

## Article

# What's in a Name? The Genealogy of Holocaust Identities

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I analyze the terminology used in the United States (U.S.) to refer to Jews who lived through the Holocaust as well as their descendants. This essay constitutes a first step in a project focused on re-conceptualizing Holocaust survivors and their families through the lens of agency and victimization. Many children and, more recently, grandchildren of Jewish Holocaust survivors trace their genealogy to their parent's or grandparent's past, and self-identify through this experience. The specific terms and labels used to identify or self-identify reflect different kinds of assumptions as well as claims on how that particular past affects their present. My preliminary findings suggest a paradoxical inversion of victimization and agency in some of the terminology used to identify or self-identify survivors as well as children of survivors.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; identity; survivors; second generation; post-memory; agency; victims; genocide

Through experiences such as visiting the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC and viewing the film "Schindler's List," many Americans feel linked to the Holocaust in some manner. They have what Alison Landsberg (2004) calls "prosthetic memory;" a strong sense of identification with a tragedy even though they have no direct religious, ethnic or kin connection to the persecuted group, in this case, the Jews. For some American Jews, however, their connection to the Holocaust is much more direct, having lived through it in Europe, or having a parent or grandparent who did. The children of Holocaust survivors have what Marianne Hirsch (1997) has termed "post-memory," an inheritance of their parents' life-and-death defining experiences even though they were not even alive when it occurred. Concurrent with increased attention to the Holocaust in American culture, different names and terms have developed to refer to those who lived through it as well as their descendants, whose experience stems from post-memory.

Sociologically, new terms or classifications create new groups of people. While these people and groups existed before the terms were created, we see them differently after they are named, what Ian Hacking (2006, p. 23) refers to as "making up people". In this essay, I analyze the terminology used in the United States to refer to Jews who lived through the Holocaust as well as their descendants.<sup>1</sup> Many children, and more recently, grandchildren of Jewish Holocaust survivors trace their genealogy to their parent's or grandparent's past, and self-identify through this experience. The specific terms and labels used to identify or self-identify reflect different kinds of assumptions as well as claims on how that particular past affects their present. This essay is a first step in a project focused on re-conceptualizing Holocaust survivors and their families through the lens of agency and victimization.

<sup>1</sup> The experience of survivors and their descendants elsewhere, particularly in Israel, was very different from the U.S. in terms of attitude, terminology and treatment. Thus, my focus is exclusively on the U.S. in terms of cultural context.

My preliminary findings suggest a somewhat paradoxical inversion of victimization and agency in certain terminology used to identify or self-identify survivors as well as children of survivors.

Why focus only on how Jews deal with the genealogy of the Holocaust rather than the survivors and their descendants from other genocides as well? The Holocaust is seen as the paradigmatic, almost “ideal type” of genocide and, therefore, a vast literature exists on Holocaust survivors and their descendants, particularly with regard to trauma among the second generation. This extensive literature may also be due to the substantial representation of Jews in the fields of psychotherapy from whence much of the professional literature comes. One could argue that it is important to understand exactly what researchers have found so that we might better understand the traumas of other genocide descendant groups. However, it is also important to understand what differentiates the particular position of American Jewish descendants of Holocaust survivors from other groups that have suffered from genocide such as Cambodians or Native Americans. My emphasis on American Jewish descendants of Holocaust survivors is, therefore, deliberate for these multiple reasons and may provide the beginnings of a foundation for future comparative analysis.

## 1. Victims and Survivors

Let me begin this meta-genealogical journey with the terminology that depicts those Jews who were alive in Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II. The image of those who survived largely has been formed by footage of barely living skeletons in striped pajamas discovered by American soldiers when they happened upon concentration camps.<sup>2</sup> Shorn of their hair and most other common markers of humanness, reduced to skin and protruding bones, the prisoners were what we now refer to as “camp survivors.” However, that term was not widely used at the time. Although the Jews who were still alive were victims, many of them rejected that term, because they considered the true victims to be those who perished (Stein 2014). Yet clearly, despite their rejection of that term, the living who were liberated from concentration camps were, without a doubt, victims as well.

