Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present

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This chapter analyzes ways in which the memories of Holocaust survivors are communicated and transmitted in their own families. The unique historical situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century, namely, the fact that three generations in Holocaust survivor families now interact with each other, invites new research and discussion. Many Holocaust survivors are still active, sharing their life stories in schools and synagogues. Their children, the so-called second generation, have mostly grown up as first-generation immigrants or refugees in a culture unfamiliar to their parents, and in the shadow of their parents’ traumatic experiences during World War II and the Holocaust. They have since embarked on a new experience for which they have not had role models; they have become (or will become) grandparents, often without ever having known their own. By now the grandchildren of the Holocaust survivors, the so-called third generation, have come of age and have begun their own inquiries and research. They have reflected on their family history and discovered their potential to act as “memory facilitators.” They are indeed “transcending memory.”

This chapter draws on personal interviews that I conducted as a scholar-in-residence at the Hadassah Brandeis Institute, documentary films, testimonies, psychological studies, and other scholarly works from the United States and Israel. While I focus mostly on survivor families in the United States, some of my interviewees in the second and third generations were born and raised in Israel, South Africa, or Lithuania before coming to the United States and developing their own postwar immigration narratives. The literary, artistic, and filmic representations analyzed here are the voices of the second and third generations. They are a small selection from a rich body of work, which deserves a more in-depth analysis than is possible here. For the purpose of this chapter I consider as a second-generation survivor anyone born in or after 1945 to at least one parent who was persecuted for being Jewish in
Nazi Germany or Nazi-occupied Europe. While I recognize the different experiences of someone born in the mid- and late 1940s and someone born in the 1960s to survivor parents, the differences between the younger and older representatives of the second generation are not at the center of this essay.

Drawing on the work of Holocaust Studies scholar Alan Berger, this chapter argues that the second generation and also, I might add, their descendants are ultimately seeking a tikkun (mending, repair) of self (atzmi) and the world (olam). Berger examines works of the second generation in literature and film from the perspective of what he calls “Jewish particularism” (tikkun atzmi) and “Jewish universalism” (tikkun olam). While tikkun, as a moral concept in Judaism certainly has theological roots, this chapter—in accordance with Berger—also considers its nonreligious implications. In addition to Berger’s binary concept of tikkun atzmi and tikkun olam, this essay also includes the notion of tikkun am (healing of the Jewish people) as a third option in which the second and third generations demonstrate their search for meaning and identity. Thus, my work shows the intergenerational shift and different ways of searching for tikkun.

The search for tikkun is closely linked to the post-Holocaust mourning process. All of the survivors’ life stories include either forced emigration and expulsion, or survival in hiding and in ghettos, labor, concentration, and extermination camps, as well as the survival of death marches. They were often the only survivors of previously close-knit families from strong, sizable Jewish communities. It was a common experience in Eastern Europe for three generations to live together, and the loss of the extended family was particularly tragic. While there was considerable variation in the ways that Holocaust survivors lived with their difficult experiences, most of their children remember a wall of silence in their families while growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. The survivors’ efforts to deal with their trauma, loss, guilt, and shame—all powerful emotions—were often exacerbated by their inability to find the language to share their experiences in a societal climate that was “not receptive to hearing survivors’ harrowing tales.” In her book We Remember with Reverence and Love, Hasia Diner argues that the “myth of silence” had been constructed by a rebellious generation of “historians, literary critics, popular writers and communal notables” in the United States to blame and shame their elders for not having been more concerned with the aftermath of the Holocaust and the lack of support for and understanding of the survivors who arrived as refugees in the United States. The author substantiates her argument by presenting, but often not contextualizing, a vast body of evidence, primarily from U.S. Jewish organizations and communities. She does not, however, conduct oral history interviews or examine individual experiences of survivors and liberators. Most strikingly, Diner eschews an analysis of familial settings, which are at the center of this chapter.
In most postwar survivor families the parents struggled with building new lives, raising children, and trying to shield them from harm and what they considered harmful information. Most second-generation adult children today recall that they did not have any details, but always knew something about “it.” Whatever this “it” might have been in any individual family, the second generation often felt an “obsessive need to imagine the Holocaust.”

Growing up in families of Holocaust survivors, many children were vaguely aware of their family’s painful past. Some were raised in circles of survivor families, while others hardly knew anybody who shared their experiences, worries, and questions. In most cases, however, the adult children recall “always having known about it.” One interviewee whose father was born in Austria remembered that she always knew that her father’s story was sad, that his parents had died under suspicious circumstances, and that his sister had suddenly disappeared. There was some mystery about her father’s past: “But I have to say that I did not really feel that sadness because [of] the way our father presented the story to us when we were small. He would talk a lot about his childhood and family life.” This example demonstrates that some survivors were cautious, trying not to further burden their children. The success of their attempts depended on their individual mourning and “working through” process. A male member of a second-generation discussion group featured in the documentary *Breaking the Silence* relayed his father’s memories, which always seemed to the son like “fairy tales, or rather adventure stories.” One of my interviewees recalled: “It was always talked about, but not in detail, and in steps and at different levels as we aged and our parents thought we could handle more — until I went to Eastern Europe. It was then that my father decided that I really wanted to know about it.”

The wall of silence differed from family to family. The memories of one second-generation survivor echo many others, including those of several of my interview partners:

My mother refused to talk about the Holocaust in a thorough way for a long time. I would only get hints—these people died, that family is extinct . . . The stories were interesting, scary, and meant to be a little removed, except that they smelled of . . . fear, buried and secret not meant to be shared with the kids. That smell came again later when my mother would talk about her nightmares, when she would often get depressed and hopeless . . . My father never mentioned the Holocaust. He refused to talk about it altogether.

