

The Children of Buchenwald: After Liberation And Now

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Usually, studies on Holocaust survivors describe the traumatic effects of their camp experiences: physical and emotional disturbances, the survivor syndrome, and the pernicious long-term effects on the second and even the third generation. All those researches give us the feeling that, after the death camps, there was no possibility of a viable readjustment to a normal life, and that all survivors must suffer from serious troubles. This point of view is very wide-spread because most survivors described by the specialists are those who applied for help as they were not able to readjust by themselves.

The others, who readjusted alone without any external help of psychoanalysts or psychiatrists, and who, very often, succeeded in their social and their family life, are usually not known. Their aim is to be like other people who did not go through the camps, and they never agree to speak about their past. When you meet them, you could never imagine they are camp survivors, and of course, they would not tell you. Very little has been written about this kind of survivor. Yet it would be very interesting to discover the mechanisms which helped them readjust to freedom. Where did they find the inner strength, and what was the process of their successful rehabilitation in society?

I studied a group of 90 young survivors, who were among the thousand Jewish children imprisoned in Children's Barrack 66 in Buchenwald and liberated by American troops on April 11, 1945. These children were the first to leave Buchenwald. Less than two months after the liberation of the camp, they were sent to England, France and Switzerland. Let us describe the 470 children who arrived in France, all orphaned boys, aged 8 to 18. They were placed in a large sanatorium provided by the French government. The staff was composed of a direc-

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tor, psychologists and teachers. They immediately received three dominant impressions: a homogeneous mass, with no hair, faces swollen from hunger, and uniform clothes; a group with an apathetic, unconcerned and indifferent attitude, with no laughter or even a smile, and a marked aggressiveness towards the personnel; mistrust and suspicion. Five had tuberculosis and one died in a Paris hospital.

It was very difficult for the Director to run the hostel as the boys believed everything was due to them, as compensation for their suffering. There was an immediate division between Polish survivors who had been deported at a very early stage to Auschwitz, and Hungarian-Rumanian boys, who had spent less time in the camps. There were fights between them. Food was the most important thing for them, and the boys went to every extreme to purchase food, even through money acquired by selling the equipment of the sanatorium (blankets, sheets, plates, etc.). After a meal, all remaining food was taken to their rooms, because they were afraid there would not be another meal. They did not like the house, which reminded them of a large barrack or camp, and they were always suspicious.

After the first month, a group of 90 young survivors requested that a religious and kosher hostel be opened for them, and they were transferred to Taverny, a smaller site. There, they had the same attitude of 'closing up,' numbing,' and 'cessation of feelings' as in the former place. The Director of the hostel feared them because of their aggressiveness and thought them dangerous. He regarded them as psychopaths, concluding that they had probably been like that before the camps, and that this insensitivity and indifference had made it possible for them to survive the camp experience.

I arrived at Taverny on a Friday, just before the Sabbath, which was celebrated by a special dinner. The boys started singing religious songs, their faces still stern and cold, and I was deeply moved by their fervent voices, and realized that these were not indifferent faces, but ones marked by the indescribable sufferings of the past. I decided to stay at Taverny and, when the Director left, I took over the home with Niny, a young counselor from Ecouis.

Who were those boys? All of them were Jewish and orphans from Poland, Hungary and Rumania. They were members of large families with whom they had been deported to Auschwitz and separated there from their families, immediately after their arrival. They remained in

Auschwitz until January 1945, when the Russians neared Auschwitz, and were then evacuated by the Germans, who did not want them to fall into Russian hands, to Buchenwald, under terrible conditions, by foot or in open wagons, in deep snow and terribly cold weather. Those who survived that evacuation, and arrived in Buchenwald, were imprisoned together in Kinderblock 66. In Taverny they arrived “en groupe,” closed off, insensitive, expressionless, and suspicious and aggressive towards the staff and the outside world. In order to give them some confidence, we had to run the hostel in a completely informal way, which never recalled the camps: everything was open, everything was allowed, there was no male authority, only two maternal and permissive figures (my friend, Niny, and myself) who wanted everybody to feel free.

