



Introduction

Sharon Kangisser Cohen, Eva Fogelman, and Dalia Ofer

Reading the testimonies of child survivors of the Holocaust is an emotionally and intellectually challenging exercise that demands listening to disparate narratives simultaneously. In their interviews the survivors recall their suffering as children who were persecuted without mercy, while also remembering, as adults, their tragic past and their lives ever since. They revisit the landscape of their suffering and loss and communicate the ways in which the trauma of their past has continued to impact their lives. Thus, these interviews not only provide a window into the past but also give researchers a way to understand how individuals live with their traumatic past. A child survivor of the Holocaust is defined as any Jewish child, thirteen or under at the start of persecution in their country, who survived in German-occupied Europe by whatever means, whether in hiding, as a partisan, in the ghettos, on the run, or in the camps. Thus, the suffering for some began in Germany in 1933, while for others it started in 1944 in Hungary. The war children are non-Jews who lived in Germany during the Third Reich from 1933 to 1945 or in Poland from the time of the German invasion in 1939 until liberation.

For child survivors to volunteer to speak about their ordeals was antithetical to how most engaged in their post-liberation world. Researchers¹ have argued that for the most part, child survivors of the Holocaust did not speak about their wartime experiences in the postwar years. For many, “not remembering” was key to coping with pain and trauma. Unlike adult survivors, child survivors did not necessarily relate to themselves as survivors in the years immediately following the war. Instead, they tried to adapt themselves to their new environments and to integrate as quickly as possible into their new home environment. This reaction stemmed from a strong need to belong. During the first few decades following the war, child survivors were, therefore, consumed with rebuilding their lives. Despite their silence, they carried their painful memories with them. However, as they began to age, many began to express a willingness and even a need to talk about their past experiences. In their later years, many began to look back at their past and reclaim parts of themselves that were from the foundations of their

lives. This phenomenon parallels the development in historiography of the Holocaust in which researchers began to examine the specific experience of children during the Holocaust. For example, an examination of the unique experience of hidden children in Holland was conducted by historian Debórah Dwork in her work *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe*.² A growing interest in their stories, propelled by historical research and a validation of their pain and suffering, gave child survivors the confidence to speak about their past.

Child Survivor Testimony

Despite the decision of many child survivors not to record their experiences, there were child survivors who were interviewed as part of testimony projects that began immediately after liberation.³ While some child survivors were interviewed as part of these early projects, it was not until 1979 that historian Yaffa Eliach devoted her audiotape oral history project at Brooklyn College specifically to those who survived the Holocaust as children.⁴ The largest collection of child survivor testimony was created in 1981. The Kestenbergs Archive of Testimonies of Child Holocaust Survivors (originally the Jerome Riker International Study of Organized Persecution of Children) was initiated by psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg and attorney Milton Kestenberg. Kestenberg was an attorney who represented Holocaust survivors who applied to the German government for reparations. He assisted survivors in preparing documents on the lasting effects of their ordeals under the Third Reich on their daily functioning and provided emotional support in the face of a German legal system that was denying the physical and psychological damage that they had inflicted on the Jews. Since child survivors could not remember a sequential narrative of their experiences, they were rarely compensated for their traumatization. Milton Kestenberg was instrumental in guiding them to reconstruct a narrative of their years of persecution. Parenthetically, some parents were reluctant for their children to apply for reparations because they did not want to subject them to the memories of their horrific past.

In the meantime, Judith Kestenberg had a few child survivors as psychoanalytic patients in her practice and would discuss her cases with her husband, Milton Kestenberg, who shed light on their traumas. Together they started the Jerome Riker International Study of Organized Persecution of Children in 1981, which mushroomed in 1984 after the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia. The Kestenbergs set up a table at the gathering to register child survi-

vors who were willing to be interviewed. Many of the child survivors believed that they had no story and were reluctant to participate; if their parents had survived, they tended to see themselves as the second generation rather than as survivors *per se*. Nonetheless, a group showed up to a meeting at the gathering and a new identity—Holocaust child survivors—began to emerge.