Oral history interviews range from stories of survivor parents trying to shield their children from finding out about their Holocaust experiences to stories of parents incessantly talking about their pain and the past. In the first case, the teenage daughter incredulously informed her survivor parents...
about a terrible event in Europe called the Holocaust that she had learned about in school, and in the second example the teenage daughter begged her mother to stop talking about the horrors she had been through.

The analysis of family dynamics in survivor families is the focus of several studies by the late psychologist Dan Bar-On and his students, who concluded that it is impossible for parents to protect their children from their own oppressive memories: “‘Untold stories’ often pass more powerfully from generation to generation than stories that can be recounted. In addition, children are sensitive to their parents’ need for silencing.”

Based on Freud’s “working through” process of repressed childhood memories, clinicians have extended this concept and applied it to working with Holocaust survivors and also their children. Bar-On agrees with the clinicians who found that the children of survivors, without having experienced the horrors of the Holocaust directly, “absorbed” them through their parents, “especially if their parents did not talk about these matters in an attempt ‘to protect’ them [their children].” After interviewing several multigenerational survivor families, Bar-On developed a model of the “working-through process” for the third generation. It includes the five basic stages of knowledge, understanding, emotional response, attitude, and behavior. This paradigm highlights a significant difference between the second and third generation responses. While, according to Bar-On, the third generation reaches an emotional response after having worked through a cognitive process, I argue that this happens in the opposite sequence for the second generation. Whether the survivor parents talked about their Holocaust experiences or did not, they rarely transmitted knowledge about the historical events and their personal experiences. Furthermore, the third generation has gained knowledge about the Holocaust much earlier in life than their parents did. The inversion of the “working-through process” between the second and third generations leads to significantly different communication patterns and subsequently to an easier understanding between grandchildren and grandparents.

When the scholars and writers Helen Epstein, Lucy Steinitz, David Szonyi, psychotherapist Eva Fogelman, and others began their groundbreaking work with descendants of Holocaust survivors in the mid-1970s, some of the most pressing issues at the time were considered the lack of communication, “the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission in the shadow of the Holocaust,” and grief in Holocaust survivors’ families (though this was not necessarily the terminology used at that time). The majority of the second generation has not only grown up without grandparents, but some with the most disturbing images of how they were murdered. At least as haunting was their parents’ reluctant revelation that in many cases they once had spouses and children who did not survive the
war. The second generation began to live with the ghosts of the past, as this testimony demonstrates:

I never knew my paternal grandparents, and my father related only occasional anecdotes about them . . . I feel this silence is a direct effect of the painful legacy of the Holocaust. My grandmother Gitla, for whom I am named, remains a mystery for me. There are no family traditions or family rituals passed on from one generation to the next. Only one small and dark photograph of my grandparents remains in my father’s possession. It is as though the Holocaust has obliterated the memory of these close relatives.20

In the 1970s and 1980s the descendants of Holocaust survivors, many of them in their twenties, realized that despite the diverse circumstances in which they were raised, they also had surprisingly similar experiences growing up. Author Melvin Bukiet highlights the uniqueness of the second-generation childhood experience:

The Second Generation will never know what the First Generation knows in its bone, but what the Second Generation knows better than anyone else is the First Generation. Other kids’ parents didn’t have numbers on their arms. Other kids’ parents didn’t talk about massacres as easily as baseball. Other kids’ parents had parents.21

Unlike “American parents,” their parents spoke with distinct accents, often had number tattoos on their forearms, shrouded themselves in a cloak of secrecy, sometimes alluded to a dark past, and were torn between trying to fit into a new set of social and economic dynamics and maintaining aspects of their “old world” value systems. Several of the parents were the only survivors of their families. In the postwar years the survivors did not know how to deal with the trauma of suffering an unimaginable loss in any other way than to suppress their memories and grief. They also wanted to protect their children from hearing about the horrors they had to endure, and were at a loss for words that could convey their horrific experiences.22 A scene in the documentary Breaking the Silence includes one survivor who was interviewed in the presence of her husband and daughter. She recalls, on-camera, being forced to watch her mother’s selection at the gas chamber. The survivor cried out in exasperation: “How do you tell your child that the Nazis killed millions of humans, my mother among them?” Other parents spoke incessantly of the Holocaust, and as a result, some of their children felt so overwhelmed that they could not bear to hear the stories. One daughter describes her feelings:

I didn’t know how to block out these stories. I couldn’t cover my ears or turn away my face or even still the turmoil the words created in me. When my
mother talked her words came at me in wave after wave of pain and rage . . . Not until I was well into high school did I tell my mother that I couldn’t listen anymore, and, then, not seeing the pain I had suppressed, she accused me of not caring about her and left the room.  

Whether the survivor parents were silent, talked compulsively about their pain, or reconstructed anecdotes of courage and adventure, it was difficult for their children to even begin to fathom what their parents had been through. In the 1950s and 1960s the research on posttraumatic stress disorder and the magnitude of repressed trauma after the Holocaust was in its infancy, and therapy options were limited.

The children of Holocaust survivors grew up in social settings where the adults “had before and after spouses, before and after professions, incomes, relations to law, art, politics, success and failure, God.” The parents’ basic sense of self had been bifurcated by the war into a “Before” and an “After.” Their children often expressed their own burden of having “felt the force of this impenetrable mystery and terrible inheritance, this lack of a ‘Before.’” Susan Jacobowitz, professor of English and a descendant of a Holocaust survivor, states in the introduction to her doctoral dissertation on the second-generation experience: “As someone [in the] second generation I felt this force of this ‘impenetrable mystery,’ this lack of a ‘Before’ . . . [this] seems to be our particular burden.” Others in the second generation found strength in their family’s past: “[S]omething that I have as a child of survivors which second and third generation American people don’t have is still some connection with the rich Jewish cultural heritage which is gone now.” Writer Eva Hoffman also feels a significant difference “between coming into this world imbued with the Holocaust and having experiences of a more normal world before.” Or, as Melvin Bukiet succinctly puts it: “For the Second Generation there is no Before. In the beginning was Auschwitz.” For many in the second generation that meant to create their own version of a “Before.”

