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## Fifty Years After *Kristallnacht*: Another Second-Generation Perspective

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Because of the imprecision and fallibility of memory, society, in order to facilitate collective remembrance of the past, commemorates specific events. *Kristallnacht*, the destruction of over two hundred synagogues throughout German-speaking Europe, accompanied by the plundering of countless Jewish businesses and residences, on November 9 – 10, 1938, is such an event. A prelude to a far darker chapter in human history, one which ordinary reason seeks to reject, it would become, in the aftermath of events to follow, symbolic of the shattered lives and the destroyed Jewish heritage that had been rooted in European soil for centuries. In retrospect, the significance of *Kristallnacht*, an event whose denouement found expression in mass murder, encompasses more than German Jewry, against whom it was specifically aimed, but extends to all of European Jewry. Remembrance of *Kristallnacht* cannot be separated from remembrance of the Holocaust.

What occurred on November 9 – 10, 1938 has come to be seen as the dividing point; it was the beginning of the end of Jewish life in Europe. Within three months after that night of depredation and senseless violence, Hitler, in his January 30, 1939 address to the Reichstag, threatened to extirpate all of Jewry, a program the official implementation of which was undertaken at the Wannsee Conference less than three years later. Only few of Europe's Jews were to survive.

The passage of fifty years since the occurrence of the brutality of November 1938 represents a watershed period in the efforts to solidify a collective remembrance. It has given the survivors, those most affected by the events that began with *Kristallnacht*, as well as society in general, time to reflect and to attempt to absorb and digest an understanding of the Holocaust and its significance in history. A half century has also facilitated the fading and blurring of memories. This was all too painfully demonstrated by the witnesses describing their ordeal at the Treblinka extermination camp during the recent trial of John Demjanjuk in Israel, and it has also given society the time con-

sciously to forget the meaning of the Holocaust, as was witnessed when an American president honored the rebirth of German democracy by paying homage at a German military cemetery in Bitburg containing the graves of SS members. The present period will undoubtedly assume an increasingly critical role as the transition between those who knew and those who must learn of this most sanguinary period in a far-too-bloodied century.

The survivors, already having been exhausted by their unprecedented life experiences, are now elderly, and their ranks inevitably grow thinner each year. However much time has passed, the experience they endured has left indelible marks, and no amount of time can ever erase the anguish or remove the scars inflicted by the Nazi years. Perhaps more than anything else, the notion that time has healed the wounds left by the Holocaust mirrors the extent of the widespread lack of understanding of the cataclysm that befell European Jewry. Primo Levi, himself an Auschwitz survivor, stated in *The Drowned and the Saved*, and ultimately confirmed by his subsequent suicide, that "the injury cannot be healed: it extends throughout time."<sup>1</sup> Upon liberation, these survivors, distraught and alone, channeled their energies for that which was, most understandably, of prime concern—rebuilding their shattered and uprooted lives. From this rebuilding has emerged the generation imprinted with the legacy of their parents' experiences, the offspring born to the remnants of European Jewry. The coming of age of the Second Generation has reaffirmed its unique position as the bridge between the survivors, those who experienced directly the Nazi horrors, and all succeeding generations who will have never known the survivors or heard first-hand of their experiences.

We, the children of Holocaust survivors, approach this fiftieth commemoration of *Kristallnacht* with a mixture of uncertainty and challenge, sobered by the reality of the inevitable toll extracted by the passage of time. We face the task of confronting a future built upon a past so full of devastation and despair, combined with the challenge to ensure that in a world where no more eyewitnesses will remain their experiences in the Holocaust will not be forgotten. We must do so while recognizing the profound impacts these events have had in making us who, and what, we are.

Any discussion of the effects of the Holocaust on the Second Generation must be prefaced with the caveat that the effects are as myriad

and diverse as the people to whom they refer. None can be quantified or otherwise measured with certainty, yet their existence remains beyond doubt. Only now as adults reflecting upon the consequences of our parents' experiences on our lives can we discern trends that have emerged and will mark many of us for the rest of our lives. To varying degrees, these effects are ubiquitous, touching matters of general concern—personalities, attitudes, perceptions, and lifestyles—and those of specific facets of our lives—choice of careers, spouses, and friends.

Common to many of the Second Generation is the acute awareness of time within its historical framework, a phenomenon which becomes ever more apparent with the harsh reality of growing older. Fifty years, which once seemed a lifetime, now becomes far more familiar as we look back as well as ahead. The differences separating us from our peers are underscored through this dual perspective. Whereas most who contemplate the time phenomenon through the kaleidoscope of past and future do so within the confines of their own immediate lifetimes, we, the children of Holocaust survivors, do so with a far more expansive perspective. Ours encompasses not only our individual upbringing under unconventional circumstances, but also the lives of our parents which had been so violently disrupted.

