Lessons for Living Learned from the Holocaust: A 2G Daughter Remembers

Susanne Bleiberg Seperson, Ph.D.
Dowling College
Oakdale, New York 11769
bleibers@dowling.edu

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Abstract

Tolerance and respect for others are the key values to be taught when teaching about the Holocaust. A second generation daughter of Holocaust survivors discusses their lives and experiences and lists five lessons for living that can be learned from the Holocaust. These lessons are: Do not be prejudiced; Be mentally and emotionally strong; Seek out the truth; Be vigilant and be involved; Be optimistic and keep a positive attitude.

Key words: Holocaust education, lessons for living, tolerance, moral values, bystander, upstander, testimony, stories, poems, Righteous Christian.

The legacy of the Holocaust as a part of World War II history cries out for us to remember the importance of moral education and bravery in the face of hatred and terror. The lessons of the Holocaust need to be remembered and taught as even the youngest survivors are getting older and the time period when we will be able to learn directly from them is drawing to a close. The question remains whether we will draw the correct lessons and whether even if we do, whether these lessons will be implemented.

I am an educator. I believe in the power of education to inform, infuse, and change people's hearts and minds. That is why I think it is so important that we think about how the meaning of the Holocaust can be taught to teachers, future educators, and children so that it will never happen again.

We must find ways of teaching the meaning of the Holocaust or Shoah to children so that it has resonance in their own lives. We must examine the reasons for its occurrence—how the institutions of government, religion, business, education, and culture all failed simultaneously. How the failure of all these institutions allowed for the message that Jews are sub-human to be accepted; that Jewish deaths at the very least were to be tolerated.

If there is any lesson that should be learned, it is that tolerance and respect for others are the hallmarks of a civilized society. Tolerance and respect for others must be the central message taught to schoolchildren today throughout the world. However, these lessons will only be learned if societies and individuals throughout the world through its government, religious and social leaders commit to the idea of equality and dignity of all people. We must find myriad ways and opportunities to teach this message. That is our responsibility, no more and no less.

The philosopher, George Santayana, stated that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. We cannot afford not to remember the Holocaust. The American journalist, Ed Quillen, asked "What purpose is a memorial supposed to serve, and precisely what should we be remembering? ...It seems that there is something inherently political about memorials. A memorial is society's way of saying 'this event is worth remembering,' with the implication that events without memorials are not worth remembering."[1] With regard to the Holocaust, Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel wrote that the purpose of remembering is as follows: "Survivors have tried to teach their contemporaries how to build on ruins, how to invent hope in a world that offers none, how to proclaim faith to a generation that has seen it shamed and mutilated. And I believe that memory is the answer, perhaps the only answer."[2]

We must find ways to teach about the Holocaust that not only teaches the facts, but also teaches about values, ethics, morality, and the climate and cultures that allowed it to happen. It should not be too difficult to help students make the connection between the events of the Holocaust and their own sense of moral behavior in their current everyday lives. We can do so by using testimonies, biographies, works of art, music, poetry, plays, and the events of history.

I suggest that we do so by listening to survivors themselves. Children, in fact, like most

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[1] Quillen, E., Looking for a meaning in memorials. *The Denver Post*. April 23, 2000.

[2] Wiesel, E. cited in "The Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in the Context of Germany Jewish History" in *LBI news.* New York: Leo Baeck Institute New York. No. 83/Summer 2005, p. 5.

people, like to hear stories. The popularity of the book, *The Diary of Anne Frank,* is not an accident. For children exposed to testimony by survivors, it can be a life altering experience. We must help them make the connections between intolerance and injustice wherever it occurs and in their own daily lives. We must help them take activist roles and not stand idly by in the face of evil, murder and wrong-doing. If only there had been more people who stood up and protested against Hitler when it was possible to do so, the outcome might have been different. It is important to make the distinctions between being a perpetrator, victim, bystander, and up-stander. We know the definitions of perpetrator and victim; the former inflicts the blows and the latter receives them. But the person who does neither has the option of choosing to do nothing or to intervene; the distinction between being a bystander or upstander. An upstander is a person who stands up for his or her beliefs; a person who does what they think is right, even if they are alone. People who spoke out against the Holocaust were upstanders[3].