By then, many of them were stateless. However, regardless of their citizenship status, they were called Displaced Persons or DPs and were sent to make-shift DP camps. Most of them eventually resettled in the U.S., Palestine/Israel or elsewhere and a small minority returned to their country of origin. Those who came to the United States referred to themselves and their friends as refugees, displaced persons, greenhorns, or the Yiddish version, “*greene*,”<sup>3</sup> (Stein 2014, p. 105) and rarely referred to themselves or others who lived through the Holocaust as survivors. What is important to note is that the terms “greenhorns” or “*greene*” date back to previous waves of Jewish immigration to the U.S. in the early 20th century<sup>4</sup> and do not refer to the Holocaust or their refugee status whatsoever.

The refugees kept a low profile, in great part because they were preoccupied with starting a new life, supporting their families in a new country and learning a new language. Their American Jewish relatives and others often did not want to hear their stories; they were told to put their pasts behind them, to look forward, and to Americanize (Wolf 2002). As a result, many survivors kept to themselves and interacted with relatives and friends from similar backgrounds. For those with no

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<sup>2</sup> Other European Jews were alive at the end of World War II on the continent who were not in camps—those who had been hidden, those who passed as Gentiles with a false identity, those who were in Soviet labor camps, as well as partisans and members of the Resistance. Those who had been hidden were not thought of as survivors until the 1990s. Those who were in Soviet labor camps were excluded from the category of survivors and from reparations as well.

<sup>3</sup> This term can be used in a derogatory manner, similar to “fresh off the boat” or FOB, but some survivors appropriated the term greenhorn and for decades, referred to their group of friends with that term (Ruth Jaeger, personal conversation. August 28, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> A well-known Yiddish song “*Die Grine Kuzine*” (“My Greenhorn Cousin”) dates back to 1921. <http://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/great-songs-of-the-american-yiddish-stage/work/di-grine-kuzine/>.

relatives, their friends became like the family they lost. Contrary to the common perception that they chose complete silence, historian Hasia Diner (2009) found that indeed survivors did talk about their experiences, but early on, it was limited to their private inner circle of family and friends who had similar histories. .

In 1978, the television series *Holocaust* was broadly viewed by millions of Americans; it was a watershed moment as it brought the Holocaust into popular consciousness and directed attention to the experiences of the Jewish refugees. Stein (2014, p. 110) refers to the series as “a Jewish version of...*Roots*” because of the ways in which it brought the historical plight of an oppressed group of people into focus. After more than three decades since the end of World War II, there was an audience interested in hearing these Jewish victims tell their histories (Stein 2014).

In the mid-to-late 1970s, the term “Holocaust survivor” or simply “survivor” began to enter popular discourse in the American Jewish community but only referred to those who had been in concentration camps.<sup>5</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that even then, many survivors still did not adopt that terminology to refer to themselves or others like them. However, that is how they were named and seen, as that term became part of the American vernacular. A Jewish man liberated from Bergen-Belsen wrote about the dynamic of this shifting terminology—right after the war, “we were ‘liberated prisoners;’ and then became known as DPs or displaced persons. After some time, we became ‘emigrants or ‘immigrants,’ or ‘refugees.’ At some point, “I noticed that I had been reclassified as a ‘survivor.’” (Weinberg 1985 150 quoted in Stein 2014, p. 104). Whether they used the term or not, by the 1980s, many survivors claimed this identity in more public ways. Later, in the 1990s, those who had been hidden during the war claimed their collective identity as survivors followed by those who had been on the *Kindertransport* to England. Some went to annual meetings of survivors locally or internationally, and some adopted this term instrumentally, e.g., to legitimize their speaking to school children about their experiences, or to claim reparations.<sup>6</sup> Thus an amalgamation of forces created both internally and exogenously eventually led to the common self-referencing as a survivor in certain situations.

The term “survivor” as it is used in the United States is imbued with a positive valence, evoking traits one associates with American culture involving strength, persistence and perhaps even heroism (Stein 2014, p. 105).<sup>7</sup> While victims are acted upon, survivors most definitely are not. The term survivor, however, implies that the survival of concentration camp prisoners beyond Liberation is due to, or at least somehow related to, their quick wittedness and their various decisions; in other words, their agency. However, if survivors are seen as people who made the right decisions, it implies that those who died are at fault for their poor decisions or inappropriate (in)actions.

In reality, most prisoners in concentration camps had no agency whatsoever and could only rely on their basic instincts to get by; they could have just as easily died or been killed. It was sheer luck that they lived until Liberation. The term “survivor” somehow bestows them with capabilities they did not possess. One survivor stated “...I guess I don’t feel right about sounding as though I did something smarter or better than any of the other millions who died. I was lucky.” (Rosner 2017, p. 36). The term “survivor” glosses over the reality that like those who perished, those who lived were victims as well and they were victimized by those few who actually possessed agency and power.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The definition of Holocaust survivor was broadened considerably by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to include those who were forced to emigrate before the war. For the most part, I am referring to survivors as those who were in concentration camp(s) and were liberated in 1945.

