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NEGOTIATION OF SECOND GENERATION HOLOCAUST IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The Holocaust, the tyrannically planned and executed mass murder of nearly six million innocent Jews by the pandemonic forces of Hitler's Nazi regime remains till date a crime unprecedented in history. The magnitude of the Holocaust trauma is so immense that it keeps percolating to generations of survivors. The second generation children of survivors, the immediate descendants of survivors of the Holocaust have also been vicariously traumatized because of their Holocaust legacy. This paper attempts to trace the trajectory of the negotiation of second generation identity as revealed in Helen Epstein's paradigmatic memoir, Children of the Holocaust.

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The Holocaust, the tyrannically planned and executed mass murder of nearly six million innocent Jews by the pandemonic forces of Hitler's Nazi regime remains till date a crime unprecedented in history. The magnitude of the Holocaust trauma is so immense that it keeps percolating to generations of survivors. The second generation children of survivors, the immediate descendants of survivors of the Holocaust have also been vicariously traumatized because of their Holocaust legacy.

Some of these second generation survivors have resorted to creating their own poetics of witnessing which is a synthesis of the firsthand experiential accounts of their parents and their own vicarious experiences of the aftermath of the Holocaust. This pedagogical experience of life writing about the Holocaust blends narrative memory and the historical reality in an ongoing process of self-discovery.

Second generation women writers like Helen Epstein, Helen Fremont and Eva Hoffman, born after the war to women who survived the war, write about their mother's experiences and their influence in shaping their own relative identities. These second generation memoirists bear witness through their subconscious memory and imagination.

The second generation rewriting of history was a paradigm shift from the universal portrayal of the Holocaust victim to an elaborate focus on own intimate personal experiences. The emphasis was no longer on assimilating with their American counterparts, but rather on making a link with their Jewish peers. Holocaust survivors in America began to identify themselves not essentially as American Jews, but rather as Jews in America.

Helen Epstein, daughter of first generation Holocaust survivors, Frances and Kurt Epstein is a renowned second generation Holocaust writer. She has written several memoirs, novels and travelogues to

explicate her second generation legacy. This paper attempts to trace the trajectory of the negotiation of second generation identity as revealed in Epstein's paradigmatic memoir, *Children of the Holocaust*.

As a child, Epstein had had a very disturbed childhood – haunted by nightmares of barbed wire, skeletons and rotting flesh. Although she was born ages after the end of the Holocaust, she could still imagine visions of ghettoisation and incarceration: “piles of skeletons...barbed wire... bits of flesh”. (9). Her psyche had been bogged down by the presence of an “iron box” (9), but she was never sure what it was. Perpetually conscious of this unfathomable burden, only later did she realize that it was a liminal manifestation of the horrors of the Holocaust, whose secondary witness she had become by inheriting its legacy in her subconscious.

Desperate for a release, Epstein set out on a quest to find a group of people, who, like her were obsessed with the Holocaust and she wanted their endorsement of her obsession:

There had to be I thought, an invisible, silent family scattered about the world. I began to look for them, to watch and listen, to collect their stories... I set out to find a group of people who, like me, were possessed by a history they had never lived. I wanted to ask them questions, so that I could reach the most elusive part of myself. (21)

Starting in 1977, from Toronto, Canada, Epstein flew to many cities spanning the Americas to Israel and met hundreds of children of survivors and started interviewing them about their Holocaust legacy. The first child of survivors whom Epstein met was Deborah Schwartz, the first beauty queen of Toronto. Deborah's unequivocal identification of herself as a child of survivors, shocked Epstein who felt embarrassed to acknowledge that her parents had to live in sub-human animalistic conditions during the Holocaust.

Deborah introduced Epstein to Irvin Diamond and Eli Rubinstein, two other children of survivors. Both these young men had married daughters of survivors and felt obligatory about propagating their Jewish race through their progeny:

It isn't just the normal parental instinct, I really feel that my raising a family is of cosmic significance. I feel that my raising a family is of cosmic significance. I feel I have a sacred duty to have children. I feel it's the only way to respond to the evil of the Holocaust and to assure that the death of my family and the six million was not in vain. (23)

Eli's parents had constantly eluded his repetitive queries regarding their past. He had great admiration for his parents for resurging so successfully after the Holocaust, instead of succumbing to despair. However his attitude to God was one of rebellion – he could not accept the stock answer that God in his wisdom knows what he's doing and that mortals should not question his ways. Similarly, Epstein too had dreaded going to Sunday school. She did not believe in God more than she believed in Santa Claus. She could not worship this God who had let her mother suffer.

Eli was infuriated that no one had done something to prevent the Holocaust. And his terrific rage even escalated to murderous fantasies about the Nazis:

I think of all of them as one person who killed my family. I would like to torture him and mutilate him. It scares me when I have thoughts like that. It shocks me because I am not a violent person. In normal circumstances, I can't imagine myself doing violence to any other human being. (31)

Epstein recalled how she too had suffered such latent murderous tendencies which she let out by running, talking or pounding on the piano. Eli's long monologue had ascertained Epstein's own feelings towards her Holocaust legacy: “Eli had not only articulated some of his own feelings for the first time, but some of mine as well. A stranger in a strange city had confirmed the reality of my own experience”. (33)

Eli directed Epstein to his younger sister, Rochelle, who at once took to Epstein and started voicing her so-far suppressed Holocaust angst. Like her brother, Rochelle felt guilty for not feeling anything at all...

