

The Feelings of Holocaust Survivors Towards Their Persecutors

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In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel writes that, during the time he spent in concentration camps, he thought about the revenge he would take on the Germans. He fantasised about what he would do after the war. Yet after he had been liberated from Buchenwald (the last of his concentration camps), the following passage describes what he actually did do. “At about six o’clock in the evening the first American tank stood at the gates of Buchenwald ... Our first act as free men was to throw ourselves on the provisions. We thought of that. Not of revenge, not of our families. Nothing but bread. And even when we were no longer hungry there was still no one who thought of revenge. On the following day some of the young men went to Weimar to get some potatoes and clothes — and to sleep with girls, but of revenge not a sign”. (10)

Yisrael Gutman comments that when we study the letters and diaries left by the persecuted Jews, the wish for vengeance is very strong. Gutman thinks that perhaps these feelings of revenge were part of what helped the survivors to stay alive in the last and difficult part of their time in the concentration camps. He notes that in reality there were minimal acts of vengeance carried out by the survivors. Yehuda Bauer observes that if any acts of revenge did occur, then they were carried out by partisans or ghetto fighters. For these two groups, acts of revenge represented a continuation of their activity during the war. (1) Gutman asks himself why there was not a wider and uncontrolled outpouring of revenge and hatred when they were possible.

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In the memoirs and testimonies that he read, he found a feeling of restraint in the survivors. Even though they had undergone such suffering, they felt unable to avenge themselves on women and children, who had not been directly involved in the Final Solution. They couldn't indulge in indiscriminate revenge.

Dina Porat, in her book, *An Entangled Leadership*, writes that most of the survivors who had been exposed to the cruelty of the Nazis didn't begin to take their revenge after the war, or when they returned from DP camps. They felt that they couldn't behave like the Nazis. Their hope of immigration to Israel and of living as Jews was their revenge. (7)

My [S. Robinson's] interest in the feelings of Holocaust survivors towards their persecutors was aroused in the following manner. I found that even when they talk about their harrowing experiences, they do not express hate feelings towards their persecutors or a wish for revenge. I encountered this reaction when I spoke to patients, and to survivors who were not in psychiatric treatment. This surprised me.

The purpose of this study was to analyse the complex feelings of Holocaust survivors towards the Germans during the time of persecution, after the war, and today. We interviewed Holocaust survivors whose names were taken at random from Yad Vashem archives.

The interview was half structured. We used a questionnaire designed for this purpose. We interviewed survivors and their children, that is first and second generation.

From the many interviews we did, we will provide several examples to illustrate the problem.

First interview: Mr. E. is sixty five years old. He was born in Poland, is married, and has two daughters. He came from a middle class family, and his father was a businessman. The family atmosphere was pleasant. He is the fourth of five children.

He completed studies at a vocational high school and matriculated before the war, and apprenticed himself to a carpenter. His parents and his sister were killed during the Holocaust. Another sister and a brother found refuge in Russia, and a second brother settled in Mandatory Palestine before the war.

During the first phase of the Holocaust he was in Crakow Ghetto, and later in concentration camps, first at Plaszow and then Czestochowa.

At the time of the interview, he recalls that his feelings had frozen during the Holocaust. He was present when large numbers of Jews were tortured or killed. He recalls the Germans ordering hundreds of Jews to undress and lie down in trenches the Polish army had abandoned. The Jews were then shot in the back of the head. He was ordered to collect the shoes and dresses of these murdered Jews and to cover the bodies with a thin layer of sand. Then the Germans brought in another group of helpless Jews and shot them also. He still has vivid pictures of this scene, and hears the shooting.

It was in this period that his feelings became numbed, and he did not attend to what was happening around him. He believes that the Germans systematically numbed the feelings of their victims. He began slowly to think only of himself. His father was taken to some other place, and his only thought was how to survive from moment to moment. He remained indifferent even when he saw how people were taken away to be hanged or shot or sent off elsewhere. He asked the interviewer to consider the fact that 16,000 people at roll-call were guarded by only 50 Ukrainians. These people could have killed the guards with their bare hands. However, such a notion never occurred to them.

