SHAPING A SOCIAL JUSTICE VOCATION: LESSONS FROM MY PARENTS' HOLOCAUST LEGACY

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For over 50 years, Rivka Augenfeld has been active in the fields of refugee and immigrant resettlement, advocacy for refugee rights and the creation of municipal, provincial and Canadian bodies to monitor and advance human rights. She has been a consultant and trainer in these fields for various community, para-public and government bodies. In 2015, to mark the 40th Anniversary of the Quebec *Charter of Rights and Freedom*, Rivka was one of 40 activists honoured for their work. She has also been active for many years in various Jewish community organizations, particularly the Montreal Jewish Public Library. Her mother tongue is Yiddish and she often serves as an advisor, translator and coach for a variety of musical, literary and other cultural projects. Rivka was born "stateless" in a Displaced Persons Camp in Austria and came to Canada with her parents at the age of two.

Growing up as the child of Holocaust survivors, I always knew my life was shaped by the past, even though it took a long time to grow into my role as a 2nd generation witness to their experience. My parents, Liba Magarshak from Vilna (now Vilnius) and David Augenfeld, from Warsaw, carried with them the weight of a world that had been destroyed – the "khurbn" (the destruction) as they called it in Yiddish. Through their stories and the values they instilled in me, I found not only an anchor to a history filled with pain, grief and resilience but also a guiding light for my own path in fighting for social justice.

THE GIFT OF MEMORY AND LEGACY

In our home, the Holocaust was ever-present, not just as a historical event but as a personal narrative. My parents talked freely about life before the war in Poland, painting vivid pictures of family gatherings, bustling streets, and the cultural vibrancy of Jewish life. These stories gave me a sense of continuity with a world I had never known. Their accounts of loss – the family members who perished, the lives abruptly halted – instilled in me an awareness of what was taken and what must be remembered.

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But they did not stop at recounting tragedy. My parents spoke of their years in Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Austria, where I was born. In that liminal space between survival and rebuilding, they taught me the importance of solidarity and resilience. These lessons carried forward into my work, and they remain the bedrock of my understanding of justice: the need to see people as individuals, to honor their dignity, and to remember that every name and every story matters.

A FOUNDATION OF VALUES

Social justice was not an abstract concept for my parents; it was a lived reality. Both were deeply involved in the Jewish socialist Bund movement before, during and after the war, believing in the principles of equality and solidarity. My mother, a member of a socialist youth group called the SKIF, lived by their motto: "Fresh, free, strong, and true." My father, a union activist in Warsaw and a Bundist his whole life, embodied these values in both his public and private life.

These principles were passed down to me, not through lectures but through example. My father believed that values must be lived every day, not deferred to some ideal future. My mother's quiet kindness and her ability to connect with others modeled the compassion at the heart of justice. Their experiences taught me that while we cannot erase the scars of history, we can work to ensure that others do not suffer in silence or isolation.

"WHERE WAS THE WORLD?"

One of the most haunting questions of my childhood was, "Where was the world?" This question, often asked by survivors, demanded an answer – not just from history but from me personally. It became a challenge and a responsibility. I knew that I could not undo the past, but I could be part of creating a future where others would not be abandoned.

In 1974, I began working for Jewish Immigrant Aid Services (JIAS) of Canada, initially out of practical need. Over time, I realized that the work I was doing – helping refugees and immigrants navigate a new life – was my way of responding to that question. Guided by my mentor, Dr. Joseph Kage, I learned to advocate for those in need and to build networks of support. His example, coupled with my parents' teachings, showed me that justice is not about grand gestures but about consistent, compassionate action. And he also believed in the importance of networks, of building partnerships with like-minded people from very different backgrounds.

PRESERVING THE MEMORY OF THE HOLOCAUST

As the years passed and the survivors grew older, the weight of preserving their stories became more

urgent. I learned to understand memory as a collective responsibility. This is not merely about recounting horrors but about humanizing history. My mother once said, "The Holocaust did not start in 1939; it ended many lives then." Her words remind me that the victims were people with rich lives, dreams, and communities before the war.

Commemoration has evolved. In my childhood, ceremonies were intimate gatherings of survivors and their families. Today, as we lose first-hand witnesses, the challenge is to find effective ways to keep the memory alive for a broader audience. This involves not just recounting facts but finding ways to connect emotionally. The story of the "Heart of Auschwitz," an intricate paper heart crafted by a group of young women in that death camp as a 20th birthday gift for a dear friend, exemplifies this approach. Its simple but powerful message of love and hope amid unimaginable horror resonates deeply, especially with younger generations. It lives on as a timeless inspiration in the Montreal Holocaust Museum.

LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

Working with refugees and immigrants has reinforced the parallels between my parents' experiences and those of others fleeing persecution. I have met people from all over the world who, like my parents, carried their scars with quiet dignity. They continue to teach me that survival is not just about endurance but also about finding ways to rebuild and thrive.

I learned to approach people with humility, knowing that their stories, like my parents', are deeply personal. As a child of survivors, I could relate to the mistrust that comes from trauma. I understood why someone might hesitate to tell their story to a stranger in authority. These lessons informed my advocacy, reminding me always to honor the humanity of those I served.

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BUILDING A FUTURE WORTHY OF MEMORY

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The legacy of my parents compels me to act. Every day, I try to honor them by embodying the values they lived: compassion, justice, and solidarity. Their lives were a testament to the power of community and the resilience of the human spirit. By working to answer the question, "Where was the world?" I strive to ensure that, one day soon, despite all obstacles blocking our way, no one else will have to ask it again.

Through preserving the memory of the Holocaust and applying its lessons to the present, we honor not just the past but also the promise of a better future. My parents' lives taught me that the fight for justice is both a privilege and a responsibility. It is a way of living – and a way of remembering that what is most precious is a compassionate open heart.