Marianne Hirsch, the daughter of Holocaust survivors and a professor of English and comparative literature, developed a theoretical framework for the second-generation experience, which she terms “postmemory.” The concept of postmemory, in Hirsch’s words, “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own related stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.” Hirsch argues that postmemory is not to be taken to literally mean memories, but the complexity of transmission of traumatic experiences through “the language of the body.” Hirsch’s notion provides a theoretical framework for the second-generation experience, and invites scholarly discussion on transmission.
of traumatic experiences, mourning, and memory. However, it hardly applies to the third generation: Hirsch defines postmemory “as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove.” I would also argue that postmemory requires a complex affective component, which is primarily present in the intimacy and immediacy of a parent-child relationship. The particular psychological aspects of the survivor parent and child relationship, such as mutual overprotectiveness, need for affirmation, guilt, and shame, have been thoroughly researched in the last thirty years and would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

Most of the survivor parents were young adults or came of age during the war. In many cases the war robbed them of their childhood, educational opportunities, youth activities, a regular family life, and often of beloved family members. The survivors often experienced teenage years in hiding or in camps and under the constant threat of death. Adolescence is arguably the most vulnerable time for any young person, but searching for survival under such stark realities is unfathomably difficult. Having been deprived of regular developmental stages such as teenage rebellion, the survivors often could not handle the behavior of their teenage children, whom they many times found to be ungrateful, demanding, and provocative. Their children’s adolescence evoked memories of their own horrible experiences at that age. The survivor parents could often not accept their children’s rebellion, and reacted in an upset or angry and violent way. One hurt, but ultimately forgiving daughter wrote particularly telling testimony. Her mother was liberated at age sixteen and married another survivor many years later. The marriage did not work out, and her mother was frequently very angry: “She also often belittled us, cursed us in English and in her native tongue and prophesized how we were destined to fail forever because of all our character flaws. These comments caused even more damage than her beatings. She made us feel terrible about ourselves.” As much as this daughter must have suffered from her mother’s violent outbursts, the daughter has raised her own children in the “opposite way.” Her healing process enabled her to parent her own children in a loving, caring way. Her mother must have gone through her own mourning and healing process so that she was able to become a “loving and sweet grandmother,” according to her daughter.

One of my interviewees, also a child of an unhappy marriage between two Holocaust survivors that ended in divorce, recalled her difficult home life. Her mother, whom she remembered as “tyrannical, physically abusive, oppressive, lonely, and miserable,” turned her life around after a suicide attempt. JF saw her role in the family while growing up as the “housekeeper and
peacekeeper” and was conscious of the fact that her mother had elected her to be the “memorial candle,” the one child who will carry on her story. However, JF heard the full story only when she was in her forties. Both women have long reconciled their earlier difficult relationship.37

Several studies concluded that the survivor parents considered their children born after the war as lifesavers, as symbols, as a triumph, and as substitutes for relatives they had lost.38 One daughter’s testimony painfully illustrates this aspect:

Sometimes when I didn’t want to listen to my mother’s diatribes about the war or anything else that may have been troubling her she would say to me, needing to hurt: “But you’re my mother to me, and my sister!” And though I wanted to turn away I was held by guilt . . . I did not ask: If I were my mother’s mother, who was mine?39

Another daughter recalled her mother’s obsession with the striking resemblance between her (the daughter) and her own mother: “She always told me I looked like her, and that I remind her of her mother. I do not want any part of this. I want to be me!”40 Yet another account speaks of the way in which the daughter had internalized her mother’s expectations: “My grandmother lives in me as . . . a set of attributes that I somehow tried to emulate, probably to make my mother happy.”41 The Jewish tradition of naming a baby after one of his or her ancestors takes on a new significance after the Holocaust . . . This is the case in particular for Ashkenazi Jews, who traditionally name their offspring after deceased relatives. This tradition of honoring a relative creates a bond not only to the past per se, but to the “Before” that the second generation is so painfully missing.

To symbolize the ancestors who were killed in the camps was a heavy burden for many in the second generation, but to “replace” a child that their parents “lost” during the war was almost unbearable. Of course, a child can never be “replaced,” but the parents’ unconscious desire to do so was often the source of familial fissures and conflicts. If one or both surviving parents had prewar families that were killed during the war, the overwhelming sense of grief and loss often overshadowed their postwar family life. They might not have been conscious of it, but their offspring often perceived themselves in competition with their prewar siblings, especially when the survivor parent had one child or several children together who were killed.

The literary and filmic treatments of this difficult topic vary from understated sadness and melancholy to self-deprecating humor. Thomas Friedman, in his novel Damaged Goods, a “thinly veiled memoir,”42 captures the heavy silence at home, occasionally punctured by the revelations of family secrets: “I find things out indirectly, discovering the older half-brother when Father
told me I need not say the blessing for the first born the morning before Pass-
over. Although my mother’s first, counting from Father, the real count, I am
second born.”

Art Spiegelman also grew up with the paradoxical presence of a brother in
absentia and reflects on his relationship to his “ghost brother” Richieu:

I didn’t think about him much when I was growing up . . . He was mainly
a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parents’ bedroom . . . The photo
never threw tantrums, or got in any kind of trouble . . . It was the ideal
kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete. They did not talk about
Richieu, but that photo was a kind of reproach. He’d have become a doctor
and married a wealthy Jewish girl . . . the creep.

