What is Survivor Guilt among Holocaust Survivors Who Have Experienced Concentration Camps and then Immigrated to America?

If one fully learns the details that describe the events of the Holocaust, the catastrophe will still remain a difficult concept to grasp. Between the years of 1939 to 1945, the German Nazi regime and its collaborators tortured and slaughtered six million Jews because of ill feelings of racism and hate. The Nazis deported many Jews to labor camps and death camps where millions died of mistreatment, disease, starvation, overwork or gassing. This study will explore how survivor guilt, a feeling of having done wrong or failed in an obligation by surviving a traumatic event, is manifested in Holocaust Survivors who have experienced the concentrations camps and then immigrated to America. I will discuss how survivor guilt is related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a disorder common to those who have experienced a traumatic event. I will examine scholarly literature and various memoirs written by survivors in order to demonstrate that Survivor Guilt is a common manifestation of Post Traumatic Stress

1 John P. Wilson, Boris Drozdek and Silvana Turkovic, “Postraumatic Shame and Guilt,” Trauma Violence Abuse 7, no. 2 (April 2006): 123.

Disorder among Holocaust survivors who experienced concentration camps and eventually settled in America.

There were about 500,000 concentration camp survivors in total. Unfortunately the literature we have today does not differentiate between Jewish and Non-Jewish survivors. A Jewish demographic study done in the year 2000-2001 showed that 122,000 Jewish victims of the Nazi regime reside in the United States. Of the 122,000 victims, approximately 35,000 of them were flight victims who were able to flee Nazi Germany and other areas conquered by the Nazis, and 87,000 of them lived under Nazi control. Among those who lived under Nazi control, 16,000 were labor camp survivors and 21,000 were concentration camp survivors. The survivors mentioned above are known as “Holocaust Survivors.”

A Holocaust survivor is a Jew who was in hiding, sent to a concentration camp, extermination camp, and/or ghetto but managed to survive the horrific experience known as World War II. There were about 20,000 concentration camps and subcamps established during the Nazi regime that had Jewish inmates. Among the most notorious were Auschwitz/Birkenau, the largest camp of them all, where 1.3 million Jews were sent and 1.1 million murdered; Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Belzec where 500,000 were

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killed; Majdanek where 170,000 were killed; Plaszow and Treblinka where a total of 750,000 and 870,000 Jews were killed. The camps differed from one another in several ways. There were forced labor camps, extermination camps, and ones that were mixed. The conditions common to them all were horrific and left an emotional and psychological impact on the survivors’ years after the experience.

Michael Nutkiewicz, a professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia who has a Ph.D. from University of California, Los Angeles in History and who served as the Senior Historian of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, believes that all Holocaust survivors were in actual danger of death by the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. They were publicly dehumanized. Nutkiewicz stated that, “During the Holocaust, Jews endured a corporate rape that took place in public places. Just as rape in the private space elicits the sense of having been dishonored and thus violated morally, physical assault in the public arena was meant to dishonor the corporate body and thus violate the Jewish people morally.” Though not a survivor himself, his study of the Holocaust survivor experience allowed him to make this


7 Berenbaum and Skolnik, 390.


statement, saying that Jews were “violated morally” due to the public nature of their torture.

Holocaust survivors who endured the concentration camps suffered from a wide scope of emotional wounds that, for many, had never healed. Feelings of guilt and shame are one of the most common emotional side effects the Holocaust has left them with. This textbook definition of guilt refers to both feelings of responsibility and fear of punishment: “feelings of culpability arising from behavior or desires contrary to one’s ethical principles. It involves both self-devaluation and apprehension growing out of fear of punishment.”\textsuperscript{11} Survivors feel guilty for a variety of causes, all of which serve to intensify their feelings of worthlessness. The terms “concentration camp syndrome,” “survivor guilt,” and “survivor syndrome” have been used interchangeably for the past 50 years in order to describe a widespread symptom among Holocaust survivors, as it has been assumed present in almost all survivors of the Holocaust. However, the American Psychological Association does not limit the definition of survivor guilt to concentration camp survivors; it states that it can be experienced by any survivor of a tragedy, family members who do not carry a harmful genetic mutation that can cause disease and death when others in their family have it, and by family and friends who feel that they did not do enough to help their loved ones before they died.\textsuperscript{12}

A general definition of survivor guilt is offered by Donna Marzo, a psychologist engaged in private practice in Washington D.C.: that it is often experienced by those who

\textsuperscript{11} Nutkiewicz, 11.

escape from a disaster that seriously harmed and killed others. A person who has this particular type of guilt may believe that they experienced a good fortune at the expense of others and that by trying to save their own life, they intentionally harmed others.\footnote{13}

Questions survivors continually ask themselves, that show a sense of survivor guilt are why they had survived, when million of others including their family had died. \footnote{14}

