

Article

Children of Holocaust Survivors: The Experience of Engaging with a Traumatic Family History

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Abstract: This study explored the motivation and the experiences of children of Holocaust survivors who were actively engaged with the traumatic histories of their parents. Our findings are consistent with contemporary views of the intergenerational transmission of the effects of trauma to descendants of Holocaust survivors and reflect a mixture of resilience and vulnerabilities. We interviewed 24 siblings from 11 families who were adult children of Holocaust survivors, alongside the experience of the first author (IK), also a child of Holocaust survivors. An interpretative phenomenological analysis of those interviews identified two overarching themes related to the motivation to gather information about their parents' stories and their experience of seeking this knowledge. Two themes relate to motivation. The first captured *a sense of immersion without choice* in the family story emanating from extreme loss and grief and a deep awareness of the communal nature of Jewish history. The second theme encompassed *a compulsion and desire to leave a meaningful legacy* of their parents' experiences for future generations. These themes were linked to themes capturing the experience of engaging with their parents' traumatic stories and describing intense ambivalence. One theme reflected *a reluctance to gather information* detailing the parents' trauma. Yet, the other theme emphasised *positive outcomes derived from knowledge*, including appreciation of their parents' resilience and opportunities to bear witness to and support their ageing parents. Overall, the data reveal the close links between family histories and adjustment to a traumatic past.

Keywords: Holocaust; trauma; narratives; family historian



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1. Introduction

After World War II, hundreds of thousands of Jewish Holocaust survivors, of which the exact number is unknown, were displaced and had lost homes and family members. For the purposes of the current study, we have defined a Holocaust survivor as a European-born Jewish person who had lived in or had to leave one of the countries occupied by or under the influence of the Nazi regime for any period of time during 1933–1945, regardless of direct experience (Bogyeski 2013). This includes being interned in a Nazi concentration camp, witnessing or experiencing torture, or fleeing or hiding for one's life during World War II. Our definition of Holocaust survivor accords with the definition used in much of the recent literature (Danieli et al. 2016; Sagi-Schwartz et al. 2013; Yehuda et al. 2011). It also increased the potential to identify natural variability in the severity of survivors' exposure to trauma as well as in their post-traumatic adaptational experiences (Danieli et al. 2016).

After the war, Holocaust survivors sought to rebuild their lives and were absorbed into Israel and several other countries around the world, including the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. The atrocities of the Holocaust that these people survived had a major impact on the individuals themselves, their families, communities, and wider society. The emotional and social trauma that ensued continues to reverberate to this day, and the transmission of the effects of trauma across generations has become the focus of much research. In this paper, we explore how this traumatic history has been incorporated into family histories and examine the notion of the family historian within these unique family histories of Holocaust surviving families in Australia.

1.1. Holocaust Survivors in Australia

Australia currently has the highest number of Holocaust survivors per capita outside Israel (Rutland 2005). The Australian Jewish community was transformed by the arrival of these Jewish refugees (as well as those who had arrived in the 1930s and 1940s), who settled mainly in Melbourne and Sydney. On arrival, these Central and East European Jews found that there were some cultural differences from the largely Anglo-Jewish community. Most of these survivors spoke Yiddish, Polish, German, or Hungarian. They were also likely to have been orphaned and alone, although the Australian Jewish community offered financial, accommodation, and welfare assistance. Upon arrival, the welfare organisations instructed the refugees to discard any foreign behaviour and become “one hundred percent Australian” (Rutland 2005).

These survivors came to Australia wanting to establish a new life far away from Europe and the Holocaust in a peaceful place. Most were successful in this goal. The survivors who came to Australia have been described as ‘people who have managed to assimilate successfully into the wider community’ (Weinberg and Cummins 2013). Relative to the general Australian population, Jews have above-average levels of educational qualifications and above-average incomes, although there are also significant pockets of poverty (Graham 2014). In 2021, Australia’s Jewish population was estimated to be 99,956 people, constituting only 0.4% of the national population (Kohn 2022). Yet, Jewish people are overrepresented in the political, business, legal, and medical spheres. Many Jewish Australians appear to be well educated, have high-income jobs, have families, and sustain good relationships (Rutland 2005; Weinberg and Cummins 2013). This aligns with research on Holocaust survivor populations in countries such as the USA and Canada, where second-generation Holocaust survivors tend to have high economic and educational success, demonstrating good external functioning despite internal distress (Felsen 2018).

1.2. Communication about the Family History within Holocaust Survivor Families

Initially, expression of the survivors’ stories was not encouraged either within the family or society. Those who were not survivors, including mental health professionals, often did not believe the survivors’ accounts or were unable to hear about their horrific experiences during the Holocaust. This created an atmosphere in which survivors felt silenced (Jucovy 1992). Moreover, the survivors themselves did not want to dwell on their past experiences as their post-war adjustment was focused on looking forward, creating new lives, and clinging to their new families (Jucovy 1992).

The lack of disclosure meant that information about their parents’ traumatic experiences was rarely conveyed to the next generation in a direct and easily digestible way. Wajnryb (1999, 2001) described the Holocaust as a fraught subject almost incommunicable between the survivor and the listener and particularly difficult relationally between the survivor and their children. She characterised the parents’ traumatic history as “what cannot be spoken and what cannot be heard” (p. 106). Wajnryb observed that, to varying degrees, the survivors retreated into versions of silence to cope with their psychological distress, believing they were protecting their children by remaining silent.

Despite the parents’ avoidance of explicit communication about their experiences in the Holocaust, implicit messages of their traumatic histories were passed down to their children. Danieli (1985, 1998) identified a constant psychological presence of the Holocaust in the homes of Holocaust survivors and their children (also referred to as second generation Holocaust survivors). She suggested that this presence was absorbed through “osmosis” by the second generation and was integral to the impact of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Many of the children Wajnryb interviewed reported that they were born with and into a state of awareness about their parents’ traumatic past, informed by implicit communication (Wajnryb 2001). ‘Finding out’ was a subtle and gradual accumulation of sensory cues rather than actually being told a story or provided with facts. Even when they were told, often in adolescence, her interviewees reported having the story recounted in fragments. They found the stories difficult to take in and described feeling like they

knew without really understanding what they knew (Wiseman and Barber 2008). In other research, Bar-On et al. (1998) found evidence that the second generation became sensitive to their parents' needs to keep silent and responded in a manner he termed a "double wall." The parents did not tell, and the children did not ask (Bar-On et al. 1998).