The important point is that teaching the Holocaust is an occasion to teach students about morality; this is true throughout the world, but also in the United States where fewer and fewer children are taught ethical or moral behavior from a religious foundation. All religious leaders have an obligation to teach the Golden Rule**:** Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. In the United States and other countries where religious education is no longer as prevalent as it once was, it becomes all the more necessary for the school to teach appropriate behavior and ethics through their course work. This is an opportunity not to be lost.

The lesson for the world was and is immediate and obvious: Never again. As social scientists, professors, we have an obligation to ask questions. As Americans, our people and government ask countries like Germany, Poland, and Austria to hold themselves accountable for their government's actions during the Shoah. The time is ripe for us to ask America as well. How and why did the United States do so little to help the Jewish people who were being systematically slaughtered throughout Europe? Why was anti-Semitism so prevalent in the United States? Every nation must reflect on its actions and inactions. We must also ask ourselves, when other tragedies of unimaginable proportions occur, and they do, why do we do so little now? And of course, we must ask, could it ever happen again?

As for lessons for living our own daily lives, this requires some more thought about what is an intrinsically interesting topic: What can we take away from that nightmare experience that

[3] www.urbandictionary.com

would have resonance for our own daily lives, especially as individuals who had not directly experienced these awful events?

Teaching the historical events and geography of the Holocaust is enhanced when a human face is attached to it. Therefore, as a member of the Second Generation (2G), I would like to share some events in my parents' and my own life and then draw the appropriate lessons from them. I propose five lessons that we can learn from the horrors of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

One story in particular that my mother, Annie Bleiberg, a survivor of Auschwitz and other camps, told me makes the connection in a context to which all can relate—a school setting. She describes an event which occurred at her high school in Jaroslaw, Poland.

> "Anti-Semitism has existed for centuries all over the world even before the infamous Holocaust era, flaring up at different times, in different places and to different degrees. In 1937-1938 anti-Semitism raised its ugly head in Poland once again. Anti-Semitism was seen and felt almost everywhere: in schools and offices, in factories and on streets. My city (Jaroslaw, Poland) and my high school were no exception. Many neighborhoods became unsafe for Jews. If a Jew was out in the evening after dark, he was beaten, pulled by his beard and mugged. Jewish stores were boycotted with signs at the entrance: 'Don't buy from a Jew.' The gymnasiums (high schools) and universities became battlegrounds for the Jewish and Gentile students. What may surprise you is that these fights were fueled by the faculty!
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> In my high school, in conjunction with a discussion of the novel, *Lalka (The Doll)*, written in 1890 by a Polish journalist and novelist, Boleslaw Prus, even the professor fomented anti-Semitism. The subject was a comparison of Jewish life in Warsaw toward the end of the 19th century and now, (shortly before the outbreak of World War II.) This discussion took place one period before my class and had turned into a shouting match and fistfight among the student body. When this same professor, Dr. Stanislaw Layezak, who was everyone's favorite professor of history and literature, came to our class, he expressed his desire to avoid a repetition of the troublesome situation that had taken place just one hour earlier. He said that in order to keep "peace and harmony" in the class, he would give a very brief review of Jewish life and Jews' role at the present time (1937-38) and ended with and I quote: 'We, students and faculty, can't solve the Jewish problem; there are higher authorities who think about this. I (the professor) for one would suggest that Poland shall do with the Jews what Brazil does with coffee—just dump them in the ocean.' Yes, it was a great shock and disappointment to hear such a statement from him. It caused uproar in the classroom, which spread to the halls of the school, but no formal charges or even complaints were brought against the professor; there was no one to take them to and nowhere to go.
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> My friend cried out loud, in tears, and all alone. None of our gentile friends came forward to console her. When she tried to explain the reason for her shock and outburst, the professor said, 'Rozia (Rose), you are too sensitive.' I was outraged, but quiet. Yet if looks could kill, this well-mannered and well-liked professor would have been killed

instantly.

This, was just the beginning and never forgotten. The sad thing is that anti-Semitism is still alive and well fifty years after the Holocaust and even in places where there are very few or no Jews at all. Will the world ever be enlightened and cured from this terrible disease?"

This relatable story is one example of why I think hearing survivors' stories are so valuable. Both my mother, Annie Wertman Bleiberg, a survivor of Auschwitz, and my father, the late David Bleiberg, a veteran of the notorious Janowska work camp and the forests, survived unimaginable and unspeakable horrors. The "lessons" I learned are a tribute to the two of them; they were able to pick up their lives, go on living, and even be happy despite the fact that they had lost so much.