The American Psychological Association defines survivor guilt as “remorse or guilt for having survived a catastrophic situation when others did not or for not suffering the ills that others had to endure.”\footnote{15} There are various survivor guilt symptoms commonly found in Holocaust survivors. They may feel sad, helpless, powerless, and filled with shame due to their crushed sense of self-competence. In addition, feelings of suspicion, nightmares, chronic and occasional de"ressions, anxiety attacks, and paranoia are common. Robert Krell, a child psychiatrist who studied the psychological trauma in Holocaust survivors and their children, and a survivor who spent the years of the Holocaust as a hidden child in Holland explains that choices the victims were forced to make in the camps were extremely difficult. For example, Krell treated a mother who was forced to abandon one of two children in her arms upon the arrival in Auschwitz, or a teenager who was forced to choose to flee and live or stay with his or her mother and


\footnote{14} Marzo, \texttt{<http://www.selfhelpmagazine.com/articles/trauma/guilt.html>}.\footnote{15} VandenBos, 913.
surely die.\textsuperscript{16} They were forced to make intense life-or-death decisions at the spur of the moment. Survivors who expressed guilt have the memory of a lost loved one, and feel they could or should have done more even to aid the victim even if it was obviously impossible for them to have done so.\textsuperscript{17}

Survivor guilt commonly accompanies what we now know as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Wulf Kansteiner, a cultural-intellectual historian of 20th century Europe and associate professor of history at the State University of New York, cites extensive amounts of literature and studies he has done on the psychological after-affects of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{18} He cites the definition of PTSD that is used in the \textit{Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder}:

\begin{quote}
Development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity, or witnessing an event that involves death, injury; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm,
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{16} Robert Krell, Marc Sherman, and Elie Wiesel, \textit{Medical and Psychological Effects of Concentration Camps on Holocaust Survivors} (New Brunswick, N.J. Transaction, 1997), 14.
\textsuperscript{17} Krell, 14.
\end{flushleft}
or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.19

Holocaust survivors have experienced all of the events described above.

The authors of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders also state that the duration of PTSD symptoms most often persists for longer than 12 months after the trauma. The duration, proximity, and severity of a person’s exposure to the traumatic event are the most crucial factors that affect the development of this disorder. The authors further explain that, “There is some evidence that social supports, family history, childhood experiences, personality variables, and pre-existing mental disorders may influence the development of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.”20

Psychologist Tori Deangelis has cited additional symptoms of PTSD commonly found in survivors of trauma. Examples of such are anger, depression, nightmares, flashbacks, guilt, shame, self-blame, feelings of mistrust, difficulty falling or staying asleep, avoidance of places, feelings or even thoughts that remind one of the experience, inability to remember some important aspects of the traumatic experience, and interestingly even experiencing physical reminders of the event like muscle tension, quick heartbeat and sweating. When it comes to relationships, they are withdrawn. This is manifested in behavior such as unwillingness to attend family or social affairs due to fear


20 American Psychiatric Association, 466.
that they would be “cornered” or questioned by someone, stirring up fights due to uncontrolled anger, and being overly protective with their children out of the fear that something might happen to them. The article also brings gender differences into consideration when examining how certain patients deal with trauma differently. Women might have an urge to talk about their experience more than men, who more likely shut down and take their feelings out by working, and staying active. Recovery patterns may also vary from one person to another.\textsuperscript{21}

PTSD symptoms seem to be parallel to those of survivor guilt. Some indicators of PTSD that Kansteiner lists include increased arousal, which is a “state of alertness and readiness for action.”\textsuperscript{22} It can present itself by difficulty falling or staying asleep, difficulty concentrating, hyper vigilance, irritability, or anger outbursts.\textsuperscript{23} Other symptoms include a high level of intense fear, ongoing re-experiencing of a traumatic event, any kind avoidance of stimuli that is associated with the event, and social impairment. Researchers over the years have discovered signs of PTSD symptoms among concentration camp survivors mainly because of the way they have communicated with the children they bore after the war. Even though they might have not agreed to openly talk about their experience with their children, they expressed and brought forth feelings of anger and depression through their moods, expectations and body language.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} VandenBos, 71.
\textsuperscript{23} American Psychiatric Association, 468.
\textsuperscript{24} Kansteiner, 98-101.
Most survivors have either witnessed another fellow survivor experience posttraumatic stress syndrome, or have experienced it themselves. A lot of them have repetitive nightmares or have married hyper vigilant survivor spouses, another symptom of PTSD. Others have found comfort, living with other survivors, reminiscing on their loss. However, hearing each other’s personal account, and feelings of guilt and shame, might make it harder for them to ever stop dwelling on the past.\textsuperscript{25}

Paul Chodoff, a practicing psychiatrist in Washington D.C. and a clinical professor of psychiatry at George Washington University, conducted extensive research on more than two hundred cases of Holocaust victims in 1963. He confirmed the parallelism found in both concentration camp syndrome, and PTSD. He wrote that the “…Anxiety core [of concentration camp syndrome] seems to fulfill criteria for the PTSD, and there is certainly no question about the presence of trauma as the main etiological factor.”\textsuperscript{26} In other words, survivor guilt and PTSD, even if not exactly the same share the anxiety factor that is a direct effect of the trauma that the victim has struggled through.