<sup>6</sup> The Claims Conference: The Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany began reparations to survivors in the early 1950s and continues to the present.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Arlene Stein for her insights about this term. My essay relies heavily on Stein’s work because she is the only scholar who has analyzed this history and this social movement sociologically.

<sup>8</sup> This nuanced but important change also reflects a shift in the social sciences at that time. Instead of viewing poor people as simply and solely the victims of capital and class structure, they were conceptualized as social

Another problem is that in American English, a victim usually refers to someone who died or was killed. Perhaps a more accurate albeit wordier conceptualization to name this group is “surviving Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide,” or the Holocaust. It is also possible that for some people, including survivors, the term “survivor” might extend beyond past experiences to keep this memory alive today.

In the U.S., the women’s movement also adopted the term “survivor” to denote anyone who has experienced rape, incest, or domestic violence. The terminology reflects a similar trajectory of having been victimized and traumatized against one’s will. Motivated by a very Americanized psychological framework, healing is supposed to emerge from talking about the trauma and sharing one’s story and is thought to be a way to take back one’s power and strength. Stein (2014, p. 90) notes that this blueprint for healing, also utilized widely in various recovery groups,<sup>9</sup> reflects a “modernist logic of the triumphant individual—one who has ‘suffered, survived, and surpassed.’” Thus, while the term “survivor” originally referred to the victims of an international political movement in which state structures colluded to exterminate the “undesirables,” it is now widely used to refer to a less politicized, personal context, including illness such as cancer. Although feminists point to the structures of patriarchy underlying and reproducing violence against women, those in recovery groups who use the term “survivor” are referring to a more personal situation. Regardless of how it is applied, the meaning of the term could reflect a collective memory but it also could reflect a very American ideology of proud and persistent individualism that triumphs over adversity.

The term “survivor” is now ubiquitous in American society. This shift in cultural meaning was touted in Larry David’s comedy “Curb Your Enthusiasm.” David’s character went to dinner at someone’s home where, he was told, a Holocaust survivor would be attending. It turned out that that person was not a Holocaust survivor, but someone who had been on the reality television program “Survivor.” This cringe-worthy yet funny interaction parodied how a term that was once associated only with the Holocaust has become popularized to the point of being farcical.

In recent years, Holocaust survivors’ very existence has elevated them to hero/heroine status in U.S. culture and their stories are treated as sacrosanct. This is likely due to the aging of this cohort, as so many of them die out. I have attended events where Holocaust survivors in the audience are asked to identify themselves and stand up; the reaction of the audience has been to applaud them. The applause may reflect appreciation for their existence, but we usually applaud people for what they have performed, accomplished, or achieved. Those survivors did not ‘do’ anything greater or less than those who perished; they were not more intelligent or strategic. Again, this is not meant to disrespect or belittle victims of the Shoah but simply to underscore how the terminology may affect our perceptions. Survivors are elevated in our society; victims, perhaps less so.

## 2. Children of Survivors

In the beginning was Auschwitz Melvin Jules Bukiet 2002, 13

Writer Melvin Jules Bukiet (2002, pp. 13–18) vividly and at times humorously describes how for children of Holocaust survivors, their “very existence is dependent on the whirlwind their parents barely escaped.” “How do you cope,” he asks, “when the most important event of your life occurred before you were born?” How do we “tell the story..... despite the fact that we can’t remember a thing [?]”.

The group we now refer to as children of Holocaust survivors emerged due to a combination of events. Major cultural and political changes in the mid-1970s U.S. deeply affected the consciousness and actions of the Baby Boomer generation. Stein (2014) argues that the convergence of the women’s

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agents who had a clear understanding of their own lives and some agency, at the very least to engage in covert resistance.

<sup>9</sup> I am referring here to 12-Step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Food Addicts Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA) and the like.

movement, the use of therapeutic models and language coupled with the notion that “the personal is political” encouraged children of Holocaust survivors to claim part of their identity through their parents’ experiences. This occurred because many children of Holocaust survivors felt distinctly different from their peers growing up.