Here I was, a child of survivors and I didn't feel anything. I also felt resentful towards my parents for having inspired a burden on me and I felt that I had a right to be resentful. (41)

Sara and Aviva were two other children of survivors who had relocated to America from Israel after the Holocaust. Aviva was a renowned musician who had played in many world-famous orchestras. Her attitude to her Holocaust legacy was not one of grievance or regret:

"I have an emotional reaction when people try to make it sensational, when they say that survivors or their children are disturbed. I don't think I'm disturbed at all". (113) She felt extremely proud of her mother, who she considered her best friend and never thought of her parents as victims or survivors.

Unlike the optimistic Aviva, Sara who Epstein refers to as a 'drifter', had fallen out with her parents at a very young age, and became a street kid:

There was never a happy moment that I can remember at home. My mother didn't teach me to be proud of myself... I never felt we were loved... I didn't want to stay at home. When I stayed away, they called me a prostitute, a thief, a mehugah, a stoup (which means 'idiot' in Polish). And when they treat you like this all the time, you start thinking that maybe you are an idiot, maybe you are a stoup, maybe you are a prostitute. Even if you are only thirteen years old. (118)

There were multifarious responses from the children of survivors to Epstein's queries. While Aviva was preposterous about answering Epstein, Sara could not stop once she got started...

I still feel ashamed and sad and guilty about my parents. The only thing I had heard from my parents was that the world was a jungle and there are no friends. There's nobody. It affected my relationships with people. I created walls... It's something I live with now, all the time. I'm afraid of my husband being taken away from me, even if he goes on a fishing trip. (125)

But after voiding her hitherto suppressed Holocaust pangs, Sara felt liberated. After the interview with Epstein, Sara decided to see a psychiatrist who had worked with survivor families, as she felt that it was high time that she let go of her burden.

Joseph Schwartz was a child of survivors who lived in a small rural town in America, comprising nearly three hundred Jewish families. Yet he felt like an alien there. In his Catholic school, when the other kids used to recite the Lord's Prayer, Joseph used to mumble the Jewish 'Shma Yisrael', so that it could block out the Catholic incantation.

Joseph felt desperately guilty for not being able to experience his parents' suffering. He also felt pained that he could not talk to his parents about the war. Like most survivors, Joseph's parents too were preoccupied with refurbishing their financial resources. So Joseph had to spend a great deal of time alone. This in turn made him notorious for his temper tantrums and volatility. Only when he was in his University, did he attend a counseling session and for the first time in his life, he felt proud of himself.

Another child of survivors, Ruth Alexander's family was Polish Jews, who had settled in the US. As a child of ten, Ruth used to cry every night, for no reason whatsoever. She knew that she loved her parents and that she too was loved in turn. But she felt stifled by a dismal atmosphere of gloom and despair that shrouded her home. So she joined New York University as she felt "it was a very legitimate form of running away". (196) After unsuccessful experiments in sensual affairs, followed by counseling and therapy sessions, Ruth read a book that ultimately changed her life. Finally she understood that all the difficulty she underwent was because of the fact that her parents had been in the war.

As Epstein spoke to more of her peers, she discovered that they all had their own versions of her 'iron box' and they too had left it undisturbed, lest it explode. Child of survivors, Albert Singerman was a Vietnam war veteran, who started campaigning against war even while he was in the army. As a child, Albert could never remember a happy moment at home. Unlike the other survivor parents, Albert's parents kept recounting their war-time tortures in all its gory details, that Albert had to yell at them to stop. The tensions and problems in Albert's home were the most extreme that Epstein had heard about.

At fourteen, Albert broke up with his parents and decided to join the army because he felt irked that the Jews did not fight back. Later he joined the Vietnam War as he too wanted to be a survivor in the real sense. However the bloodshed and atrocities disillusioned him and made him an atheist. Albert had gone to

the war as an aggressive Jew who would fight back, but came back as a survivor who identified himself with the victims. Nevertheless, after his long monologue with Epstein, he felt his fragmentary self getting reshaped.

Yehudah Cohen, a child of survivors was born in a Displaced Persons Community in Germany and then his family relocated to the US. Yehudah's home was a very consciously observant Jewish household. And so Yehudah never felt ashamed of acknowledging his Jewishness. However, after some elusive answers to Epstein's queries, Yehudah started revealing more about himself – the abuses he had suffered as a child – being called a 'dirty Jew' and being beaten up. After a short trip to Israel, Yehudah decided that Israel was his ultimate home and settled there happily.