Canadian psychologists specializing in the study of trauma, cited by Ruth Ley’s From Guilt To Shame: Auschwitz and After (2007), have found that the terms “Survivor Guilt,” “Concentration Camp Syndrome,” “Survivor Syndrome,” and “Concentration Camp Neurosis” were all precursors to what is today known as posttraumatic stress disorder. The diagnosis was first coined in the mid 1970s but only formally recognized in 1980 when it was introduced into the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and

\textsuperscript{25} Nutkiewicz, 15.
\textsuperscript{26} Chodoff, 154.
Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. There are many Holocaust survivors that have shown evidence of presenting PTSD symptoms.

In the year 1962, psychologist and Holocaust survivor Leo Eitinger studied one hundred survivor prisoners fifteen years after their liberation from concentration camps. What he found was remarkable: “Some survivors were simply unable to feel, while others had the paradoxical response of euphoria mixed with emotional numbness.” Most of the survivors involved in the study started working after they were liberated even though they showed signs of physical and emotional injury. It was Eitinger who coined the term ”concentration camp syndrome” after 85% of his patients showed symptoms of it. Today, we are able to connect the similar symptoms of survivor guilt and concentration camp syndrome to what we currently know as PTSD.

Gertrude Schneider, a noted Holocaust professor at the City University of New York and survivor of Kaiserwald, a concentration camp near Riga in Latvia, wrote an article in 1975 describing a study she conducted of fifty survivors, 25 being male and 25 female who now reside in the United States. Most of the survivors who were interviewed had experienced at least four of the following camps: Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz, Ravensbrueck, Plaszow, Kaiserwald, and Dora. These survivors were


randomly drawn from the five hundred Holocaust survivors that researcher Dr. Victor Sanua, a professor in psychology at St. John's University located in Queens, New York had used in his study. Unfortunately the literature does not indicate how many concentration camp survivors Sanua had interviewed in this particular study with Schneider. However, it does state that Sanua assisted in evaluating the results of the study. Schneider found that approximately ninety percent of those she interviewed in the United States between the years 1968 and 1971 were experiencing a feeling of guilt that manifested because they had survived when others did not.30

The concentration camp survivors who were interviewed also pointed to the maltreatment and degradation that they dealt with in the camps as a reason for their guilt. They took responsibility for their family members’ fates. They blamed themselves for not being in attendance when their loved one died, or was taken away. In addition, they felt guilty for not having the insight to know how to keep their families hidden from the Nazis. It is interesting to note the significant gender differences among survivors regarding guilt. The men interviewed took responsibility over situations they had absolutely no control over and dwelled on the fact that they had not tried to resist the Nazi officers. The women survivors approached this situation with an objective standpoint and blamed the Germans of trickery. Most of the women felt that the Nazis’ constantly changed their methods, and because of that it would have been impossible to

know how to revolt. However, they still felt responsible for the fate of their friends and family who perished.  

In 1975, psychologist Paul Matussek studied 245 concentration camp survivors living in the United States and Israel, to determine how they were affected by the camp traumas. He used physical examinations and interviews that demonstrated that up to 52.5% of the sample had symptoms that fit the criteria for PTSD. In addition, researchers Kuch and Cox, in the year 1992, together studied 124 German files taken from the West German compensation boards about Jewish Holocaust survivors. Of the 124 Jewish Holocaust survivors studied, sixty-three percent had been in concentration camps. Kuch and Cox concluded that 46% of the total sample would have met the PTSD criteria listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and that survivors who lived through Auschwitz and were tattooed are three times more likely to meet PTSD criteria than Holocaust survivors who had suffered through Nazi maltreatment but had not experienced any concentration camp.

Survivors have all dealt with their emotions in different ways. Each deals with a struggle to forget and stay quiet, and the urge to tell, and memorialize (to ensure a Holocaust never happens again). For those that remain silent, it is not uncommon for children of survivors to be ignorant of their parent’s story, and only hear bits and pieces.

31 Schneider, 83.

32 Baranowsky and others, 247.


34 Baranowsky, 247-249.
of it. For those who write, and talk about their individual account, the memory remains vivid and alive for them. Many survivors feel it is in fact therapeutic. Some feel that if they don’t talk about it, they are “forgetting” their loved ones who have perished, and for them, that would be the biggest tragedy of it all.  

Naomi Seidman, an assistant Professor of Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in California, explained that Elie Weisel, a survivor of the concentration camps during the Holocaust, had chosen to remain silent for a decade after his ordeal. Like many other survivors, Wiesel chose to remain silent because his pain was so great. He needed time to actually “absorb” what had really occurred. Words were too small to describe the overwhelming thoughts that the memories of the Holocaust brought on. The following excerpt is cited by Seidman and taken from Wiesel’s book:

How does one describe the indescribable? How does one use restraint in re-creating the fall of mankind and the eclipse of the gods?...So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essential for at least ten years. Long enough to see clearly. Long enough to learn to listen to the voices crying inside my own. Long enough to regain possession of my memory. Long enough to united the language of with the silence of the dead.  