Although discussion about the experiences of Holocaust survivors was generally avoided, families differed in how much and what was disclosed about the parents' past. This ranged from families who maintained relative silence to those where the Holocaust became the most salient part of family life. In those families where too much was spoken about or where conversing about Holocaust experiences became compulsive, the burden on the second generation was worse than that of families where it was never talked about (Kellermann 2019; Lichtman 1984). In those families where there was a focus on the horrific aspects of the parents' experience, second-generation children came to perceive themselves and their parents as anxious. They also tended to maintain their distance from others in close relationships and had difficulty with separation-individuation from their parents (Hollander-Goldfein et al. 2011).

Notably, however, it was not so much the informational content of the parents' experiences that transmitted trauma to children as the way the information was conveyed and the motivation of survivor parents for disclosing their trauma (Hollander-Goldfein et al. 2011). In some families, the story content was conveyed in a more age-sensitive way and focused on the parents' survival and resilience, as well as their vulnerability and suffering. Stories that were unmodulated and age inappropriate would include horrific information about suffering and torture and be told in a frightening way when children were young (Krauskopf 2021). For example, an adult child of survivors reported that he told his mother to stop telling him about her experiences at age 9 because the details were so horrific. He reported that, as a result of his request, his mother changed her communication style and spared his younger siblings (and himself) from hearing the stories in that frightening way. His younger siblings described a more age-appropriate way of hearing about their mother's stories of suffering as she relayed her stories in an anecdotal and non-scary way, leaving out details of torture, beatings, and so on, which made the stories more palatable. The younger sibling believed that his mother was protecting her children and softening the stories:

"And she would tell us the story, but she didn't . . . we didn't feel, umm Mum was so protective over us that I felt that she always softened any story she told us. It was no more than a bit of a scary, "red riding hood" story if you want, as I saw it as a young kid, as a young kid- Like "the big bad wolf" rather than something that we were not going to sleep about. It was more about, hearing about my Mum's childhood, as I saw it then." (Krauskopf 2021)

Such positive messages were incorporated into the lives of these second-generation children and reduced emotional distress (Braga et al. 2012; Drezdner et al. 2016; Hollander-Goldfein et al. 2011; Lichtman 1984; Wolf 2019). These accounts were more modulated and emotionally palatable for both the parent telling the story and the children listening. They also combined parental self-awareness and reflection that had positive effects on the second generation, including increased empathy, positive family dynamics, and psychological health (Drezdner et al. 2016; Hollander-Goldfein et al. 2011; Lichtman 1984). These resilient mechanisms also created positive family memories and fostered a desire to search for knowledge about the Holocaust and create a positive legacy of their parents' traumatic history. This also encouraged social and political activism and artistic creation (Wolf 2019).

1.3. Increased Interest in and Awareness of the Holocaust

Public awareness and interest in the Holocaust increased markedly in the 1970s and 1980s. Increased receptiveness to the survivors' stories stimulated research on the impacts of trauma and genocide. At this time, many survivors chose to tell their stories as witness testimony to organisations such as the Jewish Holocaust Centre (Melbourne), the Spielberg Shoah Foundation, as well as community and school groups. The Shoah Foundation, established in 1999, is a non-profit organisation dedicated to making audio-

visual interviews with Holocaust survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides from around the world (Shoah Resource Centre 2003). The testimonies were videotaped interviews that usually contained a personal history of life before, during, and after the survivor's firsthand experience of the Holocaust.

The survivors explained their motivation to provide their stories as emanating from a desire to educate and leave a legacy as they grew older (Hollander-Goldfein et al. 2011). This meant that, as adults, second-generation children discovered more detailed or previously secret information about their parents and family histories in this testimony. Thus, many children of survivors became more aware of their parents' history and could actively read, listen to, or hear their parents' actual story and engage with their family history.

1.4. Intergenerational Transmission of the Effects of Trauma: Resilience and Vulnerability

Intergenerational transmission of the effects of trauma to descendants of Holocaust survivors has been shown to include a mixture of resilience and vulnerabilities (Kidron et al. 2019). These include psychosomatic issues and psychological problems such as a propensity to anxiety and depression, difficulties in the expression of aggression and assertiveness, and feelings of having to compensate for their survivor parents' suffering (Felsen 1998; Kellermann 2001, 2009). Difficulties are also evident in coping with stress and a higher vulnerability to PTSD (Yehuda et al. 1998). Yet, alongside these vulnerabilities, there is evidence of more positive outcomes, including resilience, psychological strength, positive adaptation, increased empathy, and motivation for high achievement (Felsen 1998). Shrira et al. (2011) found that in midlife, the second generation reported a higher sense of well-being but more physical health problems than comparison groups. Thus, the impacts of the trauma can be diverse in the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, who like their parents may express both vulnerabilities and resilience (Cohn and Morrison 2017; Kellermann 2001; Shmotkin et al. 2011).

Research has shown that all three generations—survivors, their children, and their grandchildren—are characterised by resilience along with some vulnerabilities (Shmotkin et al. 2011; Sagi-Schwartz et al. 2008). According to Shmotkin et al., these vulnerabilities include negative self-perceptions, negative world assumptions of distrust, as well as difficulties in emotional expression. They suggested that these specific vulnerabilities were inherent in the family dynamics of Holocaust survivor families. Even in resilient families, these vulnerabilities may be triggered under stressful conditions such as a cancer diagnosis or facing the challenges of survivor parents ageing and dying (Shmotkin et al. 2011). Shrira (2016) found that offspring whose Holocaust survivor parents communicated their trauma in an intrusive way were more likely to have negative perceptions of the ageing process and were at greater risk of secondary traumatization and anxiety about their own ageing and approaching death.