So now I would like to share those lessons with you—the lessons I think everyone needs to learn, the lessons that young people in particular need to be taught, the lessons that will honor the lives of those who perished in the Holocaust. I propose five lessons that we can learn from the horrors of the Holocaust and its aftermath and I will do so in the context of stories surrounding the Holocaust.

Lesson number one: Do not be prejudiced. Do not make hasty judgments about people, no matter their ethnic background, religion, race, age, sexual orientation, or handicapping condition. Without the help of some people, whether German or Polish or whatever, there would be even fewer, if any, survivors. My parents were helped by Polish Christians, the late Witold Maczak and the late Helka Fiutowska, both recognized as Righteous Christians at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. That is, they were recognized for their heroism and bravery and help given to many Jewish friends and neighbors with no thought or receipt of benefits to themselves. On the contrary, there were only risks, including their own and families' lives and yet they did right by their fellow human beings. Would you? Be honest. It's asking a lot. These truly are Righteous Christians and they deserve adulation and praise for all time.

Neither Helka Fiutowska nor Witold Maczak knew whether my parents survived World War II or not. My mother and I returned to Poland and found them in 1995. At that time they had not seen each other in fifty years. You can imagine the reunion. Witold, who has also been recognized by the Polish government, was part of an organized group who helped Jewish women get false Aryan papers so that they might work in Germany in the fields for the duration of the war. Unfortunately, my mother never made it to Germany, as you will discover shortly. Helka

helped my father, David, by bringing him food out in the woods and keeping him in her home at regular intervals to help him survive. Her family helped many Jews during and after the war, and their neighbors mistreated them after the war. In fact, Helka's family had bought land for the Bleiberg family when Jews were not allowed to own their own land because of their friendship and close relationship. This takes courage and character. When I asked Helka what made her do this, she replied, "It is the duty of every good Christian to help their fellow man, especially when in need." If only there had more people of such high character. Remember them.

Lesson number two: Be mentally and emotionally strong. Have the courage and spirit to keep on fighting when times are tough. Things usually get better and you just have to last long enough to live to see it. Having the will to endure difficult times or difficult people is a piece of cake compared to what the survivors endured. After receiving the false papers through the help of Witold Maczak, Annie was sitting on a train heading for Germany; when the train stopped in Krakow, she was squealed on by a schoolmate who recognized her. The girl identified Annie as a Jew and then Annie was pulled off the train. This betrayal led her to be taken to the jail in Plaszow, badly beaten, labeled as a political prisoner, and then shipped off to Auschwitz.

Now realize that this event occurred after Annie, her mother, father, and sister had already been taken from their home in Oleszyce to a ghetto, Lubacow, and then sent on a train to the death camp, Belzec, when the ghetto was liquidated. Annie was the first female to jump off the moving train and she found her way back to the ghetto alone. Her father also jumped and survived. Her mother and sister did not, and perished along with her entire extended family of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and baby cousins. So now she found herself in Auschwitz all alone.

In her own words Annie described jumping off the moving death train as follows:

> "The last recollection I have before I jumped off the train, was the touch of my mother's hands on my buttocks as she helped me reach the window on top and jump over the side. I never saw her or my sister Helen again."

A powerful example of the importance of emotional strength took place

> "in a dream I had near my high school on the steps going up to the market place in Jaroslaw. I dreamt I saw my grandfather, Michael, going up, as if to heaven, with a group of people all wearing long white togas. As I was about to follow him in my dream, he pointed at me with his right index finger and said, 'Now you stay here!' I took this as a command and signal that I was to remain. I felt I had to obey him. I attribute my survival to luck, but I also had the strength and fortitude to endure."

Another story I wish to share is about my father, David. His sister, Golda, who was

blond and blue eyed, strong, and could easily pass for a Polish farm girl, was killed by the Gestapo, when a neighbor told her to hide in his barn and then betrayed her all for a few zlotys. His name was Stachanowski and, when my mother and I found Helka in 1995 back in her home town of Oleszyce, there he was! Helka pointed him out walking in the town square where I could see the back of his head! Nothing had happened to him. He was an old man dressed in overalls living a simple life in a poor town near the Ukrainian border. I was horrified. Helka then related that during the war when my father found out who had betrayed his sister he wanted to kill him and told Helka that he and his brother and friends would burn down the murderer's barn and kill him. Helka talked him out of it by saying that she and her family would be harmed and that he would never be able to come back to town for any help because everyone would be out to kill him and these townspeople would all know that the Fiutowski family was helping Jews. How mentally and emotionally strong did my father have to be to not give in to his rage and anger? I thought of all of that when I saw this pathetic thing also called a human being.