35 Nutkiewicz, 1.


Wiesel also describes his sense of guilt decades after witnessing a Kapo beat his father, despite his lack of ability to react. “I did not move. What had happened to me? My father had just been struck, before my very eyes, and I had not flickered an eyelid. I had looked on and said nothing. Yesterday, I should have sunk my nails into the criminal’s flesh. Now remorse began to gnaw at me. I thought only: I shall never forgive them [kapo] for that.” This is a clear symptom of survivor guilt, when the victim dwells on occurrence that they had no ability to prevent as if it was a fault on their part. 38

Wiesel also shows extreme guilt for succumbing to the repulsive attitudes and personality the camps forced its subjects to become. Here, he regrets the relief that he felt over his father’s death, even if it lasts a moment: “Don’t let me find him! If only I can get rid of this dead weight, so that I could use all my strength to struggle for my own survival, and only worry about myself. Immediately I felt ashamed of myself, ashamed forever.” 39

Once he comes to the realization that his father is dead, he says, “I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I had no more tears.” 40 These words has the reader understand that although the survivors felt torn and lonely after experiencing such a loss, they were in so much physical pain, that they couldn’t get themselves to express their feelings. Such guilt, therefore is delayed, and came later on in their life, when they were physically healed and ready to feel emotions. He later admits that he was never able to live life fully, even after liberation because of his loss, stating,


39 Wiesel, 101.

40 Wiesel, 106.
“When my father died, I died. That means that one ‘I’ in me died…at least something in me died.”41

In his 1995 book, Holocaust survivor and psychologist Aaron Hass recounted a first hand account told to him by a survivor, Elisa K., born and raised in Frankfurt, Germany. In the passage, Elisa and her daughter Lila had been sent to the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen in October 1944 and Elisa expressed guilt years after liberation on how she failed to provide water for her dying daughter. “I left her in the field because she couldn’t walk anymore. I got to the fountain; put my tin cup down while I drank. When I reached for the cup to fill it with water for my daughter, it was gone, stolen by one of the other girls…I couldn’t even bring water back to my daughter.”42 The words, “I couldn’t even bring water back to my daughter,” demonstrates a feeling of frustration and guilt by a woman who thinks of herself as being an incapable mother for failing to supply her daughter of such a seemingly “simple” request, such as water.

Chodoff found that his patients showed signs of depression and feelings of guilt, and that these feelings intensified during anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, and in connections that reminded them of their past. When he conducted this vast study he found that survivor guilt comes in different forms for different people. Some survivors from concentration camps felt guilty in performing specific actions that endangered the lives of others, or at least they perceived that they did. Also, survivor guilt is sometimes

41 Wiesel, 109.

felt as a nonspecific conviction of having done something wrong and shameful, even when the person can’t pinpoint their feeling to any specific event. Lastly, some survivors feel guilty because they remained alive when others haven’t. In general, the survivors he studied shared a feeling of human responsibility for their dead loved ones.43

Aaron Hass provides the following account from a young survivor named Rose F. She was nineteen years old in 1944, when she was deported from her hometown to Auschwitz with her sister. She described how her younger sister became ill from hunger, and how she struggled to take care of her. One day, they were separated and placed in different parts of the camp. As she tried to run back to where her sister had been, she was caught and beaten by a Kapo, a Jewish prisoner that a Nazi officer put in charge to carry out his order and ensure complete control over the prisoners.44 One day she saw her sister from across the barbed wires, and threw her some potatoes. The next day, her sister never returned to the spot where they met. Rose retells that tragic account, blaming herself for the cause of her sister’s death. “I felt guilty for many years that maybe I should have run back and tried to get her with me or stay with her. Maybe I didn’t do enough to stay together. Maybe I was too selfish about saving myself.” 45

Survivors suffered so much that they yearned for being free of their burden of guilt, self-hate, and even from their own life. The inmate’s feelings were so numb that

43 Chodoff, 154.


45 Hass, 163.
they had such limited self-awareness; they did not feel the impact of the inhuman
treatment during the Holocaust. It was only until after liberation when they attempted to
rebuild a new life, and readapt to society, and after they saw that their freedom came with
no retribution, that they began to feel hopeless. They couldn’t erase their past no matter
how hard they tried and their sense of guilt increased with the passage of time as opposed
to diminishing. They felt guilty for a variety of reasons that included enjoying life, and
being alive. Their sense of guilt, along with their longing for the members of their family
that perished, caused them to feel severely depressed. They realized the severity of their
traumatic experience only after the war, which haunted them even in their sleep.  