Kidron et al. (2019) have suggested that the trauma legacies/stories of Jewish-Israeli Holocaust descendants have described a state of "resilient vulnerability" in the second generation. They define this as the second generation having an emotional scar ("scratch" in Hebrew) or vulnerability that is normalised and accepted as a "badge of honour". This scratch is experienced both as distress and as a culturally valorized form of commemorative remembering of the Holocaust (P7).

In an Australian Jewish community survey (Graham and Markus 2018), the majority (70%) of respondents indicated a sense of connectedness to the Jewish community. In accordance with Kidron et al.'s notion of cultural valorization of remembering, almost all Australian Jews surveyed regarded "remembering the Holocaust, upholding strong moral and ethical behaviour, and combatting antisemitism as being important aspects of their own sense of Jewish identity" (Graham and Markus 2018, p. 4).

1.5. Motivation to Become a Family Historian

In parallel with the increased attention being given to the Holocaust, interest in family history has burgeoned within the general community since the 1970s, with the most rapid

growth occurring from the early 2000s onward (Moore et al. 2020; Shaw 2019). Moore et al. (2020) identified access to technologies and the internet that facilitate the gathering of family information as a major driver of this interest, along with numerous film and television dramatisations of family sagas and changed community attitudes. This increased interest in family history has produced the concept of the amateur ‘family historian’. Family historians are distinguished from individuals who express an interest in their family history because they intentionally and actively seek family information, utilising various modes of research. This includes documents, interviews with relatives, and internet websites such as ancestry.com. However, family historians do not just gather facts and information. Yakei (2004) found that many amateur family historians also seek self-understanding through establishing a meaningful personal identity and place in the world by discovering their family histories. Their motivations are therefore intrinsic, inward-looking, and personal (Shaw 2019). This search for identity offers the individual an understanding of their familial ancestors as well as their cultural heritage (Moore et al. 2020). McAdams (2001) states that such personal life stories are constructed within a social context reflecting the values and norms of the culture and, therefore, are continually made and remade in social relationships and in the overall social context provided by culture (McAdams 2001). Family history researchers often seek a point of origin and establish links to ancestors that offer a family narrative and an ethnic and/or cultural identity (Shaw 2019).

The secular pursuit of belonging to something larger than the individual self and placing oneself as part of the broader narrative of humanity has been postulated as an alternative to the role of religion (Shaw 2019). Research has identified similarities between contemporary family history research and traditional religious practises in strengthening feelings of identity, purpose, and belonging. Robinson (2021) postulated that this occurs via the three customs of handing down sacred stories and objects of family significance to the next generations; acts of pilgrimage to ancestrally significant places; and engaging in ritual gatherings such as commemorations (e.g., Armistice Day) or communal gatherings of other family historians.

Family historians also appear to be motivated by generativity and altruism. By sharing family stories, they seek to promote family cohesion and leave or continue a legacy that acknowledges the past (Moore et al. 2020). “Part of what motivates many, perhaps most, family historians is the desire to share the results of their research, particularly with family members, as a way of creating intergenerational narratives and leaving a legacy that strengthens relationships and helps to shape family culture, values and identity” (Moore et al. 2020, p. 57). These family historians have also been described as the “gatekeepers” of familial knowledge (Shaw 2019, p. 119), where they felt that it was up to them to search for and gather the family lore and knowledge for future generations so the family story was not lost. However, engagement with the family history can also produce negative outcomes. These include relationship difficulties, ethical dilemmas about whether to share genetic health risks and other information with family members, and disturbing emotions (Moore et al. 2020). Engagement with the horrific detail of family stories of Holocaust survivors also has the potential to intensify the distress, vulnerability, and resilience of the children of Holocaust survivors.

1.6. The Present Study

The aim of this paper was to examine how the children of Holocaust survivors experience their family histories and how this may influence the extent to which they adopt the active engagement with their history that characterises family historians. This allowed an examination of the relevance of the motivations for becoming a family historian for second-generation Holocaust survivors. We conducted a reflective qualitative examination of data obtained from interviews with adult siblings who were children of Holocaust survivors in an Australian Jewish community. In analysing the data, we drew on a combination of perspectives from the sibling interviewees and the first author’s (IK’s) autobiographical experiences of growing up in a family with Holocaust survivor parents.

The overall research question was:

How does the notion of the family historian apply to the experience of the family narrative within Holocaust survivor families?

To address this question, we framed two related sub-questions:

- a. What motivates the children of Holocaust survivors to actively engage with their family history? and
- b. What is the experience of the children of Holocaust survivors who actively engage with this family history?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 24 siblings from 11 families recruited from the Jewish Community of Melbourne, Australia. They were all recruited as part of a larger investigation exploring the experiences and relationships of siblings who grew up with Holocaust survivor parents. Initial interest was expressed by one sibling, and then other siblings were invited to participate. While no specific reference was made to being a family historian, it was established that all participants were interested in exploring their experience of growing up in a family with this traumatic history. All participants acknowledged that they were impacted by their family history. The eleven families had one or both parents who were Holocaust survivors. Participants were between 44 and 71 years of age ($M = 57.5$ years). There were 11 men and 13 women. Nineteen participants (79%) were born in Australia; two brothers were born in Canada before moving to Australia in 1968 when the younger sibling was 13 years old. Two other male participants were born in displaced persons camps straight after the war (1946), one in Italy and the other in Germany. One female participant was born in Cyprus (1947), in a detention camp, on the way to Israel, where the family stayed briefly before immigrating to Australia in the same year. The participant family characteristics are summarised in Table 1. All names, backgrounds, and distinguishing features of the participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Participant Family Characteristics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (Years)	Siblings	Siblings Participated	Holocaust Survivor Parents
Andrea	Female	44	Sister and Brother	Both	Father
Andrew	Male	48			
Betty	Female	65	Sister and Brother	Both	Mother and Father
Benjamin	Male	63			
Clara	Female	70	Sister and Brother	Both	Mother and Father
Charlie	Male	65			
Deborah	Female	62	Four Sisters	Youngest two sisters	Mother and Father
Dana	Female	53			
Evelyn	Female	66	Sister and Sister	Both	Mother and Father
Ella	Female	64			
Felix	Male	62	Brother and Sister	Both	Mother and Father
Fay	Female	67			
Gloria	Female	52	Three Sisters	All three	Father
Genevieve	Female	51			
Gina	Female	47			
Howard	Male	62	Brother, Brother, Sister, Sister	Two brothers and youngest sister	Mother
Harry	Male	57			
Helen	Female	56			
Irving	Male	71	Brother and Brother	Both	Mother and Father
Ivan	Male	67			
Jeffrey	Male	63	Brother and Brother	Both	Mother and Father
Jonathan	Male	70			
Karen	Female	63	Sister and Brother	Both	Mother and Father
Kurt	Male	70			