For us, the Second Generation, it has meant not having the luxury of an insouciant childhood, a time in which we merely sensed differences that we are only now beginning to understand. We have carried the pains of having limited families, of being deprived of grandparents and extended families, matters that will continue to remain with us. We remember discussing people whom, but for the Nazi savagery, we could have seen and heard, people who for us will always remain no more than a concept.

Unlike our American peers, we cannot seek solace in the past, for the ties to our collective ancestral community have been severed. We find ourselves in the dilemma of being far more sensitive and aware of the significance of a past that cannot offer the continuity upon which we could anchor ourselves. It is indeed ironic that the more we learn about our collective history, the less we become able to fathom its incomprehensibility or turn to it for direction or guidance. Our predicament in confronting the tenebrous events of the past is akin to the dilemma expressed by Saul Friedlander in describing the "historian's paralysis" in confronting the history of Nazi Germany: "We know the details of what occurred, we are aware of the sequence of events and

their probable interaction, but the profound dynamics of the phenomenon evade us.”<sup>2</sup>

We nonetheless remain aware that it is incumbent upon us to insist that none be permitted to forget a past whose meaning eludes us. In this regard, the task of the Second Generation becomes more difficult than that of our parents. In projecting ahead we must perpetuate a “memory” of events we never experienced, but only learned of through them and their tales. Obligated to think beyond our own lifetime so that those events will neither become trivialized nor become a footnote to history, we thus have thrust upon us the unique responsibility to make what will soon amount to a lesson in history remain a potent and driving force in shaping a collective conscience.

If, as the Second Generation, our awareness of time and history separates us from our peers, so too does our spatial orientation. As Americans, our horizon of concerns reaches beyond one’s immediate environment to circumstances affecting our nation and the world. These interests embrace a greater cognizance of the relationship between the individual and the society of which he is a part, a recognition of the importance of the protection afforded the individual by the state against majoritarian prejudices. Stemming from a knowledge of the experiences of our parents, this perspicacity manifests itself not only with a trenchant interest in the events of our society but with a specific concern for the institutional safeguards that have been erected in order to guard against majoritarian zeal and excesses.

Sensitivity to intolerance and to the precarious position of an individual perceived by the mainstream of society to be an outsider, undoubtedly in part arising from our personal identification with the victims of the Holocaust, has acted as an unquantifiable influence upon the lives of many in Second Generation. This bond among us not only reinforces our intellectual understanding of the Holocaust and its significance, but also alerts us to the meaning and import of the Torah’s admonition that “there came unto Egypt a new king who knew not Joseph.” Sensitivity to the fate of the individual was clearly expressed by Justice Felix Frankfurter, himself an immigrant Jew who “escaped” the Holocaust through the fortuity of his parents having emigrated some fifty years before. In a decision involving the rights of Jehovah’s Witnesses to resist the homogenizing power of the secular state, Justice Frankfurter stated what perhaps has become a major

influence on the thoughts and motivations of many of the Second Generation, an expression given far greater urgency because it was written during the Holocaust: "One who belongs to the most vilified and persecuted minority in history is not likely to be insensible to the freedoms guaranteed by our Constitution."<sup>3</sup>

As the Holocaust has been the "central moral question of our time," so too it remains the pivotal event in our collective development, around which we, a generation after, have built our lives, and around which our *Weltanschauung* has evolved. It continues to be a focal point of our existence, influencing, consciously or otherwise, many of our decisions and actions. It is this collective consciousness of the Holocaust that is the *raison d'être* of those children of Holocaust survivors who have chosen to associate with the goals of Second Generation.

Abba Eban has very succinctly described this impact on the post-Holocaust generations of Jews, and what he has written applies with even greater force to Second Generation, the people upon whom its meaning has been personally and individually imprinted through the sufferings of our parents and their tormented postwar lives, into which each of us, standing as a surrogate for some unknown ancestor, was born.

Jewish history and consciousness will be dominated for many generations by the traumatic memories of the Holocaust. No people in history has undergone an experience of such violence and depth. The sharp Jewish reaction to movements of discrimination and prejudice; an intoxicated awareness of life, not as something to be taken for granted but as a treasure to be fostered and nourished with eager vitality, a residual distrust of what lies beyond the Jewish wall, a mystic belief in the undying forces of Jewish history, which ensure survival when all appears lost, all these together with the intimacy of more personal pains and agonies, are the legacy which the Holocaust transmits to the generation of Jews grown up under its shadow.<sup>4</sup>

With the fiftieth commemoration of *Kristallnacht* upon us, it is indeed appropriate, while recalling the suffering of the survivors and honoring their courage and resiliency in triumphing over the Nazi evil, to reflect upon the ramifications and consequences for the generation after.

*Notes*

1. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 24.
2. Saul Friedlander, "From Anti-Semitism to Extermination: A Historiographical Study of Nazi Policies Toward the Jews and an Essay in Interpretation" *Yad Vashem Studies* 16 (1984): 50.
3. *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 646 (1943) (Frankfurter, J., dissenting).
4. Abba Eban, *My People: The Story of the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 416–17.