While these examples explore the relationships of fathers and sons, inde-
pendent U.S. filmmaker Abraham Ravett, similarly to Friedman and Spiegel-
man searching for tikkun atzmi, pays tribute to his mother’s first child, her
daughter Tońcia, in his visually rich, experimental film Half Sister (1985). Both
of Ravett’s parents had prewar families, but only his mother was willing and
able to talk about her little daughter. The filmmaker’s brief interview foot-
age of his mother shows her overcome with emotion when relating the event
of one terrifying da
y in May 1944 when the children were separated from
their mothers and sent to Auschwitz. As Ravett’s mother eventually found out
upon her arrival there, the children had been killed. Ravett cuts the footage,
and his unfinished sentence, “The last time …” lingers with the viewer. Ravett
presents visual images that he associates with his half-sister’s lost life and
cinematographically alludes to the life full of potential that the brutal Nazi
annihilation denied her. In the words of Holocaust literary scholar Tomasz
Łysak, “The symbolic undoing of her death turns the attention to the void left
by the life cut short.” Underscoring the filmmaker’s intent to inspire “the
imagination to conceive a life that would have been,” silences accompany
his visual explorations of the only photo of his half-sister Tońcia, about four
years old, taken at a studio in Poland.

The existence of their parents’ prewar families often contributed to the
mystery the children born after the war experienced. In their adult lives,
some of these children wonder if their fathers’ silence and emotional unavail-
ability might also have been caused by the murder of their prewar families.
While in Abraham Ravett’s films Everything’s for You and Half Sister, his father’s
depression and distance are not verbalized, but captured in the father’s body
language, writer Daniel Vogelmann directly addresses this issue: “Today I
think that he [Vogelmann’s father] couldn’t let himself grow as attached as he
had been to Sissel [his father’s first child]: how could he have borne another
such loss, ever a possibility?” Many survivor parents, often subconsciously,
were afraid of emotional closeness to their children. One female survivor admits to her adult daughter, on camera, that she could not allow herself to become too attached to her out of fear that she could lose her, as she had lost everyone she loved in the camps.50 A daughter of a survivor put it even more strongly: “My mother did not want to have a child because she saw what happened to her other one [in the camps].”51 One of my interviewees, born in postwar Poland, always suspected her mother’s overprotectiveness to be because of her having had a prewar family. The interviewee felt too ashamed to ever ask her mother, and her mother, who had survived Auschwitz, never talked about her past in detail.52

Many adult children of Holocaust survivors felt burdened by the lack of a “Before,” a time in which their ancestors lived their normal lives. In order to see, feel, and experience their ancestors’ former places of residence in villages and towns all over Europe, the survivors’ descendants often embarked on the multigenerational, so-called “trips to Europe,” which became watershed events in the family dynamics and in the children’s and grandchildren’s biographies.

Marianne Hirsch contemplates her relationship to the “world of yesterday,” her parents’ Heimat of Czernowitz, which of course is not her parents’ world anymore.53

After embarking on a multigenerational trip to Czernowitz (Chernivtsi) with her family, Hirsch relays a common experience: “In a profound sense, nostalgic yearning in combination with negative and traumatic memory—pleasure and affection layered with bitterness, anger and aversion—are internalized by the children of the exiles and refugees, members of the ‘second generation.’”54

Depending on their ages, the unfathomable magnitude of the Holocaust that their parents had experienced on the most personal level had a different impact on the adult children when traveling through Europe. One of my interviewees became more religious, others questioned religion, and the Orthodox Jew and son of Holocaust survivors Menachem Daum challenged what he perceived to be his two sons’ insular dedication to studying the Torah. With his 2005 documentary Hiding and Seeking, the filmmaker sought to contribute to his sons’ religious tolerance by having them meet the Polish Catholic farmer family, the Muchas, who had sheltered their maternal grandfather and his two brothers for twenty-eight months in war-torn Poland, risking their own lives.55 Daum intentionally used the emotional family trip to Poland not only as a lesson toward a deeper understanding of the family’s history, but also to contribute to reconciliation between Jews and gentile Poles.56 This documentary is one of the few films that focus on multigenerational interaction and portray the family dynamics between three generations. Daum’s sons, who
follow their paternal grandfather’s strict orthodox teachings more closely than their father’s humanistic and conciliatory views, reluctantly decide to join their father on the trip to Poland, for their own reasons. Early in the film, Daum’s father-in-law, Chaim Federman, resents the family trip to Poland and warns against the gentle Poles as being dangerous and treacherous, despite the fact that Polish farmers saved him and his brothers. Maybe after more than sixty years Chaim still felt ashamed that he and his brothers neglected to adequately thank their rescuers and let them know that they made it safely to the United States after the war? While Daum was inspired by his search for tikkun olam, his sons were motivated to learn more about their family history and visit the sites of their ancestors’ survival. In his speech toward the end of the film, Daum’s son Tzvi Dovid acknowledges to the Muchas that “there is such an overwhelming sense of insurmountable debt that my grandfather has literally become paralyzed to act upon it.” In the end, Daum’s story of redemption comes full circle when we learn that Chaim and his brother have set up an education fund for the Muchas’ grandchildren and that the Muchas were officially honored as “Righteous among the Nations” by Yad Vashem.

Canadian actor and filmmaker Saul Rubinek already as a young boy wanted to see the cellar in which his parents survived for thirty-six months during the war. Two years after the publication of his book about his parents’ lives, So Many Miracles, Rubinek produced a documentary with the same title in 1987. Rubinek’s parents initiated the trip back to Poland, wishing to see their Polish rescuers again. The parents showed their son Saul, whom they raised in Canada, the places of their youthful happiness in Poland, where they fell in love, and where they endured the most painful moments of their lives. While in hiding, Rubinek’s mother gave birth to a baby daughter, who immediately died. The film captures, on camera, the emotional reunions between Rubinek’s parents and the Polish family who had hid them, and between his mother and her former girlfriend, who urged her to visit their former teacher, which she did. Rubinek and his parents narrate the film, and Rubinek intercuts the mid-1980s footage of reunions and interviews with archival photographs and dramatic reenactments. This stylistic choice is meant to give the film more texture and to visually recount and illustrate his parents’ experiences before and during the war. Overall, the movie has an upbeat mood; and as Rubinek stated in a 2007 interview, he would not have been able to make the documentary if his parents had not had their optimistic outlook and positive attitude.