Niny and I understood that all traditional methods of education were bound to fail; we had to be practical and adapt to the boys' condition. We were young, not much older than the boys. Each of us had had members of our family in Auschwitz. We spoke only German, the language of their tormentors, and definitely could not use it, so we learned Yiddish by listening to their conversations; even though we did not learn to speak it well, it was much better than German. We also decided to find out their names for we certainly could not call them by their numbers. It took a tremendous effort to discover the identity of each, as they all looked alike at first sight. Sitting together on the lawn, or during meals, we would ask them over and over again: “What is your name?” Once we were able to say, “Hello, Moshe Cohen!” or “How are you, Abraham Weiss?” the boys would remain silent at first, but a shy smile would slowly appear on their faces. Their identity had been restored to them, and this was the beginning of communication.

As I have already mentioned, there were terrible fights between the Hungarians and the Poles.

Because of what we had learned about life in the camps, we realized how artificial the organization of the home (such as the division of dormitories into age groups) must have seemed to them. We therefore told them that they were free to choose their roommates, and they formed groups of various sizes based on their home towns. The large dormitories were filled with survivors of Cluj, Munkacs, Oradia Mare, and other towns, while the smaller rooms were occupied by the Polish survivors from Lodz and Pietrkow. The boys wrote the names of their home towns on the bedroom doors. (*Landsmanschaft.*)

Each group consisted of boys from eight to 18 years of age, the older ones taking care of the children. Little by little the fighting came to an end. Whenever a quarrel started, the friends of the antagonists would intervene and stop the disputes. A fraternal atmosphere soon developed, not only in the individual rooms, but throughout the whole group.

In order to discontinue their habit of hoarding food in their bedrooms, we decided to leave the kitchen doors open, and told the boys that they were free to help themselves to bread, cookies, eggs and jam. "This is your home; everything is at your disposal day and night. There is no need to take leftovers to your rooms." From that time on, nothing was taken to the rooms and we were glad to see that they began to trust us, i.e. other people.

We learned that the boys were very fond of photographs of themselves. Every week, they traveled to the nearest town, Vendome, to go to the photographer. We ordered a special train every week for this purpose. They often looked at their pictures. It was proof to them that they were alive.

The permissive style of life conveyed the message that everyone was free to do as he pleased, as long as he did not disturb others. The two mother-figures and the open policy without authority made aggression unnecessary. Brotherly relations and mutual support were fundamental.

Yet their mentality basically had not changed. They went over lists of survivors, searching for members of their families. The chances of finding any of them diminished each day, but some of the boys persisted in their hope. On Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, cruel reality emerged. When saying the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, they engaged in passionate discussions and disputes. Some refused to say the prayer for their parents, brothers and sisters: "They might not be dead. How awful to pray for them as if they were dead!" Others retorted: "But you have been in Auschwitz yourself; you have seen the gas chambers with your own eyes, the smoke, the corpses. You witnessed what happened to the women and children. Why keep any illusions? We have to say the prayers for the dead!" In the end, some of them left the synagogue while others continued to say the prayers.

All those I later met again remembered this day of Yom Kippur for it had marked a turning point in their lives. From that day on, memories of their families came back to them. It may be just a coincidence, but those who had left the synagogue and refused to admit the deaths of their

relatives, later married French or American women, or Israeli women who had spent all of their lives in Israel. They buried their past deep within themselves and never talked about the camps.

Those who had said Kaddish later married former inmates of camps, or young women who had lived in Europe during the war. Certainly they had felt the desire to speak about their past, but generally lacked the courage.

Nevertheless, that Yom Kippur was a turning point for them. Following it, the boys became more realistic. We found them more ready to consider the future, but they could not decide what they wanted to do with their lives. When we suggested that they should take up their father's trade: furrier, tailor, carpenter, etc., they smiled and accepted the decision.

Two of them did not accept this kind of suggestion, and told us that they wanted to study at the Sorbonne. We accepted this. It was our belief that, after the camp experience, all wishes should be granted. We found them a private tutor to teach them French and prepare them for university. One of them, Kalman Kalikstein, made a name for himself as an eminent professor of physics at New York University, and the other is the Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, who originally wrote all his books in French.

As long as they stayed in the hostel, a special atmosphere, and the fact that they all had the same past, and could speak together about their common shared experiences over and over again, was for them an "abreaction." The strong links of affection which bound them together in the hostel were very important for them at that time and later on.

When the boys left, and the hostel closed at the end of 1947, they had regained their former identity, their physical strength, sensitiveness, and interest in life. We thought them ready to accept their independence, and future struggles.