2.2. Semi-Structured Interview

An interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions about the impact of their parents' Holocaust story on their lives. The list of questions was developed by reviewing existing literature on this group of people (Silbert 2010) and through discussion with all the authors. Two pilot interviews with adult children of Holocaust survivors confirmed that the interview schedule was readily understood and elicited reflections relevant to family histories. The questions contained a series of open-ended questions emphasising the lived experience of growing up and being part of a Holocaust survivor family. The interview addressed five key topics, reflecting the two research questions. Examples of the questions related to the discovery of family histories are:

How and when did you find out about your mother's or father's experience? What impact do you think it's had on you? In what other ways did your mother's or father's experience (story) affect your life? In what way do you think the Holocaust figures into your life now?

Each of the twenty-four participants was interviewed individually. All face-to-face interviews were conducted at the first author's psychological practice. Three interviews were conducted via Skype with participants who lived interstate or overseas. Interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 min and were audio-recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

2.3. IPA Processing of Interview Data

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA: Smith 2009, 2015) was undertaken to analyse the data because it enabled an exploration and interpretation of participants' descriptions of their personal experiences and understandings about the impact of their parents' Holocaust trauma on their lives. This exploration included their reflections on the role of their family history in their current lives and relationships, as well as changes in their experiences and family relationships across their lifespan.

IPA was carried out using the core principles of validity and reliability in qualitative research. These include the principles of trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Creswell 2018). A reflective strategy was utilized, whereby the first author discussed emerging themes and codes in repeated meetings with the other authors who had read and cross-checked the transcripts. These discussions assisted in identifying potential themes in the data and permitted modifications and clarifications of codes and themes to be made to increase the coherence of the analysis (Smith 2015). The team's reflections were not aimed at gaining consensus. Following best practises in reflective qualitative analysis (Tracy 2010), discussions were directed at providing depth and rigour for the IPA being conducted by IK. The team engaged with the ideas reflectively by sense-checking them, considering the themes' connections to relevant theoretical ideas, and exploring the assumptions and interpretations evident within them. As a reflective team, the two other authors brought their relevant experience and theoretical knowledge to assist IK in refining the themes she derived. Both authors (GB and RC) are experienced clinical and counselling psychologists who have worked with clients presenting with trauma and have been involved in research on Holocaust survivors and their families. Additionally, both have been actively engaged in researching their own family histories, and this has permitted a consideration of contrasts with the experience of IK.

A rich, thick description was utilised to convey the findings. This included details about settings as well as many perspectives on a theme. Any discrepant information (e.g., case exceptions) that ran counter to the themes was considered. Both strategies contributed to the validity of the findings (Creswell 2018). Transparency in the study was evident in the description of the methodology and analysis. Researcher reflexivity was evident and crucial for transparency.

Five phases of IPA were undertaken on each transcript according to the method delineated by Smith (2009, 2015). In phase 1, the first author became immersed in the data

and engaged with the data, reading and rereading each transcribed interview in depth. Phase 2 involved the initial noting and highlighting of key words, phrases, and sentences. The themes were developed in phase 3. An initial list of themes was generated in the order that they appeared in each transcript, with each theme checked against the transcript for the actual words of the participant. Phase 4 involved a search for connections across the themes. The clustered themes were defined, given a name, and became the 'superordinate' themes. In phase 5, the key themes were assessed across the whole sample. Finally, the superordinate themes obtained from the analysis of participants were named, tabled, and ordered coherently.

2.4. Personal Reflection/Statement

We acknowledge that the personal experience and background of the first author (IK) influenced the interpretation and analysis of the data (Guest et al. 2006). As a researcher, IK was necessarily immersed in the data and so needed to be aware of any of her expectations about what might emerge from the data. Her personal statement about her background and experience allowed her to consciously consider any possible influence or bias created by any preconceived ideas during the evaluation of the interview data. Her background as a child of Holocaust survivors also offered the potential benefit of insight into the content discussed in the interviews and helped her to ask relevant questions of the participants. Many participants suggested that sharing a similar background with their interviewer enabled them to feel comfortable and open up about difficult and traumatic material.

IK's personal statement:

I grew up in a family whose parents were survivors of the Holocaust and I see the Holocaust story as a central part of my identity. As a child of Holocaust survivors I grew up in a family and community where the Holocaust narrative was ever present whether directly talked about or not. My parents were (Jewish) immigrants/refugees. They had an accent and they carried a story, an unimaginable story.

My father was sent away at 13 years old as a slave labourer under the Nazis in occupied Poland with the assurance that the family would be safe if they sent their eldest child to 'work'. He spent the next six years in various horrific places; labour camps and concentration camps including Gross-Rosen, Flossenberg and finally Dachau from where he was liberated in 1945. His father, mother and nine-year-old sister were murdered by the Nazis, believed to have been gassed or shot at Auschwitz, merely for being Jewish. My father had believed that his younger brother had also been murdered with the rest of the family. In fact, he had been separated from the family and was also sent away to a concentration camp, ultimately managing to survive. My father believed that his own survival was a miracle. He spoke of many times where he wondered how he actually survived. My mother and her family escaped Poland and Nazi persecution to Siberia and lived in 'camps' under the Stalin regime, starving and trying to survive.