In the early stages, the offspring of Holocaust survivors referred to themselves as “children of survivors” (COS) or the “second generation,” sometimes abbreviated as 2G. Like the term “survivor,” it is impossible to pinpoint exactly when and where these terms began but they were widely circulating within the American Jewish community in the mid-to-late 1970s. We do not actually know how many children of survivors there were or are in the United States. Neither historians nor major institutions such as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum have calculated it. Stein (2014, p. 9) cites the number at 250,000 COS, an estimate based on the 140,000–150,000 survivors who came to the U.S. after 1945 until 1951.<sup>10</sup> A British journalist who interviewed Helen Epstein states that 92,000 Holocaust survivors emigrated to the U.S. which would reduce the approximate number of COS considerably (Brown 2015). However, we simply do not know.

From writings by and about children of Holocaust survivors, it appears that survivor-parents usually followed one of two patterns—complete silence about their past or incessant reference to it. There are not many examples of an in-between, more steady and reasoned mode where questions were answered in a measured way, sensitive to the child’s stage of development.<sup>11</sup> This missing piece may be due to the self-selectness of the COS who have been vocal or written about their pasts since we tend to hear from those whose backgrounds were more problematic rather than less so. Those who grew up with these silences were very aware of the “presence of absence,” (Stein 2014) and those who heard about the past continuously were also followed by suffering and death. Most children of Holocaust survivors were aware that, unlike their peers, they did not have grandparents or any extended family such as aunts, uncles and cousins. Some felt that their murdered siblings or half-siblings were always present, haunting their existence (Fass 2011; Spiegelman 1996). In addition, in many of these homes, the parent–child relationship was inverted, with children feeling as though they had to protect and take care of their fragile parents and avoid upsetting them.

The children of Holocaust survivors formed consciousness-raising groups and support groups, local, national and international organizations. They spoke openly about their upbringing and their relationships with their parents. They were able to share and acknowledge the unspeakable grief which enveloped their homes as well as their parents’ odd, sometimes abnormal relationship to food. Discovering similar patterns among their families was validating and comforting, even liberating; for some it created a “surrogate family...*I found others like me. They understand*” (Stein 2014, p. 87). Creating a new collective identity countered their sense of isolation. “For once, so much was being validated, a vocabulary of stories and images we could exchange like a secret code” (Rosner 2017, p. 148). Many felt empowered to ask questions of their parents, to search for information about their parents’ backgrounds, and about the lives and deaths of other close kin to help fill in the gaps in their own sense of identity. What did their half-sisters look like? How did their grandfather die? Very much a “roots” process, it led to ads in newspapers seeking relatives, surprise phone calls, travels, archival research and heritage trips to Eastern Europe, sometimes with their survivor-parents. While some participants in second-generation groups wanted to talk about emotional topics, others were skeptical about this psychological emphasis—what one person called “psycho-social bullshit” (Stein 2014, p. 94)—seeking a more activist approach to anti-Semitism, Holocaust education and Holocaust commemoration. However, my sense from the literature is that these groups focused more on psychological and emotional issues at that time (Kidron 2009).

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<sup>10</sup> Stein argues that the quarter million estimate is low because it excludes those survivors from the former USSR and Eastern Bloc who experienced the Holocaust as well as other survivors who were not allowed in to the U.S. until the 1950s. (2014, 199 fn. 23).

<sup>11</sup> My current research focuses on families of Holocaust survivors where family dynamics were relatively healthy and parents were not as affected or burdened by the Holocaust as is portrayed in the literature.

The 1979 publication of *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*, created a watershed moment for many of them. In her book, journalist Helen Epstein connected the dots between their sense of isolation and otherness growing up, with the specificities of their parents' Holocaust histories. She claims, "All of our parents, the ones who had come to America after the war, were eccentric in my eyes. They were not like Americans, and we children were not like other American children. That fact was so obvious, it did not require discussion..." (Epstein 1979, p. 16). Within the context of identity politics, children of survivors mobilized later than other marginalized groups. Epstein notes that in the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans, gays and lesbians, women, ethnic groups had already organized, to "brainstorm and air vital issues." COS were "a quiet, invisible community, a peer group without a sign" (Helen Epstein cited in Stein 2014, p. 78). This invisibility changed most significantly with the publication of Epstein's book and with the first conference of children of survivors in New York, where 2000 attended (Stein 2014, p. 78). A movement was born based on "its trademark blend of psychological introspection and identity politics." (Stein 2014, p. 76).