While Daum’s agenda in producing his film Hiding and Seeking was from the onset explicitly the search for tikkun olam, Rubinek’s parents helped him see this as a goal in the process of filming in Poland.

The return to their parents’ places of childhood and youth and the search for the sites where their families once lived has been the motive for many
descendants of Holocaust survivors. Comedian Deb Filler invokes humor when telling about the 1990 trip with her father to his former hometown Brzozów, stopping in Prague on the way. Her father admonishes his daughter, whom he calls “Bebbski,” for not following the rules in a Czech restaurant:

You have to do as you’re told here. If you didn’t behave in the camps, they’d shoot you!
I was incredulous. I looked at him and said: “Dad, we’re not in the camps!”
He seemed surprised.

The trip to her ancestors’ former hometown in Poland, to their former store, and finally to the memorial that marked the site of their murder was a profoundly emotional and cathartic experience for Filler. At the actual places where her ancestors once lived and were murdered, Filler “could feel years of grief being tapped.”

One of my interviewees related her experiences when visiting her paternal and maternal ancestors’ former hometowns in Germany with her father and her eight-year-old son. Her parents’ families were able to escape Nazi Germany after having endured the “Aryanization” of their property, persecution, and abuse. DF’s mother was very conflicted about her daughter and grandson’s trip to Germany in 1998. In a letter she recalled her memories of a beautiful countryside and a carefree life, but also of beatings of the Jews, antisemitism, and the loss of her family in the Holocaust. DF’s mother has not returned to Germany because of her vivid and painful memories. DF and her son actually went in the house that her great-grandfather had built and were shocked to see items that clearly once belonged to her family. DF felt an eerie sense of both having come home to her ancestors’ culture and unease. Her inner conflicts regarding her background connect with her wishes that her son would carry on the family’s legacy.

An Israeli–born American filmmaker, Ornit Barkai also traveled with her daughter to Europe in search of her mother’s past and filmed there in 2001. Her mother, too, could not bear to return to her former home in Dorohoi in Romania from where, in November 1941, she was deported with her two older sisters and an uncle to the concentration camps in the then Romanian-controlled region of Transnistria. The film Past Forward is primarily narrated by the voiceover of Barkai’s daughter; on-camera interviews with several Ukrainian officials and old villagers in Kopystirin (the wartime Romanian name was Capusterna), where her then six-year-old mother spent two years of internment; and interviews with Barkai’s mother during family visits to the United States, painfully recalling her life in hiding in a pigsty in Kopystirin before she and her sisters moved into a villager’s house. The film is not linear and favors an associative approach over chronological accuracy. It focuses on
the interplay of footage from the road trip through the Ukraine with Barkai’s mother’s on-camera and her daughter’s off-camera narration. The juxtaposition of Barkai’s mother’s recollection of hunger and misery in the village and that of one eyewitness who claims that his family saved ten Jews provides one indirect answer as to why Barkai’s mother chose not to travel with her daughter and granddaughter to the places of her past, where she was victimized and traumatized. Although or because Barkai largely remained behind the camera and focused on the interactions between her mother and her daughter, her film’s composition is strongly influenced by seeking tikkun atzmi. By focusing on the grandmother-granddaughter interaction and narrative, Barkai both finds healing for herself and ensures that the family legacy keeps living on through her daughter.

While both men and women in the second generation have consciously decided to carry on their families’ legacies, it is perhaps not surprising that women have written the majority of second-generation autobiographical accounts about their families’ painful past. They often were designated or designated themselves to be the “memorial candles” for their families, as psychotherapist Dina Wardi puts it. She argues that perhaps because of the matrimonial line of Halachic law, the survivors tended to choose girls more often than boys as “memorial candles.” She concludes, “Another reason is that in Jewish families the role of taking care of emotional problems within the family is generally a feminine role.”61 This, however, is rarely unique to survivor families. Eva Fogelman attributes the identification of survivors’ daughters with their mothers to the “identity and development of the female offspring.”62 The 2001 Israeli documentary film Last Journey into Silence portrays problematic mother-daughter relationships in the setting of a mental institution. Filmmaker Shosh Shlam explained the reasons for and approach to her haunting film in an interview:

I am the daughter of a Holocaust survivor who alone survived his entire family. As a child I lived with the nightly screams and inherited the pain, the wound that is bleeding still. The inner bleeding led me to search for survivors, those whose lives are flooded by night. I began my quest for survivors in hospitals throughout the country. Then I heard a hostel was about to be opened for Holocaust survivors, the first of its kind in the world, at Shaar Menashe Hospital. Survivors who were hospitalized for thirty or forty years in mental institutions were going to live there . . . I chose women to get away from my father. . . . Silence was the story. They [the survivors] were imprisoned inside the hell of their memory, which they carry inside. They do not remember the Holocaust; they live it. They survived the death marches but in fact died in them.63
Shlam films the daily routines at the facility and the routine visits of three daughters to see their mothers, who have for decades suffered severely from posttraumatic stress disorder. Her film explores the inner trauma of the older women, who have lost any concept of time, as well as the selfless kindness of their daughters, who have long surrendered to the role reversal that their mothers’ emotional and mental conditions have required of them.

