

Child Survivors of the Holocaust: Their Present Mental State and Coping A Preliminary Report

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In Israel today there are about 200,000 Holocaust survivors, including those who arrived here as immigrants from the former U.S.S.R. in the years 1989-1991. Many of these survivors were children at the time of the Nazi persecution. The purpose of this research, of which this is a preliminary report only, was to examine how those who were persecuted as children have coped in Israel till today, more than 45 years later. Do they still suffer from mental symptoms belonging to the survivor syndrome? Has their mental suffering increased or decreased over the years? We also wanted to compare them with aging Holocaust survivors as to their coping and suffering.

Materials and Methods

In 1992 we interviewed Holocaust survivors who were children during the Nazi persecution, and who were less than 13 years old when the Nazi regime was established in the various countries where they lived. The Final Solution was attempted at different times in different countries. For example, in Poland in 1939, in Hungary in 1944. Krell treats this issue. (8)

We took the names of the interviewees at random from the archives of Yad Vashem, where survivors have testified from the 1950s until today. Another criterion for inclusion in this study was the Israeli citizenship of the interview-

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ees. Out of 135 persons we learned about from Yad Vashem files, 4 refused to be interviewed. We found that another 5 had died since the time they had testified, and 23 could not be traced.

We used the same questionnaire as in the previous study. (11) The interviewers included two senior psychiatrists and one resident psychiatrist. The interviews were taped as we required additional information not included in the questionnaire. As in the previous study, we wanted to know if different forms of persecution influenced the state of the survivors in different ways. Therefore, we divided them into groups of:

- 1) survivors of extermination (death) camps.
- 2) survivors of slave labour camps.
- 3) persons who had survived in hiding.
- 4) partisans.

We wanted to see if there were any correlation between age during persecution, psychological results and adjustment. Therefore we divided our sample into 4 groups:

- 1) younger than 5 when the Nazi regime was established in their country.
- 2) aged 6-9.
- 3) aged 10-11.
- 4) aged 12-13.

Results

One hundred and three Holocaust survivors — 59 women and 44 men — were interviewed. 80% of them were from Eastern Europe. 73% had lived in towns until the establishment of the Nazi regime. 90% of them recalled that their families enjoyed a good, or very good, economic status. 59% survived in hiding. 28% had been in death camps, about half of them for a year, and some even longer. 16% of the death camps survivors endured a death march.

8% of our interviewees were partisans. Many of the interviewees underwent more than one form of persecution. Those who had been partisans reported that they had not suffered from depression after the war, a high percentage of the other groups reported that they had.

The death camp survivors suffered after the war, and continue to suffer today, from depression and anhedonia more than survivors of other forms of persecution. The difference in prevalence of suffering from anhedonia among death camp survivors, compared to the other groups of survivors, is statistically significant. (See table 1).

Table 1

Percentage of survivors suffering from depression and anhedonia after the war and today in correlation to the form of persecution

Forms of persecution	Depression after the war	Anhedonia after the war	Depression today	Anhedonia today
Death camps	52	52	52	54
Labour camps	29	14	44	14
Hiding	43	34	31	36

When we compared correlation between age during persecution and degree of suffering from symptoms of the survivor syndrome after the war, we found that the youngest suffered less than the older age groups in our sample from symptoms of hypermnesia and guilt feelings. But today there is not a statistically significant difference in the suffering from symptoms of the survivor syndrome between the age groups. We found that, on the

whole, child survivors suffered after the war, and are still suffering significantly, from symptoms of the survivor syndrome. The highest percentage of suffering today is from hypermnesia to events concerning the Holocaust: 73%. Other examples: nervousness 62%, fatigue 59% (see table 2). 57% of our interviewees suffer from physical diseases connected with their experiences during the Holocaust.