Where did they go when they left? At the beginning, all of them wanted to go to Israel. But they did not receive visas and were afraid to be imprisoned again in the British camps in Cyprus, so that only a minority — 15 to 20 — emigrated to Israel. A larger number found, after Liberation — through lists of names — relatives in the United States who sent them affidavits and tickets. They preferred to accept the invitation of their relatives, and left for the United States. The younger ones, who went to school for the first time in their life, in France, and learned French

well, preferred to stay in France. They settled in Paris. Some went to Australia, one to Bolivia, two to Canada.

I am still in contact with almost all of them. They invite me to their meetings. The first of these meetings took place in New York in April 1965, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald. The second international meeting was held in Tel Aviv in 1990, and, for the third meeting, boys who had been at Buchenwald, and were now scattered all over the world, met in Paris in December 1993. A fourth international meeting in Israel is planned for 1995, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of their liberation,. But of course the Buchenwald alumni meet more often. Every year they commemorate together, in their respective towns, the anniversary of their liberation. They invite each other to their homes and meet at their children's weddings, and so on.

Most Buchenwald boys are integrated into society in a successful way. I'll adduce a few examples:

DAVID was born in Czechoslovakia in 1927. He was the third of four children. His father was very well off, owned a grocery store and a carrier business. His father was a very pious man. David went to public school in the morning, and to *heder* in the afternoon. The father conveyed to his children his love of work; to him it was sacred. During summer vacations, David had to work in the fields. And David observes: "This is what saved my life in the camps. Those who did not survive did not die only of hunger, many died because they thought they would not make it. My older brother was like that. He had given up all hope and I kept telling him: "Be patient, sooner or later it will be over. Take each day as it comes!" During the long march after the evacuation of Auschwitz, the Germans shouted: "Those too tired to continue, get on the trucks!" Before I could hold him back, my brother had followed their order. I never saw him again. This happened on January 22, 1945. Yes, in the camps one had to be determined to survive. One had to be always alert, and to work very hard."

After Liberation, the idea of returning home did not appeal to him. He wanted to make a new start. He was very happy in France, but did not stay there. He had discovered an uncle in New York who sent him an affidavit. He thought he was a wealthy man but he worked in a button

factory. He vowed that in ten years he would be independent and rich. A month later, he met a young camp-survivor, and they became inseparable friends. David left his uncle and he and his friend found a small apartment in Staten Island. They held various jobs, and were always able to cope as they adjusted their way of living to their income. David worked in hotels during the summer and this procured him the means to attend school full-time. He passed all grades from 9th to 12th in one and a half years and graduated.

He and his friend became salesmen in a large curtain store and acquired expertise in curtain-making. One day, they decided to use their know-how to open their own curtain-factory. They provided curtains for hotel and office construction sites with huge bay windows. He is in charge of administrative matters. His partner cuts the curtains, and seamstresses sew the material. They are doing very well.

He considers himself an American but all his friends are Jews. He has three sons and gives them a very strict education. He remarks: "As far as I am concerned, I do not believe in God. If he really exists, he should be denied and shunned. However, I continue to go to the synagogue each Friday, and am an active member of the Jewish community because of my sons."

David really dislikes remembering the past. After his arrival in the United States, and once he had learned to speak English, he would meet Europeans who constantly spoke about the war and the camps, and this upset him very much. This is why he decided to marry an American girl. Nevertheless, deportation plays an important role in his everyday life. He never makes any long-term projects. The only things that are important to him are to be independent and to forge ahead. At home, he never speaks about his past.

ELIE was 15 years old when he arrived in Taverny, but he seemed to be about 12. Now he is a tall man with blue eyes and white hair, and lives in Tel Aviv. He was born in Rumania in 1930, the youngest of eight children. His parents were 45 years old at the time of his birth. His mother was a holy woman. They were very poor, but none of the beggars who knocked at the door were sent off empty-handed. Their house was spotless and sparkling. Thanks to these practices, he was able to survive the camps. He tried to preserve his personal hygiene, and washed in cold water every morning.

They spoke Yiddish and Rumanian at home, and Elie studied at the *heder*. When war broke out, everybody was first confined to a ghetto. Then all the Jews of this little town — they amounted to 50 percent of the population — were sent to Auschwitz. Elie was separated from his family, and sent to work at a construction site. It was very difficult work. A German took quite a liking to him, and gave him a piece of bread every morning when he left for work, and this helped him to survive. He arrived later in Buchenwald and was put in Barrack 66.