The children of survivors frequently were able to engage in dialogues with their mothers much longer, not only because often their mothers were more open about their harrowing pasts, but also because a disproportionate number of male Holocaust survivors predeceased their wives. One of the few exceptions was the tragic story of Art Spiegelman’s mother, who committed suicide in 1968. There are many reasons why the majority of wives outlived their husbands in survivor families, such as general life expectancy and gendered roles in household and society, but postwar strategies for coping with trauma and gendered responses to societal expectations regarding emotions and decision making also played a role. As the first group of second-generation survivors began grappling with their families’ tragic past, some of their fathers died prematurely and left their children with many unanswered questions. Ravett includes some of those questions in his film Everything’s for You, which he edited and completed ten years after his father’s death. Subsequently, the temporal and spatial distance between the father’s image and son’s sound can be overcome only in the last stages of the film production process, as a posthumous tribute to Ravett’s father. Ravett deals in several of his films with what he considers the dilemma of his upbringing, which he is still “unpacking.”

Certainly the second generation has been examined, reexamined, and examined itself in literature, art, film, psychological studies, and other scholarly works. After the societal and familial silence about the Holocaust was shattered, the (self-) designation as the family’s legacy carrier in the second and now in the third generation usually falls to the female family members. The message “you are the continuing generation” became louder and clearer as the survivor parents aged:

Behind us are death and infinite emotional emptiness. It is your obligation and your privilege to maintain the nation, to reestablish the vanished family and to fill the enormous physical and emotional voids left by the Holocaust in our surroundings and our hearts.

While some of the second-generation offspring have been very outspoken and have become prolific writers, filmmakers, and artists, and along with many of their peers have dedicated their life and work to this legacy, others still feel too close to the trauma, as this testimony of a second-generation survivor on the effect of her family’s Holocaust memory on her daughters shows:
It's affecting them again the same way the horror was passed on to my brother and me—by the intimation of things too horrible to express, by atrocities too incomprehensible to render meaningful, by the notion of vast and threatening evil... Helping her [the older daughter] to deal with it was excruciating. You can learn to bear, to love, to survive, but ultimately you cannot render positive meaning to the horror.67

Many in the second generation might have enjoyed what they perceived to be a close connection to a lost world or been haunted by the question of how their lives as part of European Jewry would have turned out without the Holocaust. However, the third generation has a very different perspective. They want to find out who their great-grandparents were, where and how they lived, and what happened to them during the war. Having been socialized in the United States or Israel with a robust sense of Jewish identity, they relate to the lost communities of their grandparents and their persecution during World War II often on an intellectual level. An exception was my interviewee Rebecca, at the time of the interview a graduate student at Brandeis University. She commented on her very emotional trip to Poland in 2005, when she traced her ancestors’ forgotten communities, pensively walked through old Jewish graveyards, trying in vain to find her great-grandfather’s grave. She enjoyed imagining “how it once was,” and found a closer connection to her grandmother by seeing where she once lived before she settled in Israel.68 Rebecca’s mother had been instrumental in researching the family history and instilling a passion in her daughter for uncovering secrets from the past.

In some families, the second generation was not able to unlock the family history. Like many others, RS’s mother felt “tortured” by her father’s nightmares when growing up, and she “did not want to have anything to do with the Holocaust.”69 The second generation has in many cases laid the groundwork for their descendants to carry on the family history and the legacy of the Holocaust. But even if they had not opened the way, the third generation has many times taken it upon themselves to research and tell their grandparents’ stories, even to their parents, who often do not know any details about their own parents’ lives before and during the war.70 The grandparents often found it easier to relate their experiences during the Holocaust to their grandchildren rather than to their own children, and to help them with school assignments trying to understand the historic events on a personal level.71 The grandparent-grandchild relationship is less fraught with psychological and interpersonal conflicts than the parent-child relationship. Grandparents are often emotionally more available and more open to telling their grandchildren about their experiences during the Holocaust. In addition to the interpersonal aspects, a societal acceptance and validation makes it easier for
the grandparents to share their stories—and for the grandchildren to want to hear them. The survivor generation has created a special bond with their grandchildren’s generation. Psychologist Eva Fogelman found that “it is easier for survivors to share their lives with their grandchildren.” Unlike their parents, who in many cases grew up without grandparents, the third generation developed close relationships with their grandparents through multigenerational family interactions.

The third generation is transcending parts of their grandparents’ memory that they either received in direct conversation with them, narrated by their parents, or both. Their quest, much less burdened with interpersonal and emotional issues compared to that of their parents, tries to situate their family’s past in a geohistorical context. Drawing on Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,” my notion of “transmemory” might provide a useful model for the third generation. Similar to “postmemory,” the term “transmemory” does not address literally personal memories, but rather the reverberations of memories from past generations. This chapter argues that the third generation transcends these memories in the new millennium. I use the term “transcending” with its religious connotation in the sense that many in the third generation have either maintained or, even more, intensified their religious observance in comparison to their ancestors. But the third generation is also “transcending” memory in a nonreligious, philosophical, existential way. By contextualizing their family history in a geohistorical and political framework, the third generation seeks to make the memory of the Holocaust relevant for today and the future. They also seek to “transcend” the lessons of the Holocaust in order to stop current genocides and prevent future ones.

The relationship between the survivors and their children was often determined by a “double wall” between them. One of my former students in the Oral History course, descendant of a survivor herself, recognized this “double wall” when interviewing Holocaust survivor SB from Austria. He was initially very reluctant in answering personal questions and much preferred to talk about his political views and to lecture about the Holocaust. Both Hillary and SB felt the existence of a wall between them. In Hillary’s first interview with SB, she felt that he “put up a wall,” answering some of her questions in a guarded way and avoiding others. But when SB shared his observation with her in the third interview that he sometimes felt like he was “talking to a wall,” Hillary realized the existence of a “double wall.” Her “working-through process” culminated in the dance piece A Moving History, which she choreographed as part of her senior thesis at Goucher College. Hillary transcends SB’s and her own relatives’ memories and the interaction between her and the survivors into movement. The symbolic dismantling of a “wall” became not only the primary set device, but also one of the central themes of her chore-
ography. She concludes: “The wall also depicts the process of breaking down the boundaries everybody has, especially when disclosing painful and personal details of the past. However, through breaking down these walls, truth, knowledge, understanding and healing can surface.”