What is striking about the groups Epstein mentioned is that only children of survivors directly reference the previous generation in order to name their identity. Understandably, children of survivors drew on their genealogical inheritance as the focus of their common issues rather than organizing simply as Jews. The other groups' identities, be they related to gender, sexual orientation or racial-ethnic identity, refer only to themselves without invoking the previous generation and their past in its definition. Of course, due to widespread racism, sexism and homophobia in the U.S., these other groups did not need to refer to their genealogy in the same way. These young American Jews needed to refer to their background in this manner because they were not gathering to focus on contemporary anti-Semitism. Rather, it was vital to specify the cause of their sense of marginalization—their parents' experiences—because of the role of race during that period of identity politics, multiculturalism, and the problematic relationship between Jews and whiteness in North America (Seidman 1998)

These children of survivors were also named and analyzed as a group by professional psychotherapists. In the 1960s and 1970s, several psychotherapists had published articles about the suffering of their patients who had been concentration camp victims, creating new terms to name these particular disorders (e.g., concentration camp syndrome) that today would fall under the rubric of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. In the 1970s and 1980s, some psychotherapists realized that the children of concentration camp survivors—then in adolescence or early adulthood—constituted a noticeable proportion of their patients. These patients were exhibiting problems the psychotherapists thought could be related to their survivor-parents—e.g., separating, individuating and becoming autonomous (Barocas and Barocas 1973; Freyberg 1980). The prevailing Freudian influence of that time steered their focus to the mothers of these patients and pointed to their smothering behaviors. What evolved into the most important and lasting argument in that literature, however, was the claim that these young people had inherited their parents' trauma (Niederland 1988; Wanderman 1979).

The ongoing and voluminous scholarly and professional literature about children of survivors emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Psychiatrists, psychologists and other psychotherapists have written about Holocaust survivor parents transmitting their trauma to their children but their samples tend to be relatively small, often self-selected from a therapy clinic or practice. Psychiatrist Joseph Albeck (Albeck 1994) wrote a scathing and insightful critique of this concept and the highly problematic way in which it implies causality. He argued that complicated psychological conditions are not automatically transmitted between people like viruses or radio waves. Furthermore, the specific ways in which this trauma is manifest by one person and then absorbed and contained by their descendant is not a monolithic process and has not been clearly elucidated.

The very few studies that are robust and use control groups do not find trauma among the second generation; indeed, in research conducted in Israel, the U.S., Canada, Norway and elsewhere, there is no statistically significant difference between children of Holocaust survivors and other

groups in terms of factors associated with trauma (Van IJzendoorn et al. 2003; Wolf 2016). Furthermore, in some cases, COS have certain positive traits that are not found in the control groups such as pride in their Jewish identity (Sigal and Weinfeld 1989). Given the findings of research with control groups, we must question why many in this field assume and persist in arguing that children of survivors suffer from the inter-generational transmission of trauma (Danieli 1998; Jacobs 2016).

The most recent and significant contribution to this field is from Dr. Rachel Yehuda, a professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York, and her research team (Yehuda et al 2014). Using control groups, they found that trauma is transmitted epigenetically among COS, adding a biological component to the scholarly literature. Although her sample sizes are small, her evidence is important. Epigenetic means that it is more like a tag on the DNA, not actual changes *within* DNA.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Yehuda clearly states that this is not a case of biological determinism and that not every sibling in a family where the parents are survivors necessarily will develop signs of trauma. Some writers as well as professionals in the field of psychology mistakenly take her research as scientific proof that there is a biological component to absorbing and emanating a parent's Holocaust trauma.

In her new memoir which has received considerable media attention, child of survivors Elizabeth Rosner (2017, p. 4) states as a given the assumption that is typical in many texts, including scholarly ones: "Most if not all of my peers—the so-called Second Generation—share this sense of inherited trauma..." Clearly, this is likely true for some, but this kind of over-generalizing is very problematic. Rosner interprets the epigenetic research in more absolute terms than is warranted "...science is bringing us empirical proof of a legacy we have already known in our bones, our dreams, and our terrors." Furthermore, she asserts that "...my generation's DNA carries the *expression* of our parents' trauma and the trauma of our grandparents' too. Our own biochemistry and neurology have been affected by what they endured." (Rosner 2017, p. 7, her emphasis). "...every time a new study proves the epigenetic effect of severe trauma, the underlying *fact* of my inheritance gets its scientific affirmation (Rosner 2017, p. 149, my emphasis) This kind of insistence among many authors that the second and possibly even the third generations are traumatized seems to reflect an investment in this notion of an ongoing victimization. It also reflects a simplistic biological determinism which can be dangerous.

