seven through eleven in the Russian language, and she was a successful student. So much so, that had the war not ended—lucky timing for me—she would have been hauled off to a specializing school in Moscow and might never have come back to her Jewish parents in Siberia. But the mother I grew up with does not remember these languages. She can speak no Polish, read no Russian. She was a teenager when she came here, but the very vocabulary of those early years is gone. Repressed. The languages belong to someone else about whom she speaks in an almost unaccented English, the language in which she gives me the stories with which I have long captivated audiences as she captivated me.

I love these stories. There is pleasure both in the listening to and the telling of Holocaust narratives. The pleasure in listening can, however, border uncomfortably on voyeurism, and the inner compulsion to repeat the narratives can make one feel like a medium through whom other voices speak, the puppet in a ventriloquist act. I love the stories of indoctrination my mother tells about having been a schoolchild under Stalin, and the descriptions of those parents who feared that their children might betray them. I admire beyond all things my family members who gave up all their possessions and traveled in cattle cars to Siberia to avoid Hitler’s fire, and once there, risked everything by reconstructing the Jewish calendar from memory and baking marzah in the middle of the night while the children stood watch to sound warning in case someone might be coming.

Even more than the stories I love the process of discovery. My mother remembers that her parents ate little so that she and her grandmother might not go hungry. Sitting around a long dining-room table in a Hasidic suburb of Tel Aviv in the 1970s, my mother tells her cousins that their grandmother used to come to her in the night and sneak extra food to her, whispering, “Special. Just for you. Don’t tell.” They all laugh in recognition. The grandmother had done the same to each of them.

My husband’s mother, Grandma Janet, gives my children Hanukkah presents—a Fisher Price computer, an American Girl doll—wrapped in paper with pansies. Her daughter-in-law for nearly twenty years, I suddenly realize that she favors pansies, and I mention it. “They are my favorite flowers,” she admits. “They grew outside my father’s factory in Poland. I remember him telling me not to pick the flowers.” And so I learn that my children’s great-grandfather, the one who had been killed by Poles in the woods around the ghetto, the one who had first secured false papers for his beautiful wife, Helen, and two pretty green-eyed little daughters, had had a factory. Janet last saw her father when she was six years old, as she walked out of the ghetto with her mother and toddler-aged sister and new Catholic names.
Janet’s stories are the most romantic and tragic of them all. Her mother, Helen, didn’t know when she left the ghetto that she was pregnant. She bore twins. One was accidentally smothered by the midwife at birth; the other, who was baptized, presumably died of malnutrition. Helen took jobs here and there. She laundered for Nazis. Desperate once, she took a Nazi lover. And Janet remembers her own childish affection for this man. Having been raised devoutly Catholic and anti-Semitic, Janet also remembers the horror of being told, by then a preteen safe in Paris after the war, to “look in the mirror and meet a Jew.” A new name in French. Cuba. A new name in Spanish. Over the years, I have gleaned a story of intermittent pathos, neglect, despair, and courage. My husband’s grandmother, and I knew Helen well, emerges part heroine and part madwoman in a tale of mother love gone wild. I hold onto details, vaguely hopeful that one day I will give this narrative its due, tell the story as it should be told. But I just as deliberately fill my time with other efforts.

James Joyce fled Ireland, Catholicism, and his family. And in this self-exile, he wrote of nothing else. I teach British literature in a small Episcopal college in the Midwest. Everywhere I turn, I find the Holocaust. There is an interdisciplinary course on the Holocaust, which a colleague once characterized, to my dismay, as “the centerpiece of the Judaica offerings.” My first day on the job, I arrive in my classroom to teach Intro to Lit, and on the board is a notice: “The Holocaust has been moved to room 206.” I glance up at my blond students, and murmur, “Thank God.” Later, I tell my mother that I am going to write the Great Book of Holocaust Humor. She laughs, and I am emboldened. I add: “I am tired of dead Jews.” She twinkles, “Me too.” It is a conspiratorial mother-daughter exchange a half-century after the liberation of the camps. It is possible only because we both conjure the dead relentlessly, and we both love, and put up with, my father.