Epstein too had been drawn towards Israel, as she was piqued by the assimilationist culture of the American melting pot, which sucked away her Jewishness. She wanted to relish the purely concentrate essence of Jewishness without any compromise or contamination. So she joined the Hebrew University in Israel and started metamorphosing into a typical Israeli by shunning all her American appendages. She felt elated that Israel had finally provided the answer to the unquenchable quest in her life and identity. But by the time of her second year in Israel, she realized that her true identity could only be a hybridized one – an East-West combo. She also found several other hybrids like her, who too had come to Israel in quest of roots. And Epstein began tracing their sagas.

Tomas was one such hybrid with a single parent because his father had remarried and settled in Israel. Desperate for a reunion with his father, Tomas went to Israel, but very soon felt alienated there: "I was not raised as a Jew. This is not my country. These aren't the people I know. I can't speak the language. I don't like the food. (274) As a surrogate for this vacuous state, Tomas slipped into an incestuous relationship with his half-sister. Disappointed with his state of affairs, Tomas came back to his native Prague and finally became a full-time spokesperson for Israel in Czechoslovakia.

Epstein kept Tomas' story unwritten for ten years because she felt it to be stark and taboo. But down the years, she realized that Tomas too was also like her other second generation peers. He had gone to Israel to reclaim his identity, but having failed in that venture, he nevertheless found his mirror-self in his half-sister, who endorsed his loss and loneliness. And what happened between them was not a chemistry of hormonal attraction – but a mode of mutual psycho-therapeutic restitution!

Tom Reed, a child of survivors was a researcher in New York's Addiction Services Agency, evaluating municipal rehabilitation programmes for drug addiction. Tom's father had severed all ties with Jewishness and had named his son, Tom Reed as a perfect mark of his American assimilation. However, Tom was bent on unearthing his Jewish roots and so he contacted Epstein. Tom was a typically unique member in Epstein's second generation peer group – his parents had never been part of the Holocaust, as they had left even before the war started. Nevertheless, Tom underwent all the pangs of the children of survivors. Finally, frustrated with the hullabaloo of his dreary existence, he decided to break free of all attachments and spend time for his personal pursuits, which included contributing to Epstein's research:

I wanted to help generate a community where before there was none... I didn't seem able to do it by myself. I wanted to work it out, let go of the legacy, so that I could get on with my own life. (331)

There were also some abnormal behavioural patterns among children of survivors, like identifying or empathizing with the perpetrators. Gabriela Korda, a child of survivors had grown up as a Protestant in South America after her parents emigrated and recast their identities by totally assimilating into the new culture. Gabriela too was not ready to acknowledge her 'child of survivors' identity and she felt that her parents too were not much affected by the war. She was sent to a German school in S. America where she was looked upon as an Aryan. Having grown up in Hungary, hearing anti-Semitic remarks all around her, Gabriela became very dispassionate about her Jewish identity. Gabriela's pro-German stance even made Epstein doubt that Gabriela might be a German: "How could Gabriela embrace a culture that was responsible for killing most of her family?" (135) Pained by this, Epstein put off Gabriela's interview in a folder, as she felt that it might in no way fit into her peer group. Only later did Epstein realize that there were other children of survivors with

similar German upbringings, who too endorsed Gabriela's views. Frank Collin was one such child of survivors who had denied his Jewishness and became a vociferous Nazi activist right from his early twenties.

Children of survivors, ridden with guilt, wanted to suffer like their parents. Epstein's three years in Israel were an experiment with adversity. She wanted to testify that she too could survive any catastrophe, just like her parents. She rented a room in a slum and befriended Marc, an orphan. She complied with his shocking request to be his mistress for the sole reason that, by doing so, she could vicariously connect to her parents' experience: "My acquiescence had little to do with love or sexual attraction. It was a test, a test of my endurance and a crash course in living on the underside of society". (290) Living on the rock bottom of penury in Marc's refuse-ridden shack, Epstein felt that she was reliving her parents' camp experience.

However, after three years, Epstein got tired of Marc and Israel. Israel gave her a far better Jewish education than what Sunday school had given her. But she realized that her place was back home in America where she had a plethora of choices and so she left for it as her ultimate destination.

Epstein's hesitant quest for her second generation peer community had snowballed into a rapid movement and produced thousands of pages of invaluable survivor-testimonies. Equipped with this raw material, Epstein spent an entire summer by a lakeside in the mountains of Massachusetts, reading and constructing her research "to create a community, to make visible the peer group that had remained invisible and silent for so long". (337) And in the fall of 1977, Epstein and ten other children of survivors had their first get-together. The community which Epstein had so long been searching for finally emerged!

All these children of survivors had absorbed their parents' attitude towards the Holocaust "through a kind of wordless osmosis" (137) Those children of survivors whose parents had sealed off their past responded by sealing off their own. Those whose parents had talked openly about their experience were most at ease with the subject, while others whose parents had tried to forget had little to say themselves.

Thus, far more than a destination, these second generation survivors' identities are continually under construction and reconstruction, fashioned through dialogic encounters with others. And this reconstruction of identity by these second generation peers is a psychic journey from pre-awareness and ignorance of their Holocaust legacy to their post-realization and acceptance of it.

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