He believes that the Germans maintained their rule through breaking their prisoners psychologically. They lost the ability to resist. When he was asked if he had taken his own revenge on the Germans after the war, he responded that he hadn't even when he had had the opportunity to do so. At the time of Liberation, in January 1945, he could have enlisted in the Polish Army, and revenged himself then on the Germans. He did not enlist because he was afraid that, after all the suffering he had already been through, he might get killed in the Army. But he did join the Polish police after the Russians had liberated Poland. He was given a revolver, and could easily have shot a German in some dark alley. Nobody would have investigated such a death. He didn't avail himself of the opportunity.

"My revenge was that I took Nazis to court. The authorities had gathered the Nazis together in camps but in 1946 they freed them and sent them back to Germany". He had heard of Jews who after the war lived with German women. When asked how they could do this, they replied that this was their revenge on Hitler and his racial theories.

He does think there is a practicable form of revenge, which is to bring to justice the leading Nazis. "If I were in possession of an atom bomb",

he says, “I wouldn’t drop it on Germany”. He doesn’t want to kill innocent people. If he did, he would feel that this kind of behavior would mean he had lost his humanity. “But that Nazi soldier who had ordered him to climb a pear tree and pick pears for him, and then shot at him — luckily he missed. He would be able to kill this particular German. His skill as a carpenter had helped him during the war, and this was his occupation in Israel.

His hobby is hunting. At nights he lies in the fields, waiting for wild boars. He is optimistic and full of energy. However, even today, if he sees a uniform that reminds him of the Nazis, he trembles.

Second interview: Mrs. S. is 74 years old and a widow. She has a married son and daughter. Her family in Poland was well-to-do, and before the war she studied at an art school. She married and had a daughter before the outbreak of war. She passed through many concentration and death camps during the war. She was liberated by the British in Bergen Belsen in April 1945. She was then unconscious from typhus. After many months in hospital, she found her husband, who had passed through many concentration camps also, and their daughter who had been living with a Polish family. The three of them went through many hardships before they immigrated to Israel, where she bore a son.

I quote her words in reply to a question about revenge: “When I was in ghettos or concentration camps I dreamed of revenge. The women around me would talk quietly about it also. I had said then that I would kill the Nazis with a kitchen knife, and in cold blood. It didn’t happen though. I was unconscious when liberated in Bergen Belsen. I regained consciousness about two weeks after Liberation. I had been hospitalized with typhus, and I don’t know what happened on the day of Liberation. I have heard that prisoners beat the SS men they found but didn’t kill them. They handed them over to the British. Perhaps the Jews didn’t have the physical strength to kill them. There were mostly women in Bergen Belsen though there was a camp for men, also. The ones with strength were either kapos or *blokowa* (in charge of a block for women), because they ate the prisoners’ food. They were really fat, they could scarcely get through a door. After the Liberation, they were scared and ran away, and hid themselves. Most SS men had run away earlier. The prisoners were all bone, they weren’t strong enough to beat the SS men. It took about two

months for us to recover our strength a little, and by then the British and Americans had taken charge of the Germans.

There were survivors who stole from the Germans but in my opinion it only added to the German hatred of Jews. It could convince the Germans that Hitler had been right in saying the Jews were thieves. I had enough time to realise there could be no real revenge. Even Satan was unable to hit on an appropriate revenge for lives that had ended so tragically.