Children of survivors have drawn on their backgrounds to express themselves through various media, from art to film. Those from the second generation who have written about their families—fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels or other formats—usually reflect the trauma they feel their parents transmitted to them through a particular mode of communication—as mentioned earlier, silence or incessant talking—in addition to their screaming nightmares and other seemingly odd behaviors such as fear or hoarding (Bukiet 2002; Eisenstein 2006). Art Spiegelman's (1996) graphic novel *MAUS* is the best-known depiction of how a child of survivors grapples with his family heritage. Spiegelman transmits compellingly his Holocaust trauma that includes living alongside the ghost of his murdered brother Richieu, the suicide of his beloved mother Anya and coping with his stingy and impossibly difficult widower father and survivor, Vladek. Indeed, Spiegelman's work is revolutionary not only in the mode he used but also because of his honesty in his portrayal of his father as well as his ambivalent feelings about his father.

To conclude this section, the terms "children of survivors" or "the second generation" were created and reproduced by themselves, by author Helen Epstein who was one of them and had interviewed hundreds like them, and by professional psychologists and psychiatrists. These terms linked their very identity to their parents' tragic histories and traumas. The creation of these terms not only "made up people," (Hacking 2006) but sociologically mapped a social group with distinct boundaries, created a collective identity, and some might argue, created a new social movement (Stein 2014). Many organizations in the U.S. and in other countries created by and for children and

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Dr. Josh Wolf for explaining epigenetics to me.

grandchildren of Holocaust survivors are still active.<sup>13</sup> The names of these organizations' names usually include references to the second or third generation and some of the names—e.g., From Generation to Generation, The Generation After—draw on a Judaic religious obligation to pass on the history of oppression from generation to generation (*l'dor va dor* in Hebrew). This theme is most prominent in the Passover Seder when Jewish parents are instructed to tell the next generation about Jewish oppression and slavery in Egypt and how through Moses, God saved the Jewish people. Like this history of slavery, the Shoah was another tragedy for the Jewish people that these descendants of survivors feel must be transmitted inter-generationally, into the future.

### 3. Identities and Victims

What is implied by identifying and naming oneself as the child of a survivor? I very much agree with Arlene Stein (2014) that the creation of the child of survivor identity is connected to the ways in which different oppressed peoples created groups for solidarity, activism and/or for healing as a result of 1960s activism. I would like to suggest that naming one's self either a "child of survivors" or "second generation" is claiming a marginalized position which can be understood through the relationship between Jews and whiteness in post-war North America.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when the Civil Rights movement focused attention on racial injustices, minority groups viewed American Jews as white Americans who not only benefitted from race and class privilege but were part, if not the leaders, of the ongoing perpetration of inequality (Brodtkin 1998; Greenberg 1998). This view deeply challenged American Jews' collective identity because many of them fought for and identified with those minorities who were persecuted in the U.S. Furthermore, not much earlier historically, Jews had been persecuted both in the U.S. and especially in Europe precisely for their racial otherness. Despite the decline of anti-Semitism in the U.S. and their relative socio-economic success, many American Jews still felt marginalized and vulnerable, referencing their recent persecution in Europe (Kugelmass 1996). They were unable to acknowledge the power they had gained in the U.S. (Biale 1998). In other words, there was a substantial chasm between their self-image and the image others, including U.S. minorities, had of them.

To be fair, the neo-Nazi march in Skokie, Ill. in 1977 deeply affected the American Jewish community and many survivors as well as their children attended in protest. In 1978, the Institute for Historical Review (IHR) was founded, an organization built on historical revisionism and Holocaust denial. IHR challenged not only the fact that 6 million Jews were murdered, but also that there were gas chambers. In 1980, the organization offered a \$50,000 reward for anyone who could prove that Jews were gassed at Auschwitz (Evans 2002). This provocation angered and upset many Holocaust survivors, making it very understandable why they might identify as a vulnerable population. However, their children, like many other white Baby Boomers, gained entry into universities, the professions, and the middle or upper-middle class in post-war American society. Despite many of them not *feeling* white, they were *perceived* as white, and reaped those benefits. Thus, while some COS may have felt vulnerable and marginal due to the anti-Semitism underlying Holocaust denial, many options were open to them because they were white.

