

SPEECH AND SILENCE: POETRY AND THE HOLOCAUST

Have you heard the term “second generation survivor?” It is a term, which has been and is still used to describe children whose father or mother or both parents had been concentration camp survivors. In many cases, these children became victims themselves. While every survivor of the camps was an individual with their own psychological make-up, with their own coping mechanisms, with their own memories, their relationship to their own children was clearly affected by what they had to endure during their concentration camp captivity. Many survivors, not wanting to burden their children with terrifying stories of survival and near death experiences, would remain silent—rarely talking about their past. Others would talk frequently about what they had endured, about how fortunate their children were to be living in a free country where government sponsored acts of genocide would not be possible. Whether silent or talkative about their past, children of Holocaust survivors shared some common personality traits and experiences resulting, to a great extent, from their parents Holocaust past.

In the chat room setting, brainstorm with some of your classmates about what some of these common personality traits or experiences might have been. Make a list and send them to me. Reflect on the following: was it better or worse for children of survivors to have learned specific details about what happened to their parents in the camps or to have learned nothing or very little from them?

One survivor, living in Israel today tells the following story: She was married and pregnant when she arrived in Auschwitz. Her husband had been gassed upon arrival. When she gave birth, Dr. Mengele decided to conduct an experiment: he tied the woman’s breast so that her baby—which she kept next to her—could not be breast fed. He wanted to learn how long it would take for the baby to die without nourishment. Mercifully, a Jewish prisoner who was a nurse in the camp infirmary, gave the baby a shot of morphine in order not to prolong the child’s and the mother’s suffering. The mother survived Auschwitz, immigrated to Israel, remarried and had two sons. She never spoke to her children about her first lost child and the lasting memory of watching her baby slowly die before her very eyes, while her breasts, filled with milk, could have saved its life. When her two sons were in their mid teens, the woman was interviewed on Israeli television when, for the first time, she told her story. Her sons watched the program and were horrified that they were learning something so fundamental about the mother they loved for the very first time with thousands of “strangers.”

Can you explain the mother’s silence? Was she right?

Now read an excerpt from a poem which presents the theme of “Holocaust survivor silence” and how it impacted the life of a “second generation survivor” The author is Jason Sommer, an award-winning poet and teacher at Fontbonne University in St. Louis.

SPEAKING OF THE LOST

I cannot look at Lilly as I ask
my father about his younger brother Shmuel,
whom she knew only a little,
the brother also of her husband Harry
sitting on my left. Of these
survivors of slave-labor and war,
her history may be the worst,
and she never speaks of it, not of Auschwitz
or the brothers of her own she lost there,
so it's her eyes I avoid as I break the etiquette
forbidding anyone to ask for speech
when speech is memory and memory is pain.

Alone among them, I try to think of myself
as an adult with a right to speak, a man
who has paid a price and waited long enough,
and I have children of my own, off somewhere
in the house with their mother and my mother,
but I feel like a child demanding a story,
teased with the half-promise of my father's
stories, wanting the one he cannot tell –
the one which has been told to him
by witnesses in that vague way they have
of passing on essentials only, the barest news.

I want whatever else can be recovered
to hold Shmuel at the center of a final scene,
but Harry and my father have begun
now with the boyhood of someone who is already the hero of a tale –
handsome as he was tall, as strong as he was both,
at home in the forests around Kustanovice,
gifted with understanding the language of animals,
and I continue romance to the end.
imagining him a wild creature,
gnawing his very life away to be free
of the trap, undoing the web of barbed wire
over the window of – not a cattle car,
I knew already – a Karlsruhe freight, one hundred
tons, a number chalked up outside
on the weathered boards, forcing himself
out awkwardly, dropping – how far down? – to the water.

If they suffer memory for me,
maybe I can give them something in return,

the date they need to commemorate
the true anniversary of Shmuel's death
with *yahrzeit* candles – my bookishness of use
to them with S.S. diaries, maps of train routes.
As they grow older, more and more
they want the ritual.

I want the discipline of facts,
about that train to Auschwitz, to anchor Shmuel
in the drift of others' memory where he swims
across an unnamed river to his death
in a flood of gunfire on the farther shore.

I have a plan to follow rivers
if only on the maps, until they intersect
the line of track, and I will have the place
he died among those crossings.
How many trestle bridges can there be,
crossing as the rivers bend?
I run to get an ordinary atlas,
which shows the possibilities in blue
meandering lines and red lettering:
The Tisza, too soon out of Munkács, or the Latorica,
Loborec, Ondava, Topl'a, Torysa,
as if I could name a river to go back along
against the current of forgetting.
Nervous, I talk and talk, babbling over
the map of Eastern Europe between us on the table:
how, rate by time equaling distance, the date
must lead to the place, but either will give the other,
how at first I thought it was winter,
filling in with images from movies,
the shot man tumbling down the incline
of the tracks, or rolling into snow.

*May Lilly says abruptly May
between the twentieth and the twenty-second,
two days, two nights to Auschwitz
from the station at the brickworks.*
She was on the transport. She was there.
Nobody looks stunned that she has harbored this
for more than forty years. No voice but mine
determined to recover Shmuel,
to rescue the hero from her silence.
How could she have kept it all these years?
Lilly, there was shooting. The train was halted
on a trestle bridge – think, the twentieth,

the twenty-first, day or night? –
Brakes shrieking. *Polizei* shouting in German.
The splashing below in the water.
Surely she would recall which day that was?
No, says Lilly mildly, *there was shooting
many times, many times the train would stop
without a reason. In our car, everyone,
old people and children, pressed together.
The women held rags out of the window to catch
rainwater we could drink. The train had many cars.
No one thing happened I could tell from where I was.*

This is an unusually emotional poem. I would like you to select some of the images (lines, phrases), which you found most touching.

Why is the poet—this son of Holocaust survivors—so desperately in need of information about his uncle’s death? The answers can be found in the text. (look carefully at stanza 4!)

Why is there something rather ludicrous, foolish and even negative in the poet/second generation survivor’s “running to get an ordinary atlas” so that he can pin point exactly where his uncle was killed?

The poet’s aunt Lily finally speaks, mentioning the approximate date and circumstances of her brother-in-law Shmuel’s death. Why does she finally speak? Why is nobody stunned by this after “40 year’s of silence?”

She does not know the exact date of Shmuel’s death. Why is the poet surprised by this? There is an important lesson to be learned by the fact that Lily doesn’t (or doesn’t want to?) remember this date? Can you explain the lesson in a short paragraph?

I have purposely not given you the title of the poem from which this excerpt comes. The title is *Mengele Shitting*. What is the title’s significance? Is there a reason for the vulgarity? Please explain.