After Liberation, he spent some time in France and remembers the wonderful time he had there. But he did not want to stay there, he wanted to go to Palestine, in order to take part in the struggle for a Jewish country. He embarked illegally, and landed in Israel. Although he was only 16 years old, he was eager to fight for his country, and volunteered for a combat unit shortly after his arrival. Once in the army, he grew very fast until he was over six feet tall. He would go to Tel Aviv during leave, all by himself, buy himself a pitta and felafel, and a bottle of soda, and sit on a shaded bench on Rothschild Boulevard. He was happy. He felt a sense of belonging.

The military police were instituted two years after he had become a soldier. They recruited only tall men, and he was one of them. He slowly moved up the ladder until he became a colonel. When he was 23, he met a woman soldier of Rumanian origin, who had been in Europe during the war and he married her. Her parents are very nice to him. They have two children. He never speaks about the camps to them.

He says, “I realize that I overreact with them — I am too affectionate. My daughter, who lives close by, recently had a baby. Once a day my daughter calls and says: ‘Papa, I just prepared the baby’s bath.’ At that point I drop everything and run over there. I hold my grandchild and am overwhelmed with happiness.”

“I no longer practise the Jewish religion. I do not believe that God is concerned about humanity. Still, I am convinced that a core of devout Jews must carry on the past, as they will perpetuate Jewish tradition.

“I am content with my life. At the time of Liberation, I never would have thought I would reach my present position. I tried to suppress the past for a long time. Yes, the past, of course, is constantly on my mind. I have nightmares and think of my parents more often than before. Now that I can afford it, I wish I could spoil my mother, and repay her just a little for the sweetness and kindness she brought to my life.”

Elie thinks that no one should ever forget the Holocaust, but feels unable to tell himself about it.

ABRAHAM, a Polish boy, born in 1927. A large family, but Abraham refuses to speak about it. “My grandfather was . . . [he sighs], I studied in a *heder*.” All his family: parents, brothers, sisters, grand-parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, disappeared in Auschwitz. After the camps, he was completely alone. When the OSE closed in Paris, he found himself, with five friends, all Buchenwald boys, on the street. They lived together in a hotel, did all sorts of jobs and decided to emigrate to Canada, which was the only country, apart from Australia, to issue visas to refugees.

All his friends left for Canada, but Abraham was not granted a Canadian visa, due to his health. He applied for an Australian visa, and arrived there in 1948. In Melbourne, he worked first in small factories, but they closed one after the other because of financial difficulties. Abraham decided to look for work in a big firm where the risk of being dismissed was less. He found employment in the stores of a very large firm in Australia: meat, canned food, wood. He worked very hard and learned everything there was to know about the firm.

During that period, he met his future wife Lea, who was born in Belgium and arrived in Australia with her parents in 1948. Her parents were not very keen on the marriage, because he was alone, without any family. Abraham and Lea married nonetheless. Later on, he helped his in-laws, and they recognized how good he had been to them.

At work, every Friday he would visit the office to say hello to a Jewish bookkeeper working there. One Friday, the boss came in and said: “I need a clerk.” Abraham said: “Take me.” The boss asked him whether he could multiply, divide, solve equations, but Abraham couldn’t, he had never been to school. He told the boss: “I’ll come back again on Monday morning, and you’ll see, everything will be perfect.” During the weekend, his wife Lea taught him mathematics — fractions, percentages, even equations. On Monday, he knew everything, and began work as a clerk.

Since then, he has moved up the ladder, and now he is a director and participates in important decisions. He has a very good position, and so, he says, have the 35 other Buchenwald boys who live in Melbourne. These are his friends. They founded “The Buchenwald group in Melbourne,” and meet at least three times a year: twice to collect money for the United Israel Appeal, and once to celebrate the anniversary of their liberation.

Abraham has two sons. He sent them both to Israel for one year. The eldest said he preferred Australia. The second chose to stay in Israel. Abraham and Lea come often to Jerusalem to visit their son. But their first journey out of Australia was to France to see again the hostels where he had stayed after the war.

He is no longer religious, because, he says, "After Auschwitz it is difficult to believe in God." But he likes to read the Tora in the synagogue, because he still remembers it from the past. But he never speaks about the past. His wife says, "It is not so easy. Every night Abraham has nightmares. But during the day, he is so dynamic, so full of life. I admire him very much."