Revenge for me took a different form. It was about a half year after the Liberation. We were a handful of Jews living in a German city. The occupation forces had given us a large apartment that had been owned by a Nazi killed in the war. I and my husband felt that the Nazi's widow should have a room in the apartment, and not be evicted. I had my revenge when I heard her say to her friends that she felt ashamed to be German, and that Hitler was wrong in his persecution of the Jews, and in getting the Germans to believe that the Jews were wicked. The interviewee at that time felt pleased that the Germans were ashamed of what they did to the Jews and they had changed their attitude to them. She feels this is superior to beating up Germans, which would only have elicited their hatred. Her approach made them feel ashamed.

In the camps she passed through, there were prisoners of other nationalities also. They too suffered. There were hungry and diseased Ukrainians in Bergen Belsen but she hadn't heard that any of them took their revenge on their captors.

It was reported also that Russian prisoners of war liberated from the camps didn't take their revenge. Their one desire was to go home. The Germans had treated the Russians terribly.

She herself had seen closed wagons with blood oozing from them. She was told that inside the wagons were the bodies of murdered Russian prisoners of war.

She feels that the survivors considered survival their revenge. In the ghetto, her husband had considered suicide. This would have been easier than the daily and minute by minute struggle but because of their daughter they didn't kill themselves. They found a Pole who agreed to conceal her. Her husband would say, in Yiddish, "The Germans should explode — *platzen* — because we Jews will overcome".

She defined her, and others survivors', attitude through quoting from a poem by Nelly Sachs: (9)

Chorus of the Rescued

*We, the rescued,
From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his flutes,
And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow—
Our bodies continue to lament
With their mutilated music.
We, the rescued,
The nooses wound for our necks still dangle
Before us in the blue air—
Hourglasses still fill with our dripping blood.
We, the rescued,
The worms of fear still feed on us.
Our constellation is buried in dust.
We, the rescued,
Beg you:
Show us your sun, but gradually.
Lead us from star to star, step by step.
Be gentle when you teach us to live again ...*

*We beg you:
Do not show us an angry dog, not yet—
It could be, it could be
That we will dissolve into dust—
Dissolve into dust before your eyes.
For what binds our fabric together?*

Mrs. S. stresses at the end of the interview that she does not hate Germans. She has friends in Germany and a German couple come to stay with her almost every year on their visits to Israel.

Third interview: Dr. Y. is 62 years old, was born in Hungary, is married and has two children. He has written a book about his wartime experiences. He was deported at the age of 16 to Auschwitz, and spent a relatively long time there.

He remembers how one day all the adolescents were summoned to roll call. Mengele, known as the Angel of Death, stood there with his legs apart, and his hands on his hips. Mengele measured the height of a

sixteen-year-old prisoner, and a stick corresponding to his size was nailed to a pair of goalposts. All the prisoners had to run past this stick. Those shorter than the stick would be gassed. Many children and adolescents tried to appear taller than they were as they passed the stick. Some walked on tip-toe. Mengele pointed to those children he had chosen for death. On that day, and for some days more, many selections were carried out, and thousands of children and adolescents were chosen. They were locked in a shed without food or water for two days, before transference to the gas chambers. Dr. Y. himself, and several other prisoners, had to guard the sheds, sticks in their hands, to ensure that none of the prisoners escaped. After the victims had been taken away to be killed, Dr. Y. saw, drawn by the prisoners in charcoal, tombstone figures on the walls of the shed. They had written their names and town of origin on the tombstones, and asked the survivors to inform their families of their fate, and to avenge their death. Dr. Y. survived Auschwitz and other death camps. After the war he immigrated to Israel, studied and had a family. His work is to retrieve Jewish property, and he considers this a kind of revenge. He considers his trips to Germany, for discussions about Germans behaviour during the war, another kind of revenge. He tries to get the Germans to admit that they knew about the murder of the Jews and to make them feel guilty. His feelings towards the Germans are ambivalent, and he envies them their economic success.

Fourth interview: Mrs. C. was born in a small town in Hungary in 1925. Her family had lived in Hungary for seven generations, and they felt strong ties to the Hungarian people and their culture. They were well-to-do merchants. Mrs. C. had siblings, and recalls her family and childhood as happy. They lived with a feeling of security till the war broke out. She was the only member of her family who survived it.

