

FOCUS: The Battle for Memory

Conspiracy of Silence

When Holocaust survivors tried to tell their stories, most people—even therapists—would not listen to or believe them. The consequences have been multigenerational.

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. Yael DANIELI

Dr. Yael Danieli, a clinical psychologist, victimologist, author, and lecturer, is director of the Group Project for Holocaust Survivors and Their Children, which she co-founded in 1975 in the New York City area; a founding director; past president, and senior representative to the United Nations of The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies; and a distinguished professor of International Psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.

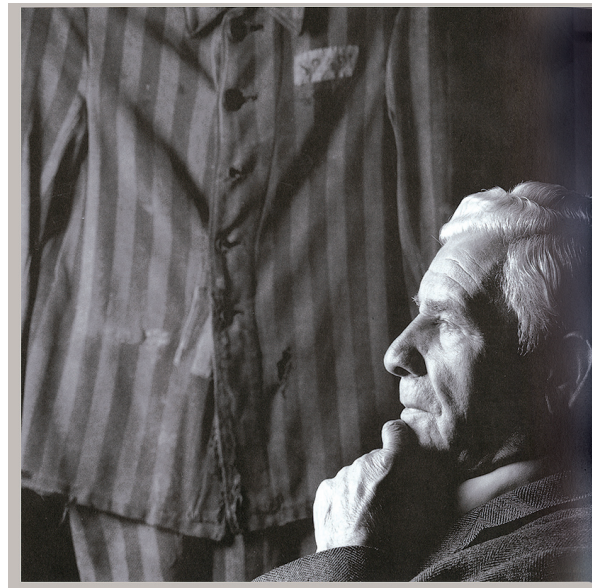
What led you to specialize in preventing the long-term and multigenerational effects of trauma?

During the '60s, while working on my doctoral dissertation on the psychology of hope, I realized that Holocaust survivors and their children suffered from what I would later term the "conspiracy of silence"—most people they tried to speak to about their experiences, including psychotherapists and other professionals, would not listen to or believe them.

Survivors' war accounts were too horrifying for most people to hear. Compounding their psychic pain, survivors also encountered the pervasively held myth that they had participated in their own destiny by "going like sheep to the slaughter" and the suspicion that they had performed immoral acts in order to survive.

The silence imposed by a world that did not want to hear them intensified their

sense of isolation, loneliness, and mistrust of society. In bitterness and despair, many decided there was no one they could talk



Survivor Jacob Meller kept his concentration camp uniform—evidence—many years before donating it to a Holocaust museum.

to about their trauma except, perhaps, other survivors or members of their newly formed families. The "conspiracy of silence" was almost a tacit agreement of "you don't listen, I don't tell." Some survivors also chose not to talk about their experiences with their children because they wanted their kids to have a "normal" life.

How did the emotional toll affect the survivors' families?

From my work with numerous survivors and their children who participated in the Group Project for Holocaust Survivors and Their Children, I discovered that, in

trying to cope, survivors created families that tended to exhibit at least four adaptational identity styles: victim families, fighter families, numb families, and families of "those who made it." The last two, in particular, often kept their traumas to themselves.

Why did they stay silent?

In numb families, frequently the parents were sole survivors of their previous family—he/she had lost a spouse and children during the war, and you cannot fully recover from losing your children in front of your eyes and not being able to do anything about it. Home life was characterized by a lack of both emotional expression and natural physical contact, and by pervasive silence.

Little or nothing was said about their Holocaust experiences. And the children of such

families were often too frightened to imagine what could have led to such constriction and lifelessness in their parents. In some cases, their own inner spontaneity and fantasy life were greatly diminished.

In these numb families, the parents protected each other and the children protected the parents. Children were expected to somehow grow up on their own, to take care of themselves. They were also counted on to understand that they were loved, the proof lying in their parents' pained efforts to support them financially.

Since they rarely felt important at