My father refers to “home,” and he means the Carpathian Mountains. His friend says, “Rudy, it has been fifty years,” and my father says, with no pause, “I am there every night.” Funny thing is that I too go there in my dreams. Others of my cohort have begun actually to go, making pilgrimages with aging parents to those places, I suppose to connect the dots of life and to concretize the second generation memories that they have and do not have. On National Public Radio, I listen to an interview with a survivor who describes standing on the ground of the concentration camp where she had been incarcerated. Voices cried beneath her feet: “Why did you live?” She must have looked sick because her daughter urged, “Mama, let’s go.” She looked up and saw her American grandchild in his stroller and inwardly spoke back to the voices: “I lived because of what this baby will do for the world.” She concludes, “And the voices, they shut up.” I listened, moved, and I thought, “Poor baby. Messianic expectations already.” The third generation. My own middle name is Hope.

I met a woman who was one of six siblings, and her mother, a camp survivor, told them that each stood for a million. I mention this meeting
to Kathryn Hellerstein, adding, "so many for one person to be," and she tells me that she and her five siblings were told the same thing by their father, a physician who had been one of the American officers who liberated Bergen Belsen. Recently Kathryn came upon an old dictaphone tape on which her father's reporting of a case is interrupted by quarreling children in the background. To distract them the father offers to interview the children on his machine, and the young Kathryn reports that she is five years old and will soon be off to Hebrew School. When asked why Hebrew School is important, the little voice confidently replies: "Because Jews were burned in ovens." In the decades of our childhood, this gruesome image defined the Jews, and as one raised to stand for a million, Kathryn became a poet, a Yiddishist, and the translator whose works include Tussman's "Cellars and Attics." In the shadow of paternal heroism, she too survives, struggling to preserve and promote the language and poetry of fading memories.

I remember, and I retreat. I yield, self-identify as a member of the "Second Generation," and tell a story. This Auschwitz identification confers a prestige that comes partly from association with the benchmark of evil in our time and partly from the tempting implication of genetic heroism. The retreat is partly delicacy, an unwillingness to raise the dead by appropriating their stories, and a reluctance to exploit the horrors. Alfred Kazin has gone so far as to accuse Elie Weisel of capitalizing on Holocaust stories, implying that it is obscene to advance oneself to a Nobel Prize on the backs of corpses. In a climate of competing ethnic sufferings that reminds me of the old TV game show "Queen for a Day," one feels shy to enter this competition, especially since the kind of sordid privilege conferred by my personal history—I should say my parents' personal histories—is not consonant with the other kind of privilege I have enjoyed, the kind that comes of having attended fine schools.

In this dialogue with myself, I protest that I did earn the rights to Holocaust memories: My morning oatmeal in our split-level home was seasoned with sugar and fear, and I ingested anxious love. Now, I too am mistrustful, a too-protective parent, waiting always for the other shoe to fall. From my first words, I deferred to the destruction of European Jewry, and to suddenly have ethical concerns about being recognized for this legacy of suffering may be an inside-out self-rejection, a shameful refusal to carry on, or merely weariness, a pitiful effort to be an unmarked American Victorianist.

I am therefore duly grateful to the professional archivists and the technologies and institutions of remembering. At the same time, I have felt vaguely uncomfortable with the rush to collect the testimonies of survivors before it is too late. It seems so morbid. And I have wondered why Spielberg does it, what all of those videotapes in the Yale archives will be used for, and who will make those decisions over time. The names of my dead are scrupulously recorded in the archives of that great remembering place in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, and I begin to feel as if my dead lack privacy. We
have seen survivors speaking in Hollywood films, sometimes for themselves, sometimes played by actors; I have seen videotapes of survivors played to teary-eyed university audiences. After years of telling, the survivor story sometimes sounds rehearsed, and I now realize that part of my own conflict over reporting my parents’ stories is shame over the unconscious wish to control their presentation, to cloak these sometimes awkward immigrants in my vocabulary. From puppet to puppeteer, in reciprocal ventriloquism. These appropriations, the theatricalities, and the catharsis they inspire have made the very word Holocaust feel overused. At the end of Coleridge’s poem, the mariner has evidently told his story enough, and there is redemption; the albatross drops off.

Grace, alas, is not a Jewish concept. Children raised to be witnesses to a past that precedes us, we were supposed to fashion lives that might somehow be redemptive, might lift the albatross’s weight from our burdened parents’ shoulders. Thinking about the narrative structure of my life, I see a mixed genre. My life begins as the comic ending to a relatively recent tragedy of unprecedented proportions. Here too is a classic adventure in the shape of the heroic immigration story, ending in the goldene medina, the golden land, America. While children of immigrants generally receive ambivalent messages, children of survivors inherit extremes: idealizations and horrors. In our case, it is our responses to this heavy legacy, rather than the memories themselves, that are likely to be a sacrilegious, self-censored ambivalence.