Ruth Jaffe, a psychoanalyst, lists three main contributing factors to survivor guilt
in the article, “The Sense of Guilt within Holocaust Survivors,” after conducting her
research in the year 1970 with Holocaust survivors who lived in America and Israel. The
selection parades, the loss of relatives, and the awareness of having been reduced to the
existence of a degraded human being are different kinds of traumatic experiences that
induced guilt feelings among concentration camp survivors.

The first main contributing factor to survivor guilt was caused by the “Selection
Parade,” which was a common occurrence in the ghettos and concentration camps.
Thousands of prisoners would be forced to line up in place for hours despite any weather
conditions. The Nazis would go through the rows determining who was of no value for
labor. The very old, young, and ill were usually the chosen ones and they would be sent

46 Ruth Jaffe, “The Sense of Guilt within Holocaust Survivors,” Jewish Social Studies 32
47 Jaffe, 208.
immediately for extermination. Most of the time they were sent to nearby woods and shot, but other times to a pit dug by the victims themselves where they were shot or burnt. The survivors frequently heard the shooting. Every time a person was spared, a feeling of relief was brought upon that person because he/she knew that they had an extra week to live before another “selection” would take place. However, what they later felt guilty about was the realization of the fact that if one person was allowed to stay on line that meant that another person had to be killed in their place.  

“Selections” found in Auschwitz were different from the selection parades. Once the victims arrived at the railway station with their families, many young children were forced to separate from their old parents who were immediately sent to the gas chambers. It was only years later that this “episode emerged into consciousness and brought on deep guilt feelings, accompanied by delayed mourning.” They could not sweep away the feelings of having saved their own lives by “abandoning” their families. Even though some survivors credit their survival to luck, they believe that for one to survive in a concentration camp, many others had to die.

In Livia Bitton-Jackson’s first person account of her experiences in the Holocaust written in 1999, she blames her blonde hair for raising the guards’ attention, causing her mom and herself to be selected to live, and her aunt to be destined to die. “Poor darling Aunt Serena, Where was she now? Had my hair been shorn off before the selection we

48 Jaffe, 308-309.
49 Jaffe, 310.
50 Schneider, 78.
would be together with her now...It was because of my blonde braids that Mommy and I were sent to the other side. If only we could have stayed together!" This quote reflects her guilt for being selected to live, along with her mother, while her aunt died rather than her actually wishing her and her mother died along with her aunt.

The second contributing factor to survivor guilt is a feeling that the survivor was somehow destined to live, while others did not have such luck. Jaffe discusses another patient who recalls her experience in Belzec concentration camp in Poland, with her siblings. When her brother was diagnosed with typhoid, her family, under extreme dangerous conditions, was able to hide a few eggs for him. It was this girl’s job to smuggle this nourishment to him. However, on the way to him she saw a Nazi guard approaching her and accidentally fell to the ground causing the eggs to crack. Days later, her brother died and she considers herself fully responsible for his death. Examples such as these were very common. Children had to witness their family members killed, raped, beaten, and tortured in front of them without being able to do anything about it without the same fate. Young children who perceived their parents to be strong, invincible and reliable figures now saw them suddenly helpless, “unresisting victims of atrocities.”

The individuals, who feel guilty due to this factor, differ from the first group, in that they did not survive at the cost of others’ lives. Rather, they find themselves asking themselves what they could have done differently, that might have kept their loved ones alive. Many survivors in this category wished they perished with them. Many survivors

51 Livia Bitton-Jackson, *I have Lived a Thousand Years* (New York: Simon Pulse, 1997), 78.

52 Jaffe, 311.
also, hoped they would be reunited with their lost relatives after liberation; only to find all of them vanished. It can seem that for this reason, this group endures worse feelings of guilt than the previous group. 53

Hass also recounts Martin B.’s experience in Auschwitz. One gathers that Martin’s sense of guilt also stems from the fact of his surviving while others didn’t. “In 1948 I was already married. It was Yom Kippur. My wife wanted to go to shul and I didn’t want to so we didn’t. When we were walking in the street in Astoria [Queens, New York] we ran into some acquaintances. He asked me how come I’m not in shul. I said how could I go to shul and thank G-d that I survived when others didn’t?” 54

A first person account by survivor Irene Kahn years after settling in America demonstrates how those who survived were overwhelmed with guilt as they thought of their loved ones who were killed. She wrote, “When I think back on that time, I cannot help feeling guilty about the fact that, although I got out, my mother did not. She died in Germany. I was quite certain I could obtain sponsorship for her once I was in the United States, but this never happened.” 55

Regina, a survivor from Auschwitz, told an interviewer, “How can I ever accept the fact that my mother was gassed? How can I live knowing this? The moment my mother first stepped into Auschwitz she knew where she was going. She understood that

53 Jaffe, 311-312.
54 Hass, 170.
she was walking into her death. How can anyone live with this? There is no flower in my
mother’s grave. There is no place to visit her.”56 This is an example of a survivor who
expressed the guilt she bears throughout her entire life knowing that her mother was
gassed, and she survived. Even though Regina started a new life in America, she couldn’t
see past the guilt.