My two sisters and I represented their survival and renewal and we also carried that story, sometimes articulated and often not. My father's story became meaningful and tangible through communal and general historical footage, photographs, books, and movies. When we were children and we were watching a documentary about the Holocaust and footage of the liberation of Dachau concentration camp was shown, my father told us to look for him among the starved and emaciated inmates and see whether we could recognise him there. It was a shocking request, said without emotion and almost like a fun family activity. We sat together as a family eating our ice cream "looking for Dad as an 18/19 year old at Dachau concentration camp". To this day, I find myself searching for my father in any images of Dachau concentration camp. Reading of historical information also includes thoughts of where and when my father's parents and young sister

were murdered. The communal historical horror becomes our individual family story. This is a very uncomfortable and grief filled experience.

I carry the burden of bearing witness to my parents as they were whilst also wondering about and imagining the life they had before and the trauma and survival story that they endured. I have engaged with the emotional aspects of my family story by researching the experiences of intergenerational trauma and resilience in Holocaust survivor families.

When coding and interpreting the data I was conscious of my assumption that other children of survivors would also experience their parents' Holocaust experience as a conscious backdrop on their self-identity.

3. Results and Discussion

The interview data are considered in relation to the two sub-research questions. The first question explores the motivation to engage with family history, and the second captures the experience of engaging with family history.

3.1. Motivations to Actively Engage with the Family History

Two themes were relevant to the motivation of engaging with family histories for these children of Holocaust survivors. These were defined as *immersion in the family history* and a *compulsion and desire to leave a meaningful legacy*.

3.1.1. Immersion into the Family History

The theme of immersion was defined as the experience of being aware that they had a connection to the Holocaust while growing up and feeling a heavy emotional burden from their parents' traumatic experiences. The sense of immersion was connected to the traumatic details conveyed by the Holocaust survivor parents or to an awareness of knowing that their parents had endured horrific experiences that were too frightening to ask about.

Many participants described their experience as being immersed in the family history of the Holocaust. They attributed this to having grown up in a family with trauma-affected parents who were Holocaust survivors, with the story being transferred to them almost by "osmosis." Dana stated:

So, they didn't really talk about the Holocaust experience directly but indirectly. I don't really think that, I don't even know. I was just born into it I think. I don't think there was anything that was said; "we were Holocaust survivors."

Felix described hearing snippets of information about his family history in conversations between his parents and relatives and at synagogue when he was praying on the Sabbath. He described his experience of discovery and awareness of family history as "*it's probably a little bit by osmosis*".

Irving reported that his parents constantly referred to the war and he, who became very emotional during the interview, described the impact of his parents' history on him as a heavy burden:

I think I've always known. As I say in conversation to other people, I've known since I was young. My parents used to just talk about it. Every conversation we engaged in from childhood onwards always came back to the War. And I've sort of borne this all my life, I've sort of carried this and I've just learnt to cope with it.

Two interviewees reported that their knowledge was 'an awareness of something terrible' rather than specific information. Karen described the experience of just knowing about it indirectly, with comments from parents such as "*You better eat-we didn't have food*" coupled with an awareness "*that something terrible had happened*".

The other, Genevieve, described the experience of having always known. She viewed it as a kind of "*consciousness*":

Gee, to be honest I don't remember it's something I've always known so it would have been at really young, and umm I would say maybe eight, seven or eight, and it could have been earlier than that but it would have been bit meaningless. So, there is obviously knowledge part and then there is a consciousness. (sic) . . . So I just know it—from a really young age I was very aware that I had no grandparents on one side and that dad was foreign and that he had come here, and that something terrible had happened. So there was a real—there was knowledge from really young but I can't I really can't put my finger on when.

Those interviewees who indicated that their parents avoided talking about their traumatic past observed that, while the Holocaust and their personal history were not hidden, details of their experience were rarely discussed directly or coherently. These interviewees experienced an awareness that they should not ask questions for fear that it would be too traumatic for their parents. At the same time, they knew that something horrific had happened to their parents. Andrea described her experience of wanting to know her elderly father's story but knowing not to ask for fear of causing him to feel re-traumatised. She stated:

Because we knew to not ask, we knew to not talk about it . . . So, the first part of his life you know, suffered terribly and then, he had a good you know, 20 something years and then, the last 20 or 18 years of his life he was really sick. So, it was like he had suffered so much. It's like why do I want to, why does anyone want to open up the wounds from before when he was suffering.

Felix grappled with reasons why his mother was not talking to them about her experiences, not realising that she had told his sister but not him. He stated about his mother:

Horrible things but she never told us. She never told us about her family . . . And she has and she complains that we don't ask. That we don't ask about her-her brothers (who didn't survive). It's complex obviously. The impression was that not that she didn't want but that she couldn't.

Felix stated about his father:

My father never volunteered much information. He had fabulous recall, and talked a lot about his family, and remembered everything about growing up, but never about the Holocaust.

The first author's experience reinforces that the experience of being born into the shadow of the family histories is immersive and compelling.

I know fragments of my parents' experiences yet few facts and little information. My engagement with their stories has mainly been an emotional experience of thinking about their experiences of their trauma and survival. I feel that their story is my story somehow as it could have been me. I do not see myself as a family historian in the general sense, yet knowing that I am the child of survivors of an important and significant historical genocide. This is inherent in my identity, regardless of details, facts and information. It is both a personal and individual narrative of my family and simultaneously a communal narrative of the Jewish people and also a historical narrative for all peoples.