Table 2

**The survivor syndrome during the post-war period and today
(percentages)**

Symptom	After the war	Today
Nervousness	53	62
Insomnia	38	55
Nightmares with Holocaust content	55	46
Headaches	38	40
Psychosomatic complaints	26	33
Emotional instability	50	50
Depression	31	42
Fatigue	37	59
Hypermnnesia concerning Holocaust events	63	73
Survivor guilt	36	28
Chronic anxiety	35	43
Difficulty in concentration	25	41
Anhedonia	27	38

Coping and Adjustment

The group we interviewed cope well on the whole. 63% still work in their profession, 85% are still married, 92% have children. Whether they belong to survivors'

organisations depends on age and form of persecution. Those who were in hiding are less inclined to belong to these organisations than the other groups. This finding is statistically significant.

Table 3

Correlation between form of persecution and coping and adjustment (percentages)

Form of persecution	Higher education	Academic profession	Craftsmen	Senior positions
Death camps	31	13	17	28
Labour camps	76	21	7	57
Hiding	62	23	0	45

The percentage of those who belong to survivors' organisations increases in correlation to age — another statistically significant finding. We also found that the older these survivors were during their persecution, the better their professional adjustment today. 35% of the oldest age group in our sample, aged 63-64 years at time of interview, have an academic profession, compared to only 20% of the group aged up to 58 years today. The older age group more commonly occupy more senior positions also.

Death camp survivors in our sample adjusted worse than the other groups (see table 3).

Discussion

In 1985 Krell wrote that child survivors of the Holocaust have only recently been identified as a group

of individuals deserving attention distinct from survivors in general. He emphasised that the psychiatric literature relates mainly to the difference between elderly Holocaust survivors and their children (second generation). (7) In the present study we found a positive correlation between the intensity of the trauma and the after-effects which it caused. Child survivors from death camps suffered after the war and still suffer now more than child survivors who suffered other forms of persecution. Depression and anhedonia are more pronounced in this group than in the other groups of survivors.

In a previous study of elderly Holocaust survivors, we also found that those who were subjected to severe stress, i.e., those who were in extermination camps, showed higher rates of mental suffering afterwards. (11) Kestenberg notes that

children who suffered humiliation, aggressive treatment and constant threat of death, and who could not react with aggression and anger, react with depressive symptoms as their only outlet. (6)

In a clinical sample studied in the past, we found a reversed correlation between age during persecution and severity of outcome. The youngest persecuted children were the most disturbed afterwards. (9) In the present non-clinical population, we could not find a clear correlation between age during persecution and psychological suffering today. After the war there seemed to be a difference in some symptoms, for example the youngest suffered more than the older age groups in our sample from symptoms of guilt feelings and hypermnesia for events from the Holocaust period.

In our opinion they were too young to remember either their relatives who perished in the Holocaust, or events from the time of Nazi persecution. R. Krell also relates to this topic. (7) Psychoanalysis can help to recall such events. (5) Mazor and his associates point out the effort made by child survivors to remember their past, and to make their personal history coherent. (2)

The child survivors interviewed by us suffer today, almost 50 years since the Nazi persecution,

from symptoms of survivor syndrome. Their suffering from these symptoms today is even more severe than immediately after the war. Most of them still feel that they are suffering mentally and physically from the impact of the persecution they underwent during the Holocaust.

As in our study of older survivors, (11) we found that, despite their suffering, child survivors show high ability in coping and adjustment. Other authors describe similar findings. (1, 3, 4, 5) The child survivors we studied built families, and became well-integrated in Israeli society both professionally and socially. Many of them report harmony in their family life. The percentage of survivor spouses among child survivors is lower than among elderly Holocaust survivors. (11) The reason for this seems to be that they came to Israel at an earlier age, and were better integrated socially than the older survivors. It may also be the result of their strong wish to become assimilated in the general population. (12) As to adjustment, we again find correlation with the severity of the trauma suffered. Death camp survivors did not adjust as well as other groups. Fewer of them received a higher education than other groups of survivors, or occupy academic and senior positions. Amongst them

there is a higher percentage in non-academic professions than in other groups.

Child survivors who were in hiding tend to avoid survivors' organisations more than the others, as if they still had to hide themselves. We plan to compare the suffering, coping and adjustment of child survivors to that of elderly Holocaust survivors.

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