The strong desire to live that many survivors demonstrated during their
experience in concentration camps sadly turned into a desire to die after liberation, when
they found themselves alone. The survivors faced no choice but to start a new life without
their dead, and consequently many “neglected” the relationships they could have
developed with new people afterwards, even their own offspring. It was not unusual for a
mother to look at the child she bore after the war and think to herself, why this child was
chosen to live and be happy when her other baby had to die. These thoughts added on to
the already guilty feelings for surviving.57 This gives us a better understanding of the
guilt survivors experience due to their loss of relatives.

The third source of guilt experienced by the survivors was the most degrading of
all. The Nazis forced Jews to give up their human dignity and self respect by a variety of
methods. As soon as they arrived in the camps, they were asked to strip naked,
humiliating themselves in front of others as if they were public exhibitions on sale and
then given ragged uniform making them look exactly like one another. This, as well as
the tattoo on their arm, for those who have survived Auschwitz, robbed them of even

57 Jaffe, 312.
their names! They also, had their heads shaved, given blows to forced labor, and were watched and bitten by dogs. The only time they were actually seen as being something of value is if they had something to offer the Nazis, such as a good talent or skill. The survivor’s self esteem was significantly lowered in great amounts because of the embarrassment they were put through. As Ruth Jaffe puts it, “One of the most effective methods in the process of degradation, leading to dehumanization, was the systematic utilization of hunger. Its consequences were great enough to induce moral disintegration.”

They were suffering with hunger so much, that many unfortunately saw no choice but to steal their friends, and even their child’s ration of bread. They were also forced into devouring repulsive things. This degradation left a negative impact on the survivor’s years after the incident.

In the memoir, I have Lived a Thousand Years, Jackson shows how low the inmates in Auschwitz were degraded:

I have grown into a concentration-camp inmate. I have learned to live with fear and hunger and abuse. I have learned to swallow dirt, and live worms. I have learned to endure cold, pain, and long hours of physical labor. My cheekbones protrude so sharply that sun blisters have formed on each because of their extreme exposure to the sun. Sun blisters have blown my lips up like those of a clown.

58 Jaffe, 313.
59 Jaffe, 311-314.
60 Jackson, 115-116.
Nutkiewicz points to a fourth factor contributing to the guilt these survivors experienced; feeling shame for deliberately robbing, damaging or beating a companion, not informing others of the torture they will be facing, and omitting help. Most of the people who fall under this category were the Kapos. They treated the inmates often just as harsh as or even worse than the Nazis when they failed to carry out their orders. Such guilt feelings due to one or more of these factors were experienced for long periods of time after survivors were liberated and attempted to start a new, normal life. As Ruth Jaffe puts it, “Instead of losing importance with the passage of time, these guilt feelings persisted, or else would seem to have emerged for the first time, only after years passed.”

An example of a survivor who felt guilty for harming a fellow Jew in order to save his own life is cited in a memoir by Benjamin Jacobs, a survivor, who wrote his story years after the traumatic event, in 1995. Here, he describes his shame for being forced to pull out gold teeth from corpses in order to obey the Nazis orders and save himself: “I did not think that anyone could stoop that low. Killing people was horrible enough, but tearing out teeth of the dead moved me to disgust. I did not think that I could do it. But it was inevitable. I had no choice…It was by far the hardest thing I had to do in the camp. When I approached the corpse room for the first time I tried to rationalize that what I was about to do was meaningless to the dead. But it never was to me.”

61 Nutkiewicz, 12.
62 Jaffe, 308.
There were also survivors who felt guilty benefitting from another Jew’s misfortune. An example of such feelings was directly stated by Holocaust survivor Livia Bitton Jackson, after noticing that the coat the Nazis had given her once belonged to a girl around her age. The reader is able to sense the guilt she puts on herself for benefitting from a child’s loss, a child who was perhaps already gassed:

I noticed white stitching at the hem of a lining. I look closer and see that the stitches form letters. Leah Kohn-Des. It’s a name, and a place…This coat belonged to Leah Kohn from Des. She was tall and slim just like me. And she loved this coat, that’s why she stitched her name in the lining. Is she alive? Is she now shivering on bitter cold winter days and nights in a thin prison sack, while I delight in her warm coat? I have become an accomplice to SS brutality and plunder by wearing these coats.