Beginning in the late 1970s and the 1980s, on behalf of the United States, President Carter and the established American Jewish community focused attention on remembering and the Holocaust (Espiritu and Wolf 2013, Novick 1999). After years of deliberation about the form and content of its representation, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum was dedicated in 1993, on Federal land in Washington, D.C. In her prizewinning book on the discourse of victimhood in Judaism, Esther Benbassa (2010, p. 108) argues that the Holocaust, 'as a religion of suffering' was 'adopted by the Jewish masses' as the new Jewish civil or secular religion, replacing Judaism, and strengthening Jewish identity. She (Benbassa 2010, p. 114) contends that at a time when most (but not all) American Jews were living comfortable lives, the emphasis on the Holocaust required them to 'constantly

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.coshresources.org/coshorgs.htm#2ndgenorg> for a list of these organizations.



imagine that they were in the gas chambers or on the thresholds of them,” despite their actual standing being the inverse. Although many of those active in the COS movement were also involved in other civil rights struggles, this more generalized cultural emphasis on the Holocaust allowed American Jews in general, and the second generation in particular, to sustain an identity based on victimhood.

This turn to victimhood can be seen among other white Americans in particular. Personal outpourings pervaded the television networks. In addition, a very broad popular psychology movement emphasized the victimization of adults by their parents—Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA). ACOA is a spin-off from the 12-Step Alcoholics Anonymous program but it is intended for a wide range of people:

“...adult children of alcoholics, codependents, and addicts of various sorts...The term “adult child” is used to describe adults who grew up in alcoholic or dysfunctional homes and who exhibit identifiable traits that reveal past abuse or neglect. The group includes adults raised in homes without the presence of alcohol or drugs. These ACA members have the trademark presence of abuse, shame, and abandonment found in alcoholic homes.” (Adult Children of Alcoholics 2017)

One can be a child of alcoholics even if there was no alcohol or drugs in the home growing up; it was sufficient to have a parent with poor and dysfunctional parenting skills.<sup>14</sup> This broad umbrella draws on the language of popular psychology used in the co-dependency movement. One of their core concepts is healing the “Inner Child” which has been wounded by poor parenting. This approach places a great deal of blame on parents in order to explain the “adult child’s” own behavior. While we are all products of our parents and our upbringing, the constant reference to parental wrongdoing constructs the adult child as victim and emphasizes the agency and irresponsibility of bad parents. This blames others rather than taking responsibility for one’s self. Indeed, the concept itself of the “adult child” further infantilizes people who may be well into or past middle age. While COS do refer to themselves as “children of,” they do not refer to themselves as “adult children of” and their groups do not come close to this ACOA movement in other ways. However, through both movements and perhaps others like them, white Americans could claim one kind of victimhood.

Thus, the children of survivors movement evolved at a time when the politics of identity emphasized victimization and marginalization, drawing a sharp line between whites and minorities in American society (Seidman 1998) Although children of survivors bonded over their inheritance of this past, their post-memory, they were not victims themselves. Indeed, they were part of the privileged class and were perceived as such by those who were poor. I have argued that the term “survivor” obfuscates the victimization of those who lived past the end of the Holocaust while implying a degree of agency. It is ironic then that the second-generation groups emerged in a manner and at a time when victimization was reified and valued, and when personal agency was downplayed.

#### 4. Being There

There are other names and terms used by or about descendants of survivors that reflect a genealogical link not only to their forbearers’ experiences but also to their trauma. There are now references to being a “second-generation survivor” or even a “third-generation survivor.” This terminology invokes their generational number in the family chain but, more importantly (and disturbingly), makes claims about the actual experience of the Holocaust. In a manuscript I read for

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<sup>14</sup> I once had a conversation with a member of ACOA who explained that her parents had been “dry alcoholics,” meaning that they did not drink but did engage in poor parenting behaviors. I also conversed with someone who claimed to be a “survivor of incest.” When I queried further, she explained that no one had touched her but that it was emotional incest because her parents talked about sex.

review, a grandchild of a survivor referred to him/herself as an “inter-generational survivor.”<sup>15</sup> The meaning of “inter-generational survivor” is somewhat ambiguous but it is clear that its creation directly echoes the concept of the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