Finally, the most powerful aspect of the legacy may be ambivalence, an acutely painful ambivalence born of a fact as undeniable as the death of grandparents and aunts and uncles, and folkways for which our parents long. That fact is that we are the phoenix born out of those ashes and that we have Hitler to thank for our presence in America. I hear descriptions of a happy, pastoral, innocent village life in the Carpathian Mountains, but I know that my grandmother had borne eight children, that two died of childhood illnesses, that they had little education. I gulp. I feel spared. My mother’s family were all Hasidim, men in long black coats, women in wigs to cover their hair out of modesty. Much of my extended family are Hasidim still, and I have visited them many times. I am at ease in these ultrareligious communities, and I know the life of women there. I am grateful (to whom?) that I have been spared a kitchen life.

In the world that was destroyed by Nazism, my parents would have been an impossible match. He a village Jew, ethnic, not devout; she from Polish cities, with some prestige, ritual slaughterers, rabbis, circumcisers, and her own mother had studied art and piano in Germany. Class, nationality, religiosity, ethnicity, education, ideology—everything imaginable—separated my mother from my father. But in 1948, both survivors found themselves in Brooklyn, and when they found each other in the early 1950s, no marriage seemed more natural to their friends and family. Survivors both, they emerged from a fire that had had a democratizing effect on the Jews; it leveled the ground. And
out of a union that would have been fantastically bizarre in prewar Europe, come I.

I attended a Holocaust commemoration once in New York where people shared such photographs as they had of dead relatives. A young woman displayed an old, happy picture of a man, woman, and child in ski attire, and she confessed that discovering this hidden picture changed her life. She had known that her father, the man in the photograph, had survived the camps; she hadn't known that he had had a previous family that did not make it through the war. The image of this dead half-sister haunts her; she misses her and wishes for her in her own life, and then the speaker confesses, "but had they lived, of course, there would have been no me. She died that I might be born."

Memory is a Jewish specialty that often takes the form of inserting oneself into the mythic past. We maintain the legend that all of us were present for the giving of the law at Sinai, the dead and the yet-to-be-born alike. And when we remember the Exodus at the Passover Seder, we not only commemorate a liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt but we perform an annual ritual reenactment of our own liberation, commanded as we are to regard ourselves as members of the original generation that was saved by divine intervention in history.

Another way that Jews preserve memory is by naming children for the dead, a neat conjunction of time and eternity. Under ordinary circumstances, all of the dead are honored in this way. God entering history, naming for the dead, and the passing on of genetic material are all ways that present time crosses eternity, but those of us who come from families of survivors often have too many dead and not enough children to preserve all the names. So our children are laden with the past, have too many names, one stands for a million. When I gave my youngest daughter the middle name Esther, I announced that in doing so, I remember all the children. Then I looked at this small baby and felt instantly ashamed of so overburdening her. On reflection, this middle name may be a site of ambivalence, a way of acknowledging the claims of the Holocaust without putting them first.

I look now at this little girl with blond curls—none of us is blond—and I joke that it must be some Cossack rapist deep in our genetic history. Like adopted children, we do not know our whole story. When we went for routine testing while this child was still in utero, the genetic counselor asked routine questions about causes of death in our families. We do not know of course how they would have died had they lived. "Unnatural causes," one after the other. When we left this poor woman's office, my husband teased me: "We must remember to tell our children to avoid cholesterol and anti-Semites."

And so it continues. We will give our children words for heirlooms because, finally, the point of sharing our stories is in the act of sharing itself. In the absence of antique matzo-grinders, this truth—however compromised—is what we have. History and art have conspired, after all, to give me a faintly Korean grandfather.
The memories in my hope chest are sepia-tinted, washed in red, and then painted over in white. Memory is a pathology, a repetition compulsion. I too survive and save and fear. I also resent and celebrate. Inherited memories are my animating ghosts. As I conjure the grandparents who didn’t have the chance to love me, and as I rage for that young Esther who walked holding her mother’s, my grandmother’s, hand into the crematorium in Auschwitz, I feel deprived of their presence in my life, even as I know that their absence—the death of all of it—accounts for, and constitutes, my presence.

WORK CITED