

home, these children had trouble believing that others would consider them worthy of attention. They often adapted by numbing themselves, thus appearing less intelligent and capable than they were. Some were perpetually angry as a way to evoke some attention rather than none at all. While they tried to achieve generally accepted social standards, they often felt out of place, forlorn, and not genuinely involved in their pursuits.

How would you describe the victim families?

The home of survivors with a dominant “victim” identity—common among concentration camp survivors—was characterized by pervasive depression, worry, and mistrust. Joy, self-fulfillment, and existential questions were viewed as frivolous luxuries. Fear of the outside world—of the inevitable next Holocaust—led to clinging within the family. Children were taught to distrust people, especially authority figures, outside the family circle.

To these children, survivor parents appeared to be very confident and “disaster smart” in protecting them against any negative eventuality in life. At the same time, though, survivor parents were frequently disoriented in dealing with the American reality, so the children became the family’s mediators with the outside world. Thus, overprotection of children and of parents became mutual.

Because a wrong decision often meant death during the war, children in such families would often act as if every decision was a matter of life or death. Parents also exercised guilt as a means of control and of keeping adult children from questioning them about their war experience, expressing anger toward them, or “burdening” them with their own pain. Keenly sensitive to their parents’ suffering, the children of these survivors frequently entered the helping professions.

What are some of the characteristics of fighter families?

The term fighter refers either to the way such survivors described their role during the Holocaust—most of them were partisans and resistance fighters—or the pos-

ture they adopted after the war to counteract the image of the victimized Jew.

Permeated by an intense drive to build and achieve, the home atmosphere of fighter survivors was filled with compulsive activity. Parents forbade any behavior that might signify victimization, weakness, or self-pity. Pride was fiercely held as a virtue, relaxation and pleasure were deemed superfluous, and defiance toward outside authorities was sometimes encouraged to the point of peril.

The children, in turn, established a fighter/hero identity, both in order to belong to the family and to separate from it, and in search of validation and esteem. Children in such families tended to choose justice and law enforcement professions.

And what do we know of families of “those who made it”?

Many of these survivors were motivated by a wartime fantasy to “make it big” if and when they were liberated, also as their way to defy the Nazis. Persistently and single-mindedly, after the war they sought higher education, social and political status, fame, and/or wealth.

Outwardly, this group became more assimilated into American society than other survivors. Some achieved a “normal” posture by excluding any reminders of their past. This denial often resulted in inner numbing and isolation.

Some in this group devoted their careers, money, and political status to demand commemoration of and attention to the Jewish experience during the Holocaust. They strove to understand the roots of genocide, to find ways to prevent its recurrence, to ensure that Holocaust victims were treated with dignity, and to aid victimized populations in general. Notably, though, “those who made it” tended to deny the long-term effects of the Holocaust upon themselves and their children; rarely would they acknowledge the Shoah as a factor in their psychological lives. The primary focus was on outside appearance and displayable success. But despite their outward appearance of having “made it,” of all the four groups, they were the most likely to divorce; and, tragically, when reminders of the

denied past caught up (such as loss of control, helplessness, inability to work or perform), they were more likely than the others to commit suicide.

It seems that the children in all categories of survivor families consciously or unconsciously absorbed their parents’ Holocaust experiences as their own.

That’s right. To varying degrees, Holocaust parents transmitted to their children a sense of the conditions under which they had survived the war. Many children of survivors have internalized Holocaust images and, hence, simultaneously live in two different places (Europe and America) and times (1942 and the present).

So many years after the fact, can Holocaust survivors and their children be helped?

Yes. Our work at the Group Project for Holocaust Survivors and Their Children has shown that when survivors and their families become aware of how their lives have been shaped by their post-Holocaust adaptational styles, they are better prepared to move forward toward self-actualization. Moreover, this awareness can help stop transmission of pathology to succeeding generations.

The ultimate goal is psychological liberation from the trauma of victimization.

How can this goal of psychological liberation be achieved?

Survivors and their offspring can learn to acknowledge, accept, and integrate their and their parents’ experiences into their own lives—that is, confronting and incorporating aspects of extraordinary human existence that would not be normally encountered under everyday circumstances. Over time, a fuller understanding of victimization experiences leads to gaining the ability to develop a realistic perspective of what happened, including the impersonality of the events.

What do you mean by the impersonality of events?

By this I mean the ability of survivors to no longer view themselves and humanity solely on the basis of what personally