The implications of these new terms are several-fold. For a child or grandchild of a survivor to refer to herself (or to be referred to by others) as a survivor, no matter where she is in the generational chain, appropriates a parent’s or grandparent’s actual experiences. Simply put, survivors were there; their children and grandchildren were not. It is akin to stating, “I am a survivor, once removed,” and indeed, they are much removed. They may feel strongly connected to their parent’s or grandparent’s experiences but they have post-memory of the experience, a second- or third-hand understanding of what occurred. They have not witnessed it but they can imagine it as secondary witnesses. In addition, to some extent, these terms engage in vicarious and competitive victimization. The term seeks to put the descendant’s pain on par with the survivor’s pain in what appears to be intergenerational competition. Anecdotally, at international Holocaust gatherings I have attended, I was aware of tensions expressed by survivors about all the attention given to the second generation. Returning to victimization and U.S. culture, so-called third-generation survivors in particular tend to be college-educated and middle-class Americans who are Ashkenazi and white. They have cultural capital stemming from their privilege that most of their refugee grandparents did not have. In this context, naming oneself a “third-generation survivor” in particular creates and reflects what I would term “privileged victimhood.”<sup>16</sup>

In her recent book, sociologist Janet Jacobs (2016) introduces another terminology, referring to the children and grandchildren of survivors as “the first and second generation of Holocaust descendants,” reflecting how some of her interviewees identified themselves. Indeed, for non-academics born to refugees or survivors, it makes sense to claim that as offspring, one is a “first-generation American.” In fact, as the daughter of German-Jewish refugees, that is how I identified before becoming a sociologist. However, there is a vast sociological literature on the children of post-1965 immigrants and refugees from Latin America and Asia, who are referred to as “the second generation,” similar to COS some decades ago. Her book would be clearer had she explained how some of her interviewees identified, but then still used conventional sociological (and American Jewish) concepts. It is confusing when some COS she interviewed refer to themselves as “second generation” but she refers to them as first-generation descendants (Jacobs 2016, p. 86). Jacobs’ work is the only case I am aware of that uses this terminology.

Jacobs also refers to some of her interviewees, all second- or third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors as “Holocaust carrier groups,” “Holocaust culture bearers” and a “descendant carrier group” (2016, pp. 2–3). Many of the second-generation interviewees in her sample were involved in COS organizations; in reference to them she acknowledges the “noteworthy role that children of survivors play as carriers of Holocaust trauma both for themselves and within the larger culture” (2016, p. 6). Her terminology in the previous quote reflects the assumption that trauma is automatically transmitted from generation to generation and describes it in almost laudatory terms, as “noteworthy.” A “Holocaust carrier” or a “carrier of Holocaust trauma” conjures up pathology, like the HIV virus, and reflects some kind of biological determinism stemming from the Holocaust. More disturbingly, it echoes some aspects of Nazi propaganda about Jews as transmitters of disease, as a cancer in and to society. To be fair, being a “Holocaust carrier” could be interpreted as someone who is obligated to tell their parents’ or grandparents’ stories and indeed, many COS do feel that is their duty now that the survivors have died. However, the other terms Jacobs uses, in my view, skate over the edge of pathologizing Holocaust descent.

In conclusion, the terminology that reflects a genealogy of Holocaust identities contains a curious paradox by suggesting an inversion of the agency and victimhood used to identify (or self-identity as) survivors and children of survivors. Those dealt Nazi violence are victims but the term

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<sup>15</sup> I cannot cite this manuscript because it was a confidential review I did for a journal.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Zechariah Whittington for suggesting the term “elite victimization.”

survivor conceals victimhood while reflecting agency. The terms used to designate their descendants' Holocaust genealogy reflect different levels of victimization while some more recent terms actually appropriate the camp experience. The proclivity for a relatively privileged person in the U.S. to claim victimhood—what I have called elite victimization—reflects a broader problem in American culture and is not specific to Jews. These notions of agency and victimization for the actual victims and their descendants, respectively, seem to contradict their actual experiences, what I argue is a paradoxical inversion.

Clearly, it is important for scholars to be thoughtful when using accepted terminology. When we are “making people,” precision is crucial because these terms matter. Finally, I would like to point out that all living victims of genocide—non-Jews in concentration camps, Cambodians, Rohingya, Rwandans or Armenians—are survivors as well even though they are not usually named as such in popular discourse. Their genealogies of genocide require more of our attention. Thus, the task at hand is to remain vigilant about the terms we use and be more inclusive when we use them. There are many genealogies of genocide that we have yet to discover.

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