She had finished 12 years' schooling, was 19-years-old, single, and working as a clerk, when the Germans invaded Hungary. She was sent to Auschwitz together with other Jews from her town. When the Red Army neared Auschwitz, she and others were sent on a death march to Neustadt and Mauthausen, and, finally, Bergen Belsen. In Auschwitz she met her older sister, who told her that she had separated from her small daughter so as to survive. When her sister understood what she had done, she could not live with her guilt feelings, and died just before the liberation of Auschwitz.

Mrs. C. was liberated from Bergen Belsen. She was then suffering from tuberculosis and typhus. She weighed 28 kilos. The Red Cross sent her to Sweden, and there she began the second difficult part of her fight for life. By the time she had grown a little better, she realised she alone survived of her family.

She began her rehabilitation, learned a profession, married a non-Jew, and gave birth to her only son, who lives in Israel today, and has his own family. She told me she was very angry with God for betraying her during the war. Now she understands that her marriage to a non-Jew was her protest against God. She divorced her first husband, came to Israel, and married again.

After working for some years in her profession she retired. Today she is a very energetic woman, with an active social life. Much of her time is devoted to the commemoration of Jewish life before the Holocaust. She is especially active in matters concerning Hungarian Jewry during the war-years. Since the end of the war, Mrs. C. has suffered from insomnia and nightmares. In recent years she has felt well during the day, but, if she lectures about her Holocaust experiences, has nightmares. She has no guilt feelings concerning her survival, nor is she depressed. She feels that, since she survived, it is her duty to speak about what happened during the Holocaust. She feels that people should remember and not forget, in order for a similar catastrophe not to happen elsewhere.

She feels that her survival is a miracle. For example, her name had been on a list of people to be killed, but it was removed from the over-long list. She only felt able to tell her son about her Holocaust experiences when he was himself an adult. She feels that mature people, not children, should be told about the Holocaust. She herself cannot watch T.V. programs or films about the Holocaust. She feels it is a masochistic preoccupation for survivors. She has a deep psychological understanding, and expresses herself very well.

After the Liberation, she did not think about revenge, nor does she recall thinking about it during the war. She remembers she was angry with the Germans, and even more so with the Hungarians among whom her family had lived many generations. Today she thinks she built a wall, which isolated her from the painful past, especially feelings of betrayal by the Hungarians. Her mother tongue was German, though she speaks it poorly now. She thinks this is her way of expressing her anger for their killing of her family. She is angry with this culture which nurtured the

Nazi dragon. Mrs. C. is quiet for a while, then says: "I am not an aggressive person. Maybe it is because of my upbringing that I remained this way. The Germans did not change me".

She is against the trials of war criminals in their present format, as for instance the Demjaniuk trial. She says this is not revenge, doesn't help the Jews, but only causes damage. It brings out anti-Semitic feelings. It is important for her to preserve the memory of the Holocaust as a historical event. The world should know that this happened, and not be allowed to forget it. She does not consider this insistence on memory as a form of revenge on the Germans and Hungarians.

She tells me she has visited Germany briefly, to be examined in connection with her application for Reparations. It was difficult for her to ask the Germans for this, but she did apply finally, though no sum of money can compensate for her suffering. She gave the money received from the Germans to her son, since she did not feel able to use it. During this visit to Germany she went to Bergen Belsen. It was a traumatic experience for her. All she remembers is that she cried and screamed till she left Germany. She was sorry she had gone there. She also spent a short time in Hungary, where she felt strange. She visited the town where she was born, and took photos of places she remembered from childhood. She feels suspicious of Germans. She can only be with one German at a time. When she meets two or more of them, she starts to think about Nazi Germany. She does not like to meet young Germans. She knows they are not responsible for what happened, but feels their parents or relatives may have taken part in Nazi atrocities.