As a final reflection, after a guided tour through Poland, another one of my former students wrote a letter to his deceased survivor-grandparents. In the letter he tried to explain and justify his participation in an international student program in which he traveled to Germany and Poland, which included several concentration camps. He concluded his letter:

I recognized that my ultimate purpose in grappling with the Holocaust is twofold. One is to honor your humanness . . . Both of you survived the Holocaust and, while this had a profound effect on your lives and will [continue to] have on the fate of our family, this tragedy didn’t define either one of you . . . The second purpose is to continue this dialogue with Jews and non-Jews alike for the sake of my grandchildren (should they someday materialize).

Being two steps removed from the horrors of the Holocaust, many in the third generation are also searching for tikkun, but they have shifted or are in the process of shifting from tikkun atzmi to tikkun am or tikkun olam. In his novel entitled Everything Is Illuminated, Jonathan Safran Foer, himself the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, fictionalizes his own trip to the Ukraine in search of the woman who might have saved his maternal grandfather’s life during the war. He is concerned not only with his own geographical and spiritual journey, but also with gaining an understanding of a different time and a different culture. The fact that Foer managed to do all that with a subtle sense of self-deprecating humor and an accomplished play with language made his novel widely popular. Not all grandchildren of survivors feel the need to explore present-day Eastern Europe as author Jonathan Safran Foer did. One of my interviewees, Ilan, at the time of the interview a senior at Brandeis University, firmly states that he would not travel to Eastern Europe or Germany, “out of respect for my ancestors. It is just inappropriate.” However, he feels deeply committed to carrying on the family legacy and searching for tikkun am. For him, one of the most important lessons of the Holocaust is that the Jewish people need to be united, including in their support for Israel. Another interviewee, RG, is in total agreement regarding unwavering support for Israel since it gave her grandparents a new life, and it has become a very important part of her own life. She takes the opposite approach, however, regarding visiting her ancestors’ former homes. In her opinion the only way to show respect for her ancestors is to literally trace their steps and walk on their cobblestone streets. Yet another former Brandeis student, RS, also stresses
the importance of supporting Israel as a safe haven for Jews, but unlike RG, she did not want to visit her grandmother’s towns on her trip to Europe because she did not want to endure the hostility of the current occupants of her family’s former, now dilapidated home. Some of her family members actually went back for a visit, but it was a terrible experience for them. RS echoes what they must have reported upon their return to the United States: “Back to what? It is not their home anymore.” RS feels very strongly that she has the responsibility of preserving her family history. Since RS cannot connect to her grandmother’s lost Jewish community in Uzhgorod in western Ukraine, she focuses instead on the few tangible objects that her grandmother was able to save. In telling her family history on the basis of few everyday objects, RS transcends time and space. The candlesticks that held the candles her great-great grandmother lit in her home in the 1800s still serve this purpose in RS’s life. Their odyssey from a shtetl in eastern Europe to a new home in the United States tells of the horrible twentieth-century tragedy, the Shoah. RS’s senior thesis argues for the symbolic character of these objects, which to her also signify Jewish identity. They symbolize lives lived and lives lost, love and tragedy. RS’s inquiry into the past engaged her grandmother in such a way that “by focusing on the objects . . . she was able to comfortably tell their stories.” After sixty years, RS’s grandmother felt the need to share her and her family’s story with her granddaughter, who vowed to carry on the family legacy. Both are grateful to each other for the mutual trust and the opportunity “to pass on her story to the next generations.” RS’s desire to preserve her family story and her grandmother’s donations to the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York suggest their interest in the continuity of Jewish traditions and tikkun am, the healing of the Jewish people.

“Transmemory” is a multilayered process influenced by familial and societal dimensions first and foremost, which addresses the notion that the third generation directly interacts with their grandparents-survivors, listening to their memories of the Holocaust, examining artifacts and family heirlooms that their grandparents brought to the United States, and inviting their grandparents to speak at their schools. The grandparents are now, much more so than when they raised their own children, in a position to reflect on their experiences in and memory of the Holocaust, to research their lost Jewish communities in Europe, and to engage in dialogues with historians, teachers, writers, and younger generations. Even though some of my interviewees in the third generation experience the burden of their grandparents’ feelings of guilt placed on them, the generational remove allows for an emotionally more balanced response. RG recognizes that her grandmother’s projections of “guilt” onto her are the result of a life of deprivation and discrimination. The geohistorical knowledge of the Holocaust allows RG and many others in her
The third generation is also affected by what they sometimes perceive to be snide comments by their grandparents regarding today’s comfortable lives and educational opportunities. The grandparents do not mean to be critical, but the comforts of a carefree childhood and youth that they first noticed in their own children and now in their grandchildren sometimes trigger the memories of their own losses, for which the mourning process will never be fully completed. According to Eva Fogelman and other psychologists, the second and also the third generation, to differing degrees, are engaged in a mourning process along with the survivors. While the third generation is the “memory facilitator,” the second generation, in their double role of children and parents, facilitates the mourning process in many survivor families.

The survivors also want to come to terms with their past and leave their personal legacy and that of the Holocaust with their grandchildren. In several families the grandchildren have consciously chosen to become more observant than their grandparents and transcend memory on a religious level. These grandchildren consider the religious tradition in their families tragically interrupted by the Holocaust and see their role in mending this rift. On yet another level, some grandchildren are transforming their grandparents’ memories into books of remembrance, research projects, storytelling events, art, and even dance.