The Kestenbergs along with Eva Fogelman organized monthly meetings in New York, similar to the Vietnam veteran rap groups.⁵ Each session was an entity into itself with no prearranged topic. There was a core group, initially survivors of ghettos or concentration camps, who attended regularly, and new participants arrived monthly. Members were encouraged to be interviewed. Soon, those who found the interview process a transformative experience encouraged others to be interviewed. There are, however, those who are, to this day, reluctant to be interviewed for fear of breaking down, because they say they do not remember much about the war, or because they live with shame and guilt that they do not want exposed.

What is unique about the Kestenberg interviews is that, first, many of the child survivors were speaking for the first time. Second, the interviews were conducted by mental health professionals. The interviewers were knowledgeable about the historical facts of Europe before World War II, the war years, and post-liberation, but they were also attuned to the psychological ramifications of the child's life both during and after the Holocaust. The team of interviewers learned Judith Kestenberg's kinesthetic techniques of recalling events using all five senses.⁶ This was particularly important for enabling the preverbal child survivors to develop a narrative of what they had experienced: for example, trying to imagine who had carried them or how they had been carried in the train to Terezin, or trying to recall the last time they had seen their parent by visualizing the clothes that the parent had worn. Imaginings of what might have happened to the child was another technique that added to the narrative.⁷ The Kestenberg interviews were audiotaped and not videotaped and were not shared with family members unless requested. This anonymity enabled interviewees to be more open about their emotions, current lives, and relationships.

The protocol for the Kestenberg interviews evolved over time. Those who were themselves child survivors had to be interviewed before they were allowed to conduct interviews. The Kestenbergs and Eva Fogelman organized training sessions in New York for interviewers. A core committee met on a regular basis to review the questions. The interview was semistructured in nature, meaning that the interviewee was told to speak about his or her life before, during, and after the Holocaust, and

the interviewer followed the flow with the ultimate goal of guiding the interviewee to achieve a sense of integration. A fragmented life developed coherence as the interviewer led the survivor to express a sequential narrative.

The best explanation of a semi-structured interview was offered by Rachel Auerbach who conducted interviews with survivors at Yad Vashem in the 1950s and 1960s:

We must let the witness speak freely and follow the thread of his reconstructed individual narrative in as natural a manner as possible. We must guide him, but without needlessly interrupting the flow of his speech, except very gently and discreetly, without detracting from the vein of inspiration and air of confession we have stimulated. We must not forget that, from a certain perspective, the testimony is the witness's autobiographical account, whose focal point is the witness himself—what he saw and what happened to him—and that only on this basis can his story serve as the basis for historical research. This does not mean that the witness is the subject of the testimony. The subject of the testimony is the event, the phenomenon, the fate of the individual as an instance of the fates of many people, which reflects the situation of a society and a people—a picture of an era.⁸

Many of the child survivors were interviewed at least twice. In the second interview survivors often discussed experiences that they may not have been ready to speak about initially. The interviewers were also able to review the first interview and assess what was missing in their life story. The second interview was also an opportunity to ask more-specific questions about aging, identity, memory, and childhood games, among other more idiosyncratic subjects.

Although many of the earlier oral history collections focused on the experience of the war, collections created in the late 1980s and 1990s moved toward a life story approach, mirroring the dominant trend in oral history as a whole. The questionnaires were developed by psychologists, and the aim of the project was to record life both before, during, and after the Holocaust, thus illustrating how the war affected the individual's life and fortitude.

Similar to other oral history projects, the Kestenberg collection's rationale changed and developed over time. After conducting a number of interviews, it became clear that an additional rationale was the therapeutic value for conducting interviews with survivors of the Holocaust. The interviewees were seen to benefit from having a listening ear and having their suffering, pain, and losses validated. Interviewing a traumatized person about life before, during, and after the dehumanization, persecution, and multiple losses facilitates the integration of self. A survivor values being perceived as a total human being and not

just a victim. It is popularly assumed that an individual who underwent trauma must inevitably suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The various analyses of these interviews, however, allow us to move beyond the typical PTSD stereotype of historical trauma victims. Researchers are able to explore the interaction between socialization, personal characteristics, the trauma, and all the situational factors, past and present. Thus, coping behavior, attitudes, and feelings are neither monolithic nor static. Furthermore, the interview facilitated the integration of the self that had been fragmented with a self from before and after the persecution. The very process of the interview motivated some child survivors to search for meaning rather than to connect to the past and losses through survivor guilt or identification with the victimization. Writing memoirs, attending commemorations, educating young people, speaking to adult audiences, returning to one's home or the place of persecution, working in the helping professions, or speaking up for other traumatized groups have all been proved to be channels for healing.

