Trauma and Resilience in Holocaust Memoir: Strategies of Self-preservation and Inter-Generational Encounter with Narrative.
By Shira Birnbaum.
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What did it take to escape the Holocaust? This is the guiding question of a book on refugeeism, survival, and memory by American psychoanalyst Shira Birnbaum, who has done a great deal of work to combine psychological, historical, and familial themes in her consideration of these questions. Coming from the second generation of Holocaust survivors, the author examines the strategies of Polish Jewish children and youth of the time who were coping with the progressive decomposition of the world as they knew it (or a dramatic 'perforation in the logical order of things' they witnessed, 110). The author collated, translated, and edited the stories of six members of her family. It was not until this book that these stories found their way to one another, as the survivors of the family lost sight of each other after the war. The affluent Birnbaum family had lived side by side in Warsaw until they were separated in September 1939. By 1941, the family was already spread over several continents, from Kobe to Rhodesia, and after 1945, also to North and South America.

The book contains two kinds of prose. On the one hand, the source material — ego-sources written in four languages in the form of memoirs, letters, essays, penned retrospectively by six people who were on the threshold of their conscious or adult lives in 1939. The memoirs are arranged in chapters chronologically according to the years of war. On the other hand, they are encrusted with scientific commentary by Birnbaum. This provides two very different but complementary narratives. The memoirs are notable for the amount of remembered detail and the ability of their authors to emotionally travel through time. Thus, we get not only a record of events, but also a moving glimpse into the feelings that accompanied the subsequent partings with loved ones. The most poignant part of the memoirs revolves around the parental love and closeness from which the children drew support even when they were already separated.

The fates of these six siblings and cousins remarkably reflect an almost complete overview of the Holocaust survival: David escaped with his parents on a luxury route (by plane and lodging in the best hotels) through Vilnius, Sweden, Holland, and Italy to Palestine. Nina made her way to Shanghai via the Trans-Siberian railroad using the "visa to life" which her family attained from Japanese Consul Chiune Sugihara. Wanda, through the Soviet Union, Beirut, and Aleppo, eventually ended up in Africa, where she led the life of

comparatively 'pampered and cosseted refugees' (74) under the Polish-British refugee programme. Teenagers Marysia, Irena, and Nathan didn't manage to escape from Poland. Marysia survived feigning 'Aryan' outside the ghetto and feeding lice in Dr. Rudolf Weigl's famous medical program (who developed a vaccine for typhus, sheltered Jewish friends and was awarded the Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations). Irena and her father survived the deportations from the Umschlagplatz. Irena left the ghetto, and her beloved dad, shortly before the 1943 April uprising. Fate took everything away from Nathan; he entered the war with his family as a 12-year-old failed refugee, then he was in hiding in the countryside, before being thrown out and first ending up in the Kraków ghetto, then with his father in Płaszów and Mauthausen slave labour camps. His age, story, and narration are somewhat reminiscent of Imre Kertész's *Fateless*.

The densely footnoted and theoretically referenced introduction, chapter commentaries, and epilogue offer the author's discussion of the self-preservation strategies in times of dislocation and permanent life threat. Importantly, the author is interested in the resources of human nature, striving for survival and defying decreed death, no less than she is interested in the emotional damage done to young people by the Shoah. She assumes that the legacy of the Holocaust is not just a 'package of pathologies' either passed on to others or not, but also includes the power of working through the loss: 'Traumatic exposure does not foreclose prospects for achieving stability and vitality later in life' (3) — this is another, yet less emphasised, lesson from life after the Shoah. She argues against flattening generalisations in conceptualising the costs and circumstances of survival and refugeedom. Furthermore, she reminds — after Dan Bar-On — that if it is possible for trauma to be transmitted down to the younger generation by the older generation, it is also possible that the regained confidence of the younger has a therapeutic 'upward' effect on the elder.

What obviously unites the characters and co-authors of the book is their age. That is why Birnbaum pays special attention to the condition of children and young people — survivors and refugees, to their sense-making attempts in confrontation with traumatic events. In her commentary, the author often looks to the present, not to equate past events with the present, but because some analogies inevitably resonate and may be instructive. Looking at the children reminds us that, both in the past and now, children do not choose the chaos of war, but are confronted with its 'titanic impact' and pay for it throughout their lives. It is to Birnbaum's credit that in her intimate narrative, which combines family history with close analysis and scholarly commentary, she has developed a compelling pathway to show without a shadow of a doubt that WWII was not only about 'nations' that suffered: '[…] each small family unit was at its own unique stage in the life cycle' (7).

Among the many strands of consideration about post-memory, the author offers a personal confession about the peculiar compulsion that the younger

generation sometimes feels to take care of the proverbial 'box in the attic' and deal with their parents' legacy. She also addresses these issues in a much broader perspective. With empathy rather than judgment, the author brings readers into a discussion about the stakes of 'woundedness' and why some communities may choose to hold on to trauma over the healing process. In the epilogue, the author draws together and warns of the diverse implications of the memory of genocide. In intergenerational transmission, this memory can be treated as a 'talismanic link' to ancestors, 'an oath that excludes anyone but ourselves' (166). In social transmission, memory can be mobilised in the form of toxic leveraging of the wound for political advantage (after Vamik Volkan and his concept of 'chosen trauma'). The memory argument is also used to make accusations of deliberately overshadowing the suffering of others.

The very presence of this reflection in the conclusion of a work on the trauma and resilience of child Holocaust survivors attests to the scholarly value of this book. A book that is worth picking up for the sheer poignancy of the source material from the memories of its main protagonists. And a book in which the author has used her psychological expertise as a therapist not so much to expose the wound of her family's past as to work towards building a social understanding. With a book in this form, the author unequivocally proves the thesis of resilience, which is a possible, albeit, as we should guess, laborious effect of the intergenerational transmission of memory.

It is unfortunate that these precious memoirs, which Shira Birnbaum rescued from the drawers and attics and offered to her readers, stop with the end of the war. To fully appreciate the resilience thesis, the reflections of the six protagonists and co-authors of this book on life post-war would certainly be helpful. It appears that, historically, not all sections of the memoirs have been properly assigned to the correct year. This does not change the fact that what we receive from Shira Birnbaum is the theme of trauma, resilience, and the legacies of the Holocaust revisited in an interdisciplinary, balanced, and nuanced manner. The book comes at a time and is inspired in part by the return of a situation in which young people in different parts of the world (here exemplified by a story of a Salvadorian refugee girl) are suffering from separation from their families, displacement, and loss of home. Home is the place from which we set out and measure all of life's roads and distances, reminds the author after Donald W. Winnicott. The Holocaust meant rupture, part of which was also the loss of a childhood home and the difficult post-war relationship with Poland that the author writes about (158). In this book, thanks to her family's efforts to record the past, and her scholarly analysis of their narratives, this American author and six of her co-authors "returned" to their Polish home. To end on a more personal note, as a researcher from

Poland I hope that this country will also rise to the task and become a true home for these, indeed part of its own, Jewish stories.