How dare I wear this coat? Leah Kohn, forgive me.64

The survivors acquired a certain approach to life due to the struggle they had to go on living, and to build their lives over from scratch. There are a few different approaches survivors took. Some survivors did everything in their power to never forget what happened; rather they tried their best to always “remember” and even went so much to refuse to take part in any joy in life. Then there are others, who actually wished they could forget but were unsuccessful because every life event brought back a dreadful memory of something they once had, shared, or saw in a deceased loved one. Their memories imposed on their dreams, nightmares, sudden flashbacks and fantasies. Others

64 Jackson, 161.
succeeded in “forgetting” because they suppressed their memories so much. However, as a result many experienced neurotic symptoms and suffered the most psychologically.\textsuperscript{65} This last category of concentration camp survivors comprised of the largest group of survivors. These people, as Ruth Jaffe explained:

Functioned well in everyday tasks, but were impoverished in their emotional lives, since they had to expend a great deal of mental energy in order to hold their disturbing memories in abeyance. Ultimately, it was the ability of these people (or their inability) to come to terms with their sense of guilt and loss, which determined whether or not they could once again become reintegrated into life and society.\textsuperscript{66}

What determines which category a survivor would fall into? It could never be certain, because it depends on too many variables that could have shaped the individual to turn to either direction. The following variables have to be taken under consideration; prewar personality, the age the survivor was when the persecution began, the duration and severity of trauma, and the sociological circumstances the survivor had to deal with after liberation and the years that had followed. However, what studies have shown throughout the years of interviewing, and following the lives survivor’s made for themselves following the war, is that many of them were affected and unfortunately the majority did not seek psychiatric help.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{65} Jaffe, 314.

\textsuperscript{66} Jaffe, 314.

\textsuperscript{67} Jaffe, 312-314.
Chodoff quotes at length a women survivor of Auschwitz, Mrs. S. The following excerpt shows signs of her denying what she had seen, and trying her best to suppress her horrible memories. In addition, she describes her feelings towards hearing or speaking about it:

In the end, people were losing weight, and they were getting skinnier and skinnier and some of them were just skeletons, but I really did not see them. I just wiped the pictures out of my mind. I was able to step over them, and when I came out of the concentration camp, I said I did not see a dead body- I mean I feel that I didn’t see them. Even if I can see them. This is what’s killing me to know that I have never felt the strain, the brutality, the physical cruelty of the concentration camp….When I meet another woman who is in her 60s and she will tell me her suffering, I can’t stand them. I broke all the friendships up with them. I don’t want them. I can’t stand them because they bore me. I just can’t stand listening to them and I have nothing to do with them.  

In the audio documentary transcribed in the book *Voices of the Shoah: Remembrances of the Holocaust*, a survivor from Poland, named Siegfried Halbreich, who experienced Auschwitz, described the way he dealt with his traumatic feelings once he immigrated to America. “I didn’t feel liberated. What liberated? Where’s your family? All is gone…It is very hard to adjust. Finally, I said to my wife, ‘I cannot take it anymore. It’s too much. I don’t know where I am! I want peace. I want to settle down and

68 Chodoff, 151-152.
start to work and find myself.” Here, he felt an urge to keep himself busy before falling into a depressive and uncontrolled panic. He needed to belong to something, some place. Starting work and life routines immediately were his method of coping with the past.

Henry Oertelt, a Holocaust survivor born in Berlin in 1921, who experienced several concentration camps including Auschwitz, wrote in his autobiography in 2000, about his first few years residing in Minnesota after the war:

Within a few years of our arrival in St. Paul, Inge and I attended a party given by some friends. One of the guests had become somewhat persistent in trying to dig out information about my past. At that time, as was the case with most survivors, I had no desire to talk about my history and started to feel rather annoyed by the man’s insistent probing.  

This account shows the unease survivors had after years of their liberation to talk about their experiences. They did not want to relive and open up feelings of guilt that had been bottled up inside of them.

Naomi Mor, a clinical psychologist for Holocaust survivors and their children currently practicing in Tel-Aviv, Israel, examined the second generation of Holocaust survivors and the survivors themselves to study whether the survivor’s trauma was severe enough to have been transmitted to their children. The results were shocking. The


survivors were extremely overprotective of their children, and therefore the children showed signs of separation anxiety from their parents. Survivor parents’ high expectations of their children to succeed and become the people they wish they were, was overwhelming and burdensome. They wanted their children to make up for the life they were robbed of. Yael Danieli, an Israeli clinical psychologist and traumatologist who conducted her study in New York City, where she has a private practice, wrote a chapter in a book edited by Frank Ochberg, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Michigan State University. She wrote that survivors taught their children how to survive in a world of betrayal and transmitted to them the life conditions and approach they used under which they had survived the camps. These are in fact signs that show severe posttraumatic symptoms.

Danieli quotes one of her Holocaust survivor patients, Mrs. B, “I keep myself busy so I don’t think. My life doesn’t matter. It is all for the children. If they are happy, I am happy. When she [her daughter] does these things (that I do not approve of), I feel more upset than I felt in Auschwitz. Auschwitz doesn’t matter.” These words show how her children and their success are all that is important for her. Therefore, it can be


73 Ochberg, 285.
expected that there is a lot of pressure and high expectations placed on many Holocaust survivor’s children.\textsuperscript{74}

The Holocaust survivors’ trauma wasn’t over once they were liberated. On the contrary, their traumatic conditions only worsened once they returned to their homes in their hometown and discovered they had been destroyed, or taken over by Germans, leaving no trace or evidence that they had ever once lived there. They were faced with continuing anti-Semitism, but this time totally alone. Adding to this trauma was the need to adapt to a new environment, customs, and learn different languages in the countries that they settled in, especially Israel and the United States.\textsuperscript{75}