The data from this study are consistent with the findings of earlier work by [Wajnryb \(2001\)](#), [Wiseman and Barber \(2008\)](#), and [Bar-On et al. \(1998\)](#). Their research identified immersion as connected to the experience of direct and indirect messages about a traumatic family history. The children of survivors expressed a sense of being immersed in the Holocaust family history and narratives by virtue of growing up with survivor parents. This occurred regardless of whether or not they recovered factual information about their family's history. Just as in other research (e.g., [Epstein 1979](#); [Krell et al. 2004](#); [Wajnryb 2001](#); [Wiseman and Barber 2008](#)), the present participants described feeling like they carry the legacy and the identity of their family histories within them as an emotional and visceral experience. [Danieli \(1985\)](#) has also described this as the children of survivors' experiencing

a kind of “osmosis” of the psychological presence of the Holocaust through the overt and covert behaviours and messages from their survivor parents.

3.1.2. Compulsion/Desire to Leave a Legacy

This theme was defined as a desire to maintain the knowledge and memory of their parents’ experience for current and future generations. Many participants referred to a commitment to honour their parents’ Holocaust experience. They wanted to remember it and maintain the legacy for future generations. This was something that most of the participants stated as their motivation for participating in the study. The interview data suggest that the children of survivors’ feelings of being unable to escape their history were often associated with feelings of being compelled to leave their parents’ legacy as a historical testimony for their family and for society in general. This compulsion was driven by an awareness of their parents’ suffering and persecution and the value of humanity and human life. The interviewees spoke of the importance of honouring this history by never forgetting it and by educating others about the terrible loss and what humans are capable of.

Several second-generation interviewees expressed this as a personal responsibility. Genevieve stated:

Well . . . I guess I’ve been raised with the importance of never forget, never forget. Dad always said “You have to be vigilant. You’ve just got to be vigilant because you just never know”. I guess that’s grown in me as I’ve grown, and imparted that knowledge to my kids. But, also because there are fewer and fewer survivors, and more and more deniers, and you know history can get reinterpreted and reinvented in hindsight, and when you don’t have people there to say “I was there”, then the people who are saying “Oh, it’s just a lie”, and you know that people can manipulate statistics and fabricate information, and then it’ll just disappear.”

Many described the burden of remembering and honouring the important legacy of the family and Jewish communal history for their children, future generations, and for general society. At the same time, engaging with this history also added meaning to their lives. The desire to leave a legacy propelled some to engage actively with their family history and take on the role of family historian. Benjamin, whose parents had previously spoken very little to him about their experience, transcribed his mother’s story as she neared the end of her life. At this time, he felt driven to leave her legacy for future generations and was committed to hearing and writing her story.

After I was married she would pull me aside and say listen this is what happened to us, do you know what happened to us? . . . In the later years when my mother moved to Melbourne I would spend days, literally days, questioning her and she would actually enjoy, well in her own way telling me all her experiences to the extent that that I took all the transcripts of what I heard and made a book about it in her honour.

Howard described the compulsion to deal with the death of his child and find meaning in life by searching for information about his mother’s experience and Holocaust information in general. He also described how the family history gives him an understanding of his Jewish identity. He stated:

I’ve researched it, there was a stage, I had a child, who died and I became little bit, almost obsessed with the Holocaust after that, looking for personal answers, for a period. Previously, I was educated, okay? I’d read 20 books and so on, but after that happened, I became obsessed for a while and I read another 100 books.

Kurt described that his mother only spoke later in life, and he was shocked to discover aspects of his mother’s story and was compelled to research it and leave a legacy and commemoration of the family history in the form of a plaque:

She never told. But that did change, so we decided to put up plaques at Yad Vashem. And at that stage, I did speak to my sister and I told her exactly what I was going to write on

there and who I was going to include. And then we spoke to her- so we put up a plaque for my parents. So there was my father's family, my mother's family, it was all in the one plaque . . . And umm, and basically when we put out the plaques, I spoke to my mother and showed her what I was going to do and it was only then that she started opening up. And it was only then that I realized, I had never known this . . . it was only then that I'd realized that my mother was in exactly the same camps as my father, over exactly the same times.

The first author's experience includes a compulsion to leave a legacy.

The informational dates and facts seem less important to me than remembering my parents and their antecedents' legacy and engaging with the collective historical narrative. My family's story is part of Jewish culture and part of the history of persecution, trauma, survival and triumph of the Jewish people. I am acutely aware that the history of the Jewish people from biblical times and throughout history includes a narrative of persecution, expulsion, and survival. Examples include the expulsion of the Jewish people from Spain in 1492 and the pogroms in Eastern Europe and Russia in the 1880s and then in 1900s. These continued during World War 2 and the Holocaust, with a nationwide pogrom known as Kristallnacht in Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia decreed by Hitler in 1938. This narrative of persecution and survival is commemorated in religious and ritualistic ways by my family like many Jewish families in the Australian community and across the globe. For example, the yearly ritual of recounting the Passover story to family members, particularly to children "as if you were there as an Israelite in Egypt", is an important high holiday within Jewish custom. The narrative is one of overcoming slavery and persecution with Moses saving the Israelites. This cultural ritual is a family tradition that I have practiced since I was a child and continue with my own children. They continue to engage with this practice regardless of their level of orthodoxy or religious observance.

3.2. The Experience of the Holocaust Survivors' Children in Engaging with Their Family History

Two themes were identified that were relevant to the experience of engaging with the participants' family histories. These relate to a sense of ambivalence while discovering the family story. The first theme is the reluctance to engage with the information for fear of finding out the traumatic aspect of the family story. In contrast, the second theme captures positive outcomes that were derived from engaging with the family history that coexisted with the fear/anxiety. The personal benefits for the second generation included having knowledge of the family story and perceiving benefits for the Holocaust survivor parents. Despite the emotional distress and burden, there was a desire to provide an opportunity for parents to express their experiences and to support them in dealing with their traumatic past as well as honour the family history.