Unlike other projects, the Kestenberg collection includes all groups of children who the Kestenbergs defined as "victims of war." While the majority are Jewish survivors, they are not the only interviewees. The suffering of other groups, particularly Polish non-Jewish children, is also documented and recorded, revealing the extent of the criminality of National Socialist (or Nazi) racial policy: while singling out the Jews, the Nazis also persecuted those they considered "racially inferior" or "undesirable" population groups, including even Germans. By incorporating interviews conducted with non-Jewish children who lived through World War II, this collection gives voice to the suffering of children who lived under Nazi occupation and whose lives were invariably affected and irrevocably changed. It includes interviews with individuals whose parents were Nazi perpetrators. The project thus makes a bold statement about children who are victimized as a result of their parents' actions and choices and who suffer the repercussions of this throughout their lives.

Children in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath is an interdisciplinary study by researchers who examined the Kestenberg archive. This archive comprises more than 1,500 testimonies of child survivors worldwide, of war children from Germany and Poland, and of some caretakers. It also includes immediate post-liberation depositions taken by the Central Jewish Historical Commission (CJHC) in Poland. Due to both its geographical and experiential scope, the archive provides scholars with an invaluable and ongoing resource that the researchers of this volume have examined from different scholarly positions in their diverse fields.

Three of the chapters in this volume examine the testimonies of non-Jews who were children during World War II. Katarzyna Person discusses and compares the testimonies of Polish Jewish and Polish non-Jewish survivors; Christina Brüning describes how the children of perpetrators dealt with their parents' actions; and Ilka Quindeau, Katrin Einert, and Nadine Teuber, who conducted their own interviews with children who grew up during the Third Reich that are to be included in the Kestenberg archive, examine accounts of these children's experiences during the war and how these experiences impacted their postwar lives. In addition, their analysis of the oral histories of war children reveals that some experienced PTSD symptoms as a result both of living through the terror of war and of the nature of the parent-child relationship.

In their interviews the child survivors did not only convey their war-time experiences, but also depicted the early postwar period during which they struggled to reestablish their lives. In her chapter, Beth Cohen uses interviews from the Kestenberg archive to describe the reconstruction of Jewish families in the wake of the Shoah. Her chapter contributes to our understanding of the immediate postwar years and the challenges faced by survivors in rebuilding their lives. Dana Mihăilescu examines the survivors' postwar experiences, particularly the impact of family structure on the children's memory and personality development. Helene Bass-Wichelhaus discusses the attribute of resilience among child survivors, while Nancy Isserman's study is a psychological work on the attitudes of survivors toward the perpetrators, and, in particular, on their expressions of revenge.

The specific geographical location during and after the Holocaust has an added dimension that sheds light on the impact of trauma on the coping mechanisms and identities of child survivors. The postwar context also contributes to the coping of child survivors. In their chapter, Rita Horváth and Katalin Zana discuss the specific characteristics of the Holocaust in Hungary and how they have impacted the way survivors and their children have interpreted and reacted to their postwar lives. There are very few works with a comparative analysis of the postwar context of survivor communities, a context that invariably affected how these individuals related to their past. This collection of chapters therefore fills this gap and presents the reader with the beginning of a comparative account.

The use of qualitative interviews is a research tool used in many disciplines as a way of understanding the complexity of the individual experience. The fact that the interview is used in areas as disparate as the humanities, social sciences, legal studies, and medicine attests to its richness and to the opportunities it presents for furthering our grasp

on human behavior and experience. Due to its plurality, there is, of course, no one theoretical and methodological approach in this collection, and this is the source of its richness. In a chapter on the long-term effects of the Holocaust on child survivors, Gila Saban, Mark Sossin, and Anastasia Yasik raise methodological questions relating to qualitative research by employing both qualitative and quantitative research designs to study their narratives. Using a narrative content analysis, they demonstrate that parental competence and maternal adjustment have the greatest impact on the child's functioning in later life.

