THE PAST IS NEVER PAST

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THE DEMOGRAPHIC LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Jewish people may never recover from the Holocaust. Consider the basic demographic facts. Today there are roughly as many Jews in the world as before 1941, approximately 15.5 million. It's perhaps not surprising that Jewish demographers have extensively studied the counterfactual question: how many Jews would there have been if there had been no Nazi extermination effort. Had there been no Holocaust, had the six million European Jews not been murdered, demographers estimate the global Jewish population would have been somewhere between 25 and 30 million.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL WEIGHT OF MEMORY

But perhaps even more devastating than the number of Jews, the murder of the six million infects the very core of Jewish psychology and spiritual life. What Jew has not considered the game Nathan Englander describes in his short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank"? In the story, two couples, old friends from college days get stoned, get paranoid, and play the "Anne Frank game," in which the object is to identify which of their gentile friends could be counted upon to hide them in the event of a second Holocaust. The resonance of the game and the story is testimony to the continued centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish collective memory.

In some sense, we are always living in 1938, and the question is, when will it be 1939? What sort of fool – I'm tempted to invoke the Hebrew word "freyer" or sucker – would not think about this? I admit, I do. I sometimes plan out routes of escape before I go to sleep at night – devise ways of protecting my family, transferring my money, and

figuring out how to get to safety (yes, how to get to Israel from California!).

GROWING UP AMONG SURVIVORS

I realize how weird this sounds and I hesitate to commit these words to paper but I grew up in a world of Holocaust survivors. I was born in 1961 and most survivors I knew had joined the North American middle class. But not all. In my neighborhood, Stubbie ran a small burger shack, but we all knew he had genuinely carried someone dozens of kilometers to safety during a death march. There were others. My father owned a small furniture shop and his associates included a number of survivors: Laibel the framemaker who survived the war in the sewers of Lviv. Malnourishment yielded a grown man of 150 centimeters and my father couldn't figure out how the guy made a living. My sister dated a guy whose father had survived Auschwitz. He never travelled anywhere without taking his entire family with him. Five kids, always, everywhere.

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THE COMPLEXITY OF SURVIVOR NARRATIVES

My favorite, however, was Itchy whom my father employed as a bill collector. He was paid a percentage of what he collected from deadbeat small stores who were constantly trying to stiff my father. I never found out exactly which hellhole Itchy survived. It was not discussed but my dad said the stories were horrific. After the war Itchy worked in Detroit as an "enforcer" for the remnants of the Purple Gang – gangsters who wrapped tefillin in the morning and killed in the afternoon. When I knew Itchy, he was in his fifties and my father often let me tag along with the two of them for lunch. I once asked whether Itchy ever hit anyone to collect unpaid bills. My father responded, "when Itchy asks for money, he never has to hit anyone." But Itchy smiled a lot, he spoke with a thick Yiddish accent and really butchered the English language in a sweet way, he listened to me, and treated me like an adult. He was huge, tough as nails, and had the largest hands I'd ever seen. He was charismatic and never revealed much about himself. That smile shielded a towering temper, I think. He had some money, he frequently wore a jacket and tie, but the world of violence, both "there" and "here," never washed off him.

THE TRANSITION FROM LIVING MEMORY TO HISTORY

Fifty seemed old to me at the time, but it's not – I'm 62. When we think of survivors today, we think

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of elderly and infirm people who are primarily repositories of memories of the most horrific experience in the history of the Jewish people, a tragedy of biblical proportions. We think of secular saints with grey hair. But it's easy to forget that these survivors were once young with decades still ahead of them. They needed love and passion as much as anyone, perhaps more so, to forget, to rebuild, or simply to go on with their lives. Sometimes the scars were external, as with Laibel the frame maker; other times they were internal, such as the unbearable grief of so many of the older people I knew as a teenager.

THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE HOLOCAUST

I recently read that approximately 245,000 Holocaust survivors are still living. They must have been children in 1945. When they leave the scene, the Holocaust will pass from living memory to the realm of history. But I also recently read that when the Israeli soldiers arrived at the Kibbutzim on October 7, 2023, they lacked the intellectual and emotional language to understand what had happened. Inevitably they drew upon the categories of anti-Jewish violence and the Holocaust itself. The slaughter carried out by Hamas evoked much older categories: pogroms and death marches. How could it be otherwise? The Jewish people may never recover from the Holocaust.