Lesson number three: Seek out the truth. Things may not be what they seem. Scratch the surface and question. Do not believe everything you read in the newspapers or hear on the news. You may only be hearing one side and it may be the wrong side or the official version, which may not be the complete truth. I learned this in sixth grade in a public school in New York City when my class collected money for the Red Cross and my parents reluctantly told me about the collaboration by the International Red Cross in the Nazi ruse to disguise the real purpose of concentration camps. That is how I learned about Theresienstadt and how it was used for propaganda purposes.

Yet another example of this ruse is evident in the famous sign at the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp. "Arbeit macht frei" or "Work makes you free" feeds the fiction that the Jews were just workers and were not going to be annihilated. That was false, yet obviously accepted by the International Red Cross at Thereisienstadt as well.

Lesson number four: Be vigilant and be involved. Words matter and there are small and large injustices all around us. Whether these actions are by children who mimic what they see around them or by adults who should know better, do not stand by silently when you hear name-calling or see acts of discrimination, bullying, vandalism, or violence. Become involved in your community: give time and money to programs that combat anti-Semitism and racism. Support Israel. How different would the Holocaust have been if there had been a State of Israel?

Write letters to the editor of your newspaper. Vote. Be involved. The only peaceful way to eliminate injustice is to educate. Do what you can to make this world a better place—in Hebrew "Tikkun Olam"—repair the world.

I sadly saw bigotry in that same sixth grade class when a teacher accused a Black classmate of having stolen money to contribute to the Red Cross because he couldn't possibly have collected so much otherwise. I credit my parents for learning to recognize bigotry and injustice at an early age and knowing that that teacher was wrong.

If better and more communication had existed prior to World War II, the response to Hitler might have been more robust. Just before the war broke out in Jaroslaw, Poland in1939, my father, along with my uncle and a group of other young men were preparing for the forthcoming war, which was expected. They just didn't realize what kind of war this was going to be—so total, so long, so brutal. Had communication been more open and available it is possible to speculate that the war against the Jews might have gone differently. And some who knew about the concentration camps, such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt, did not do enough to stop it. The anti-Semitism of Breckenridge Long, the US Assistant Secretary of State, and others prevailed.

Lesson number five: Be optimistic and keep a positive attitude. Be compassionate. Appreciate what you have. Share your life with your family and friends. Enjoy life. It is precious. After all that my parents lost—their families, friends, homes, and community— they started all over again in a new place, speaking a new language, with nothing but hope. They moved from Poland to Germany to the United States. They created rich, full lives, and, in the way they lived, they showed me and others how to live life fully and with meaning.

I am sure there are other lessons one could draw. I chose to draw these five. In hindsight, my choice of occupation, sociology professor, is no accident. It affords me the opportunity to put into practice lessons I had absorbed as a child without even knowing I was learning them. I am grateful that I had two parents who, by living their lives as they did and as my mother fortunately still does, allowed me to learn these lessons; and I am grateful that I have the privilege of teaching others these important values.

I conclude with a poem I wrote called *Ode to Jooss.* It is obviously a play on the word, Jews. Kurt Jooss was a German choreographer, who created the anti-war ballet, *The Green Table,* after World War I, and danced by the Joffrey Ballet in New York City. For me and I hope

for you, it speaks to the evils of war.

Ode to Jooss

by Susanne Bleiberg Seperson

Soldiers die.
Mothers cry.
Diplomats keep drawing maps.
Unaffected
Disconnected
They draw and re-draw lines.
Massive damage
Bloody carnage
Ruin all around

Unmarked graves
Madness reigns
Death camps.
Have they no shame?
Headlines scream
We can dream.
It will end

Finally, the main point I wish to make and conclude with is that it is important to teach about the Holocaust. Given the state of race and ethnic and religious relations and morality in the world today, a more comprehensive examination of this period of world history is in order. History must be taught as more than a mere chronology of events, but rather as an opportunity to enlighten by examining values, prevailing attitudes and social conditions so that the students may learn from history. How that history is presented is all important: the powerful can only succeed with the support or acquiescence of the silent majority. "Never Again" must be more than a slogan. Tolerance and respect for others are the values we must teach our students and teaching about the Holocaust is an excellent way to begin.