The use of the interview as the basis of research also represents a shift in the politics or positioning of the research subject. Interviewees are not the objects but rather the subjects of research, a point that is discussed in Sharon Kangisser Cohen's chapter examining early reports given by child survivors of the Holocaust to the CJHC in Poland. Although the interviews collected by the CJHC were written up by the interviewers and not the interviewees, thereby affecting the construction of their personal narratives, the memories that the survivors articulate gives them more authority in determining what children remember from the war years. This trend of research exemplifies what historians have defined as the democratization of history or history from the bottom up, which puts the voice of individuals at the center of the historical narrative and proves the significance of oral history interviews to historical inquiry. Interviews are used by historians to reconstruct a historical period and to experience and introduce "new evidence from the underside . . . by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who have been ignored."⁹ Through the interview, the historian is able to trace both individual and collective consciousness that is, according to Paul Thompson, "part and parcel of that very past."¹⁰

Testimony is particularly important in terms of the history of the Shoah. From its inception, Yad Vashem recognized the importance of collecting oral testimonies from survivors, because verbal testimony that is given by survivors constitutes virtually the only material regarding the fate of the victims. Yehuda Bauer further points out, "Because the documentation is largely one-sided, that is German, survivors' testimonies are crucial to understanding the events of the period. They become extremely useful and reliable when cross-checked with and borne out by many other testimonies. They are then, I would argue, at least as reliable as a written document of the time."¹¹ However, the use of oral history or qualitative interviews is seen by some scholars as problematic for scholarly inquiry or the investigation of the past. Memory is a never-ending topic in examining oral histories. Some claim that memory is an unreliable source: accuracy diminishes with time

and is vulnerable to a broad range of interfering stimuli. The vividness of remote memories depends heavily on rehearsal (i.e., thinking and talking about them), and yet studies have shown that the more frequently they are reproduced, the less accurate they become. Unpleasant facts may be forgotten or repressed. New information can interfere with memory, modifying and distorting it. Once incorporated into the original memory, the memory cannot be distinguished from what is actually reconstructed, especially after much time has elapsed.¹² Furthermore, scholars have debated whether the earlier testimonies are more authentic historically than later testimonies. Dalia Ofer has concluded that

the assertion that earlier accounts are fuller, more authentic, and more accurate is not necessarily true. The most important areas in which later testimony has added to our store of knowledge are associated with daily life in the ghettos and labor camps, problems of human relations, the world of the individual, and relations between the individual and the community. When they retold their stories a generation later, the survivors assigned more importance to the family and home and to their childhood experiences before and during the Holocaust. This is especially noticeable among those who were children during the war: at the remove of decades they frequently include friends and teachers in their life stories.¹³

She further emphasized that historiography of the Holocaust has evolved. Thus, “the belated testimonies, with the information they contain, can offer fresh information and insights, a new understanding and reevaluation of society and the individual during the Holocaust. Historians read them critically, drawing on other disciplines in order to appreciate the various elements that shape the testimonies and to learn how to read them as history.”¹⁴

Yet, scholars who use qualitative interviews in their research view memory as a vehicle through which the past is not reproduced but rather reconstructed and conveyed and through which the individuals impart their sense of the past and their identity. Life stories or narrative interviews uncover more than just the historical circumstances of the individuals’ lives; they are also, as Jerome Bruner pointed out, testimonies on the “meaning of experience.”¹⁵ While acknowledging that memory changes over time, this approach views these transitions or changes as something that enhances understanding of the individuals. As Alessandro Portelli explained: “the discrepancies and the errors are themselves events, clues for the work of desire and pain over time, for the painful search for meaning.”¹⁶ In Stephenie Young’s chapter she studies the Kestenbergs’ interviews in order to understand how the individual’s memory is influenced by the incorporation of public memory; how the post-Holocaust context has influenced the individuals’ testimony.