MOSHE: Not all the Buchenwald boys rejected God. Moshe has become an Orthodox rabbi in New York, and is famous throughout the Jewish world for his responsa, which offer the religious Jew solutions to problems created by modern life.

Moshe was born in Czechoslovakia in 1925. His father was head of a *yeshiva*. Moshe was the fifth of six children. He recalls: "When we were deported in 1944, my father had no illusions. Convinced that he was going to die, he used the water distributed by the Germans to wash his hands and recited the prayer for the dead." All his family was killed in Auschwitz, and Moshe remained completely alone. He refuses to talk about this period and never mentions it to his children. But the nightmares return every night.

Thanks to an affidavit from an uncle in New York, he was able to leave for the United States in 1947. After two days, however, and feeling very unhappy, he left his uncle, who was not a religious man, and searched for the address of the rabbi of Klausenburg, who received him warmly. Eighteen months later, he was head of one of his *yeshivas*, and soon after opened his own. In the beginning, it was small and poor but now occupies several buildings. He has a tremendous influence on his pupils. After marriage, they settle in his neighborhood, and become members of his congregation. He has opened a kindergarten, and intends to establish a *heder* and a school.

"The upsurge of religious life in the United States is largely due to the concentration camps. I am very proud to have taken part in this development. My wife is also a camp-survivor and she knows this world. My children are raised in the spirit of my father's convictions."

Moshe is still in close contact with all the other Buchenwald boys in New York, and helps them whenever they need something.

HAIM: He was born in 1930. He was unlike the others in that he had some family. He was very proud that he had two brothers who had immigrated to Bolivia in 1938. But as soon as he arrived, there was a split between him and his brothers who “could not understand me.” He longed for his “real brothers,” the Taverny fellows, the Buchenwald boys, and wanted to return to Europe. But of course this was unrealistic. Haim left his brothers, worked in La Paz and became a successful businessman. He lives now in New York, but is not married and still very lonely, as he has not found his place in society in spite of his financial independence.

His only friends are from Taverny, in particular two of his own age who, like him, are not married, and have not created a family.

Conclusions

What does our short study establish?

That adjustment to a normal life, after the trauma of the concentration camps and separation from parents, is possible even without help of specialists. It is even surprising how many of the former inmates have reached high positions in society. Of course, it is impossible to formulate general conclusions, as everyone reacted in his own particular way. Nevertheless, all subjects have something in common: they are all silent. They never speak about their past, even about the years after Liberation. They repress it deeply, and this repression is for all of them the defense-mechanism which helped them face the future and to live today a so-called normal life. This is why their particular kind of history is so little known. Although they often deny it, most of them suffer still from sequels of the past: nightmares, digestive troubles, headaches. Yet this does not prevent them from living a normal life.

Taverny was very important for their future readjustment, because it provided an interval between the trauma and the struggle for life. During that period they were able to recover, to regain their identity, and their physical and inner strength. The affectionate links which bound them at that time are still a reality today, and the members of the group from Taverny feel less lonely than some other survivors.

Marriage is a very important factor. Their choice of a wife was always deliberate. She had to be either a girl who had been in the camps, or in Europe during the war, or someone far removed from that past, who would help the former Buchenwald boy to “forget about it.” It is interesting to notice how important it is for all of them to be independent in their work, without a boss or authority of any kind.

Age is also an important factor. Our study shows that even the very young inmates, who had been children in the camps, and do not remember their parents at all, readjusted well and normally. They married, raised children, have successful professional lives, and are not distinguishable from the non-deported. The older ones, from 15 to 18, continue also without restraints imposed by inhibitions formed by the past. Their personality was already formed before the camps, as well as their sense of identity.

But those aged 12 to 14 in the camps, who still remembered their parents very well, but had not achieved puberty before the camps, could not regain a sense of identity. Readjustment seems to have been more difficult for them. In our group, those who are not married, and have less ambition, are usually of that age. The oldest, who were 19 or even older, readjusted well but seem to suffer more than the younger from nostalgia.

And what about the second and the third generation? The parents do not talk to their children about their experiences. Those children and grandchildren do not seem to have more problems than other children. But they are generally very interested in the history of World War II and in the concentration camps. They read the literature, and enquire of their parents, who do not answer them, and who send them to me for me to tell them. Many visit Auschwitz and Dachau, and are in general proud of their parents, who dealt so bravely with their traumas (as they see it).