Several psychologists have argued that the members of the third generation tend to be “higher achievers than their peers” (Fogelman), that they feel a sense of pride and awe toward the survivors (Hogman), and that their survivor-grandparents’ love and attention toward them have resulted in a greater resilience compared to their peers (Sigal). One descendant describes her unique form of transcending her grandmother’s experiences: “Since my grandma is reminded of her experience every time when she looks at her arm [with the tattooed number from Auschwitz] I got a Star of David tattoo to remind me never to forget what happened, and to show my pride. The Holocaust also influences my everyday life because it had made me realize that similar torture and systematic murder still occur today.”

We do not yet have enough gender-related data analyzing differences in the third generation in carrying on the family legacy. Empirical impressions confirm, though, that the role of the “remembearer” (Nava Semel) continues to be primarily female. In self-selected groups such as Internet forum discussion groups and among my interview partners, the young women clearly outnumber the young men. Future research would need to delve deeper into the causes and the extent to which this is the case. One of my third-generation male interviewees grew up with a general knowledge about the Holocaust, but his family did not acknowledge that the Holocaust was not only a

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collective, but also an individual and personal experience. His grandmother, who survived the Lodz ghetto and the Auschwitz concentration camp, “never ever talked about it with anyone else but my sister.”

Further research would also need to address the question of how the third generation has affected the position of the second generation. With the coming of age of the third generation, the shift from trauma to legacy, from *tikkun atzmi* to *tikkun am* and *tikkun olam* is beginning. A comparative study between the United States and Israel would be a necessary step in understanding similarities and differences in the ways the third generation acts as “memory facilitator” not only between the generations, but also in their respective cultures.

**NOTES**


2. While most children in the second generation grew up without grandparents, this was not necessarily a universal experience. Geohistorical differences and individual circumstances allowed for exceptions. Most notably, multigenerational survivor families came from the Budapest ghetto in Hungary, parts of Transnistria under the Romanian control during the war, and Western Europe. The most important variables include age, location, and rescue possibilities.

3. I am indebted to Joanna Beata Michlic, director of the “Project on Families, Children, and the Holocaust” at the Hadassah Brandeis Institute (HBI). I was privileged to be part of this project at HBI in the spring 2010 semester.

4. This especially concerns Israeli feature films and literary works in both the United States and Israel.


7. Author interviews with LG, March 12, 2010, Weston, Massachusetts; StS, January 15, 2010, Baltimore, Maryland; and DK, April 25, 2010, Newton, Massachusetts.

8. Efraim Sicher, *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 71. The equivalent in the Israeli context is the reference to “coming from there.”
16. Ibid., 17f.
19. Eva Fogelman (and other psychologists), based on Freud’s definition of trauma, maintain that trauma itself cannot be transmitted. The second generation was raised by traumatized parents, but by and large did not experience trauma themselves.
25. Ibid.
27. Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, tape 94, as cited in Lawrence Langer, Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), x.
32. Ibid., 106.
34. StS, interview with the author, January 15, 2010, Baltimore, Maryland.
35. JF, interview with the author, January 31, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts.
40. Fogelman and Mason, *Breaking the Silence*.
45. In Ravett’s film *Everythings for You*, his father briefly mentioned his prewar children, a son and a daughter, killed at ages eight and eleven. A photo of Ravett’s father and his first wife, pushing a baby carriage, is floating across the screen. In an attempt to elicit his father’s memories more easily, Ravett asks his questions in Yiddish, whereas his father continues to answer them in heavily accented English.
48. I use the term *prewar families* in a broad sense here, referring to a time before the Nazi occupation and subsequent atrocities. The time frame varies depending on country and location.
51. Fogelman and Mason, *Breaking the Silence*.
52. EE, interview with the author, January 13, 2010, Baltimore, Maryland.
54. Ibid., 261.
55. *Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust*, produced and directed by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky (PBS, August 30, 2005), video.
57. So Many Miracles, directed by Vic Sarin and Katherine Smalley (Canada: Alternative Pictures and CBC, 1987), DVD, 58 min. Available from the National Center for Jewish Film, Waltham, Massachusetts.

58. Ibid. Saul Rubinek, interview with Max Roper, 2007, DVD.


60. DF, interview with the author, February 10, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts.

61. Wardi, Memorial Candles, 32.


64. In my samples, which include interviews and testimonials of the writers and filmmakers whose works are analyzed here, fifteen husbands predeceased their wives as opposed to four wives who predeceased their husbands.


66. Wardi, Memorial Candles, 30.


68. Rebecca Gil, interview with the author, April 19, 2010, Boston, Massachusetts.

69. Rebecca Shapiro, interview with the author, March 8, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts.


71. See Barkai’s documentary Past Forward, in which her daughter’s narration is based on an essay she wrote as a school assignment. In Israel and South Africa, the “roots projects” also aim for the students to get a sense of history by interviewing their grandparents. Cf. Bar-On, Fear and Hope, 32, and Robin Porter (name changed), interview with the author, March 11, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts.


75. Ilan (name changed), interview with the author, February 8, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts.

76. Rebecca Gil, interview with the author, April 19, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts.

77. Rebecca Shapiro, Memories Never Die: The Significance of Objects in a Survivor’s Tale (senior thesis, Brandeis University, 2010).


79. Author interviews with TP, March 11, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts; Ilan (name changed), February 8, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts; MB, March 30, 2010, Baltimore,
Maryland; LK, March 9, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts; AP, March 12, 2010, Waltham, Massachusetts; and RS, May 13, 2010, Boston, Massachusetts.


85. RS, interview with the author, May 13, 2010, Boston, Massachusetts.