The last chapter in the volume was written by Andrew Griffel, a child survivor who was himself recently interviewed for the Kestenber collection. Griffel's chapter is not his testimony but rather a self-exploration and reflection of his experience and its effect on his life. It represents an individual in dialogue with himself and his memories, a constant reinterpretation and renegotiation of the events he has lived through in light of subsequent life events. It is an important reminder that when we use testimony as the basis of scholarly research we are writing about peoples' lives in which self-representation and understanding are often dynamic. Furthermore, his chapter highlights that while researchers often use certain aspects of the individuals' testimony to discuss a particular theme or issue, the individual is larger and more complex than any of the features we might be trying to understand.

Authors

Eva Fogelman is a social psychologist, psychotherapist, and filmmaker. She is the codirector of the International Study of Organized Persecution of Children, a project of Child Development Research. She pioneered awareness groups for the children of Holocaust survivors and intergenerational groups. She is also the founding codirector of Generations of the Holocaust and Related Traumas, and the Training Institute of Mental Health, as well as the founding director of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers, now the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. She is the author of the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, coeditor of *Children During the Nazi Reign: Psychological Perspective of the Interview Process*, and writer and coproducer of the award-winning documentary *Breaking the Silence: The Generation After the Holocaust*. She is, in addition, an adviser to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Sharon Kangisser Cohen is the Director of the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People and the Director of the Eli and Diana Zborowski Centre for the Study of the Aftermath of the Holocaust at Yad Vashem. She holds a PhD from the Hebrew University in the field of Holocaust studies. She is, in addition, a lecturer at the Rothberg School for international students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She has published numerous articles relating to the postwar lives of survivors of the Holocaust. Her most recent book, *Testimony and Time: Survivors of the Holocaust Remember*, was published in 2015 by Yad Vashem.

Dalia Ofer is the Max and Rita Haber Professor of Holocaust and East European Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (emerita). She was head of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry (2003–2007) and of the Vidal Sassoon International Research Center for the Study of Antisemitism (1995–2002). Her book *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel* (Oxford University Press, 1992) received the Ben Zvi award and the 1992 National Jewish Book Award. Her coedited volume, *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1999), was also a finalist for two National Jewish Book Awards. She is the coeditor of *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (Shalvi Publishing, 2007) and more recently of *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities* (Berghahn, 2012), as well as the editor of *Israel in the Eyes of the Survivors* (Hebrew; Yad Vashem, 2014).

Notes

1. For more on this issue see Kestenberg and Fogelman, *Children during the Nazi Reign*; Kangisser Cohen, *Child Survivors*; Kestenberg and Brenner, *The Last Witness*; Krell, "Child Survivors of the Holocaust: 40 Years Later, Introduction"; Moskovitz and Krell, "Child Survivors of the Holocaust."
2. Dwork, *Children with a Star*.
3. In Lublin as early as 1944, the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland interviewed Holocaust survivors in order to get an account of their wartime experiences. This interview project expanded to other European communities, such as the Wiener Library in London, the Centre of Contemporary Jewish Documentation in Paris, and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Between 1945 and 1946 the staff of the National Committee for Attending Deportees in Hungary (DEGOB), recorded the personal stories of approximately 5,000 Hungarian Holocaust survivors. The first to record survivor testimonies electronically and thus provide audio testimonies was American psychologist David Boder. Boder used a wire recorder for his 1946 project and gathered more than one hundred testimonies. Electronic recording of survivor testimonies did not, however, become general practice until a decade later, in the 1950s, when museums and memorials throughout the world began developing their own collections with survivors. The earliest of these collections was established at Yad Vashem, which began collecting testimonies in the late 1950s and 1960s.
4. The Yaffa Eliach child survivor interviews are now housed at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York City.
5. Lifton, *Home from the War*, 75–95.
6. Kestenberg, "Overview of the Effect of Psychological Research Interviews on Child Survivors" 5–13.

7. Ibid.; Kestenberg, "Overview of the Effect of Interviews, 63.
8. Auerbach, "A guide for collecting testimony", 6
9. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 8.
10. Ibid., 172.
11. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 25.
12. Niewyk, *Fresh Wounds*, 2. For more on this issue refer to Browning, *Collected Memories*.
13. Ofer, "The Community and the Individual," 532.
14. Ibid., 535.
15. Bruner, "Narrative and Paradigmatic Modes of Thought," 97.
16. Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, 16.

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