At the end of the interview, she says she does not believe revenge is possible, or would help. Hate breeds hate in our world, and there's no point in nurturing it. She blames the Hungarians for their collaboration with the Germans, and for her personal tragedy. She feels that they could have acted differently. It is important to her to blame them, and to see them as her enemy. She feels her anger towards the Hungarians is, in part, her father's anger towards them. He had served in World War I, and felt attached to Hungarian culture. She remembers her father's humiliation, and his feeling of betrayal by the Hungarians who had once been close to him.

In a recurring dream she sees herself again deported to Auschwitz. The dream is always the same, but its characters change. Sometimes they are persons from her own generation, sometimes from her son's or her

grandchildren's. She does not dream about revenge, it is not possible, since the Nazis' crimes were inhuman, not of this world. She feels that the Hungarians' behavior, though it constituted a form of betrayal, was human, and that they are guilty.

We did not find hatred towards the Germans, or a wish for vengeance, in the many video cassettes of survivors who testified at Yad Vashem.

Conclusions

In the many interviews conducted with Holocaust survivors for this study, we did not encounter hatred of the Germans, or fantasies of revenge. The survivors did not hate the Germans. They visit Germany, are in contact with Germans, and have German friends. Some of them had thoughts of revenge during the Holocaust, especially at the start, like the survivor in the second interview. However, as persecution continued, these feelings of hatred and wish for revenge decreased and then disappeared. It may be that in the imagination of the victims, the inhuman and demonic image of the Nazis became so strong that it was impossible to feel human hatred towards them. The fourth interviewee expresses this idea.

Anger or hatred towards those who collaborated with the Nazis can be expressed by the survivors, because the actions of collaborators are commensurate with a range of human feelings. Judith Kestenberg writes about survivors — children during the Holocaust — and finds that they do not have feelings of revenge towards Germans though they do want to see justice done. (5) They feel that the courtroom is the place where the Nazis should be judged, and their victims avenged.

The second generation are more anti-German. They avoid contact with Germans more than their parents, the Holocaust survivors. They hesitate to visit Germany. In a previous study, carried out during the Demjaniuk trial in Jerusalem, most therapists in Israel received a questionnaire in which they were asked about their reactions to the trial, including the affective reactions of their patients, and their own response to the trial. The answers indicated that many reacted with depression, and increased tension. The questionnaire enquired also about feelings of hatred towards the Germans, and the wish for revenge. We found feelings

of hatred towards the Germans in only a few questionnaires. During the Demjaniuk trial, most survivors expressed the wish to see justice done. One of the therapists added a few lines to the structured questionnaire: "In my patients the affective reactions to the trial which you asked about did appear, excluding the feelings of hatred for the Germans, and a wish for revenge".

On the other hand, among many second-generation therapists and second-generation patients, reactions to the trial included an awakening of hatred for the Germans, and a wish for revenge. During the trial, some patients having psychotherapy, and some therapists also, reacted with displacement of aggressive feelings about the Germans on other subjects. For example, a patient started to be aggressive towards his therapist. Another patient, living on a kibbutz, directed his aggression on the kibbutz. A young therapist, from a country not occupied by the Germans, started dreaming about his Arab neighbors. In his dreams, the Arabs were wearing Nazi uniforms and look like Germans. (2, 8) Hoppe writes about displacement of aggression in Holocaust survivors from the Germans to the Arabs. (4)

It may be that hatred, and the wish for revenge, became blocked during the Holocaust, because the expression of these feelings was dangerous then, and would have meant certain death, so that these feelings became frozen till recently.

In his last published book, Primo Levi, who spent a long time in Auschwitz, writes about his lack of hatred towards the Germans. "That I do not feel hatred against the Germans surprises many ..." (6) The lack of hatred in Holocaust survivors for their persecutors is a psychological phenomenon which deserves more research.

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