Approximately 140,000 Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) immigrated to America from Eastern Europe after liberation between the years of 1946 and 1954. As is often the case with immigrants, survivors who had to separate themselves from the culture, language, childhood, tradition, and family they once knew and move to a new country experienced psychological discomfort. K. J. Aroian, a researcher and child of foreign born Arab parents who got her doctorate in the University of Washington, School of Nursing, interviewed 25 Polish immigrants who resided in the United States, from 4 months to 39 years. She concluded that Polish Holocaust survivors had better integrated in the American culture, only after first visiting their previous home towns.\textsuperscript{76} One can conclude that visiting ones hometown before immigrating provides closure and allows

\textsuperscript{74} Ochberg, 285.

\textsuperscript{75} Chodoff, 153.

them to accept their status as immigrants. The survivors were forced to sever from their home suddenly and violently, after the Nazis invaded their home and took them away. For this reason, immigration after liberation for those who survived the war came to be traumatic.

There are three stages of traumatization that surviving orphans (children and adults) faced: separation from family (parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, spouses, grandparents), survival during the war, and returning to a nonexistent “home” after the war. The last stage can be seen as the most traumatizing because it was then that the survivors came to the realization that everything close to them was lost forever, and there was nothing they can do to get it back. Survivor Benjamin Jacobs, mentioned above (p.24), demonstrates how despite moving to America far away from his small Poland town, Dobra, he cannot “forget” his past, and tries his hardest to suppress his memories. “Surviving as a prisoner of the Nazis was a hard and bitter struggle. In the face of the generous freedoms in America, our persecution was even more difficult to translate. I felt pain, lots of pain, but I had to suppress it. I envied everyone everywhere who had escaped this terrible ordeal.”

Immigrating to the United States wasn’t a difficult experience for everyone; for some people it was a “corrective act” because it meant starting from scratch, and repressing all the bad memories that had happened in their particular town. This

78 Jacobs, 214.
79 Sicher, 106.
demonstrated a very strong act on their part, because they showed the world that they have the ability to move on and live.  

A survivor Henry Oertelt wrote:

   In Germany I witnessed the horrifying destruction of my and other synagogues. The chance now to actively involve myself, and to watch the step-by-step creation of a new synagogue meant for me the exciting arrival of a moment in a cycle from destruction to creation! For me, this was gratifying.  

Here, he described the joy he gets in seeing a new synagogue being built in his hometown of St Paul, Minnesota. Just like he built a new life for himself in America, leaving Germany behind, this new synagogue represented his back “home” but this time it stood in a country that acknowledge its full existence.

Samuel Pisar is a Holocaust survivor born in 1929, who wrote a first person memoir of his experience as a young boy from Bialystok, Poland surviving Soviet occupation, Auschwitz, and a few other slave labor camps. He eventually became a noted international lawyer in the United States, and wrote about his experience moving to America years after his immigration in the year 1980. “The English language became for me a marvelously unencumbered vehicle to the world of knowledge, a vehicle that did not carry with it, as did all the other languages, I already knew, the emotional baggage, the fears and terrors I carried from my violent past.” Pisar knew a total of seven

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80 Sicher, 105-106.
81 Oertelt, 159.
different languages but here, he showed his preference for the English language because it separated him from the past. The fact that he could start an entirely new life with a new language helped alleviate his sufferings.

Gina Gotfryd, born in 1932, and a survivor from Auschwitz, wrote a first person account of her Holocaust experience. She is an example of a survivor who really benefitted from immigrating to America, and starting a new life in New York. However, there are also PTSD symptoms she demonstrated she has till today. She wrote, “I always had hope in my heart. I believe in the Constitution of the United States, and I hope that another Holocaust will never happen again. War is a horror. I still dream about hunger, deportations, Germans chasing me, being separated from my family and not being able to find them. I wake up in a state of panic and I say to myself, “Never again.”

In conclusion, post-war research has found survivor guilt among many Holocaust survivors and has connected it to post traumatic stress disorder. Studies done on concentration camp survivors over the years and documented survivor accounts have shown that many symptoms of survivor guilt such as anger, depression, nightmares, flashbacks, shame, self-blame, feelings of mistrust and others are also prominent symptoms of PTSD. It is rare to find those who have survived such trauma without a substantial impact on their social, emotional, and psychological well being. The Holocaust and its lasting affects will not disappear after the last Holocaust survivor passes. On the contrary, it remains a permanent stain in human history. It is our job to forever remember the horrible atrocities committed by human beings against other human beings.

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83 Scrase and Wolfgang, 170.
beings and do everything in our power to remember and make sure that we support the
victims of contemporary genocides, discrimination, and torture.
Bibliography:


SURVIVOR GUILT
IN HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

Judaic 83.2/ Thesis Paper / Professor Shapiro

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