3.2.1. Reluctance to Discover and Know about a Traumatic Family History

Several participants experienced a deep sense of ambivalence when they began to engage with their family story. They knew that seeking out past information about the Holocaust would involve engaging with previously avoided stories of loss, grief, and utter horror. Andrew expressed his ambivalence about knowing his father's trauma and the family history:

We found out a little bit about it but I think from my point of view I don't know whether I want to know what they went through. If it was bad enough for him to not say anything then, I don't know whether I want to know what happened.

Another participant, Fay, was reluctant to watch her father's testimony in fear of discovering the horror of his experiences.

I don't really know about his experiences. There is a tape which none of us have had the guts to look at. My father's passed away . . . I know he was beaten, he had a scar on the back of his neck, and he got that from a beating with a rifle. I remember that scar on the

back of his neck. Umm, why he got the beating, I'm not sure, but I know there was a terrible story to do with his brother. Umm, beyond that I don't know. My mother doesn't even know . . . That's just probably beyond, just beyond what we can deal with.

Sometimes the survivor parents contributed to their children's reluctance by actively attempting to dissuade them from finding out what happened to them or exploring the family history. For example, Betty stated that her parents told her and her brother to never go back to her birthplace to find out about her history.

She always used to say to me I'll never forgive the Germans, never forget and never forgive and she used to say that to me. My mother also said to me because later on in life that was . . . a lot of people that are going on this March of the Living and a lot of families went with their children with their grandchildren and my mother said to me, "Don't you ever step foot on that earth, not in Poland not in Germany I don't want you to step foot there, because it's 'falshoten', how do you say 'falshoten'? It's a cursed land. For her it was a cursed land. And now my kids actually want to do this Roots, this thing with my brother and me and all the children. They want to go back and they want to see where their family's from and everything. I really feel against it because my mother indoctrinated me against it.

Betty then remarked that to explore and engage with her family history in that way "felt" wrong and possibly disloyal to her survivor mother. It would not be an interesting or enjoyable pursuit, but rather an emotionally fraught thing to do. She thus expresses her ambivalence about engaging with her mother's story while still expressing the importance of the family and its descendants knowing more information about the family history. At the time of the interview, she remained unable to actively engage with the family history in this way but participated in communal and religious modes of commemoration.

3.2.2. Positive Outcomes of Engaging with the Family History

Some interviewees identified clear positive outcomes from engaging with their family history, which helped overcome their ambivalence. Charlie reported an important legacy and meaning of inspiration and resilience:

But I would say that there is no doubt that my knowledge about how they survived has been a great source of strength for me. Because I've got those sort of stories that can be a source of inspiration that's allowed me, to often play the role as a source of inspiration for other people. I wish I could be as good for myself as I have been for others. But there is no doubt that I have generally—and I still work with many young men and women on their careers and their career development. And there is no doubt that I can draw on my family's history and stories and it's clearly very important to me to give people a sense of what I call energy and inspiration to keep going at things, to be persistent, to do the best you can; take responsibility for making your life work.

Another interviewee, Helen, described the positive messages that she and her siblings received from discovering their mother's story of survival:

I just feel very privileged, very fortunate, you know I really feel that she was able to impact her experience without any embitterment and she always imbued us with a positivity, so I think from that point we're very fortunate.

Irving stated that he is gratified to know his parents told him about their experiences despite their distressing impact on him. He feels he was able to be a supportive son and enable them to express their grief and losses.

Other parents refused to talk about it. I've said you know in a way it's just good that my parents did talk because in a way it is therapy for them too. Because they could get it out of their system and have someone to discuss it with or just to tell their story. So, I thought, "okay". I was like a punching bag, I just absorbed everything as a child and as a young adult.

Betty also believed that by listening to her parents tell their stories, she was bearing witness, which is an important act of honouring their trauma.

That my parents constantly spoke about the Holocaust about their experiences, about the families. So, that we would know first of all where we come from our heritage and what happened to them.

Siblings Evelyn and Ella also discovered a lot about their mother's experience hearing her give the Spielberg Shoah testimony in later life at the same time as the grandchildren's inquiries. Evelyn described the shock and distress of discovering their mother's history while simultaneously feeling the relief of finally knowing.

And the only way that Ella and I know are because—know about, are, that my mother did the Shoah, recordings. And so I found out a lot already as an adult with my children sitting with my mother because they interviewed us all for, um—Spielberg. So there is a video of that. I think Ella has got. So we learnt from that sitting with my mother while she was telling the interviewer the whole story about how she was hidden during and how she learned to hide and didn't wear her yellow Star of David. But she had it on her. She hid it.

Evelyn described the impact of hearing her mother's testimony as a shock and a relief: *Shocked. As an adult, shocked. Shocked that she never told my sister and I. But she would say, 'and you didn't want to know about it.' Every time we wanted to—And I don't think that's true. Because I think when you sit down. Being a parent now, you know, to tell your child or sit down. And I know she didn't sit us down.*

Ella and Evelyn's mother, in her 90s, has volunteered to speak to a school group about her experience:

My daughter asked my mother, her grandmother, my mother, to come to Bialik and talk to the older children, the children who are doing the Roots Project, of her experiences. And it was really good. It was good for my mother . . . This year . . . asked her to come. And she spoke to, I think, year 9s and year 10s. And it was a great thing for her to do. I think it helped my mother and it helped me. Because it was good that she finally spoke about it instead of speaking about it to us when she should have, to children. And she got emotional. And my daughter and I were both there with her and listened to her talking to the children about it.

(Evelyn)

The first author also experienced feelings of ambivalence in engaging with her father's and the family's history, coupled with a sense of pride in doing current research and honouring the family legacy.

Despite knowing little factual information, my father's story became meaningful and tangible through communal and general historical footage, photographs, books, art, and visits to museums. When I read historical information, I have thoughts about where and when my father's parents and his young sister were murdered. When looking at images of concentration camps, I search for my (then young) father in an emaciated state.

Along with these feelings of distress, reluctance, and ambivalence about engaging with the Holocaust family story, my experience of undertaking research in this area has been a source of pride in contributing to the legacy of the Holocaust and my family's history. Also, my clinical experience of therapeutic work with children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors is another source of the positive contribution of my family history.

4. Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

The data collected from the interviewees and from IK's personal experience show that adult children of Holocaust survivor families experience similar motivations and processes as amateur family historians in engaging with their family histories, albeit with distinctive features. They are motivated by generativity, leaving a legacy, and making meaning for

their self-identity. However, it appears that the traumatic nature of the Holocaust's history imbues the children of survivors' experiences with intensity and a strong psychological impact that can produce reluctance and intense ambivalence in engaging with the material. Unlike general family historians who choose to engage with it on a more voluntary basis, individuals from Holocaust-affected families experience their family histories in very immediate and immersive ways. A sense of immersion without choice emanates from the extreme nature of the losses and grief of the survivor parents, which impacted their posttraumatic adaptation, their behaviours, and their parenting. These effects of trauma were transmitted to the second generation along with resilience. Another distinctive feature of these family historians is their deep awareness of the communal and cultural nature of the Jewish people and their history.

Those individuals who actively engage with their family story, despite their feelings of ambivalence, also report important positive benefits. These include assisting their parents with managing their traumatic past by listening and bearing witness to their stories; honouring their parents' history and feeling like they are leaving a legacy for the family and the Jewish community and cultural history. Like all children born into a family where trauma is present intergenerationally (e.g., Rwandan refugees, Afghani refugees), the children of Holocaust survivors are part of an important and significant history. Regardless of whether or not the individual engages with the family history by searching for information, children of survivors take on the role of gatekeepers and feel that their identity is tied to their family history. Alongside their ambivalence, many report great pride in carrying the legacy for future generations, both for their own family history and for history in general.

Figure 1 presents a thematic map of the relationships that were evident among the four themes identified via IPA.

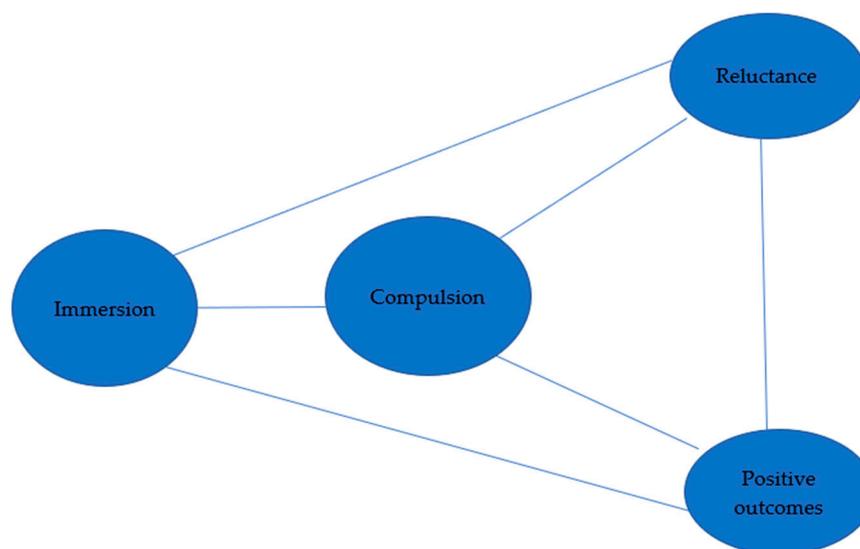


Figure 1. A thematic map of the relationships among the four main themes associated with the experience of engaging with the family history.

As shown in Figure 1, there appeared to be a temporal relationship among the themes. The first theme related to the motivation to engage with the family history appeared early in the individual's accounts and was captured by feelings of always being aware of their involvement in the Holocaust story. This theme was associated with the other three themes: it was the source of the compulsive desire to leave a legacy of the second generation's parents' experiences but also was linked to the reluctance to engage with the horrific material and at the same time the awareness of positive outcomes of so doing. Similarly, the compulsion to leave a legacy was also linked to both the reluctance and the positive outcomes themes. Finally, the link between reluctance and positive outcomes captures

the ambivalence caused by engaging with family history. Engagement brought both a negative experience (reluctance) and a positive experience (positive outcomes). This dual relationship with the Holocaust stories is further evidence of the resilient vulnerability referred to by [Kidron et al. \(2019\)](#).

There are several ways in which future research could build on the present findings. Future research could investigate whether the second generation's engagement with their family history changes over time. Since the time of the interviews conducted for this study, nearly all the Holocaust survivor parents have died. Thus, there is increasing distance from the Holocaust, and it may be that the children of survivors will engage more actively with their family histories in years to come. This may alter the influence of feelings of ambivalence or compulsion to engage more actively in their parents' histories with time passing since their parents were alive and as they face their own ageing and mortality.

It would also be valuable to investigate the role of the family historian in the third generation of Holocaust survivor families. The family historian role of the second generation may differ substantially from those of the third and fourth generations. It was observed that Holocaust survivors were more open about their experiences with their grandchildren ([Silbert 2010](#)). In addition, other research has shown that the identities of Australian grandchildren of Holocaust survivors continue to be influenced by their identifications with their familial narratives and legacies of trauma, yet in a different way ([Cohn and Morrison 2017](#)). These authors found that the third generation sought information and researched their family's (grandparents) histories through additional sources than just their grandparents' narratives. Both these studies indicate the third generation has a more intentional desire to connect with their family history without the emotional experiences and burdens of conspiracy of silence or the double wall experienced by their parents (the second generation) ([Cohn and Morrison 2017](#)). Therefore, it would be informative to explore in further studies whether the third (and fourth) generation experience the same ambivalence or a different form of ambivalence than their parents in engaging with the family history, or any ambivalence at all. Will these family historians experience the Holocaust more in an historical sense than in the immersive and visceral sense of their parents? Research could seek to understand the experiences of children of survivors from other cultures and populations. The current research could also be replicated in other countries that welcomed Holocaust survivors after World War II, notably the United States, Canada, and Israel. This would help to determine how the family historian role is evidenced by the second generation within different cultural contexts.

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