

Article

Family and Trauma: The Autobiography of Scholarship

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Abstract: Unpeeling what is usually concealed by professional language, this essay explores the interactive relationship between my research, on the one hand, and my personal and family history, on the other. These connections are not simply uni-directional, but dynamic and interactive, evolving over time. Although some of my research questions may have paralleled my personal challenges, the Holocaust survivors I have researched also deeply affected my emotional life and personal trajectory at different times. I briefly discuss my genealogical inheritance coupled with an in-depth focus on my scholarship.

Keywords: family; trauma; memory; Holocaust; Jewish studies; autobiography

1. Family and Trauma: The Autobiography of Scholarship

At the beginning of my career, a colleague once said to me that all of our research has an autobiographical valence, even if we are not conscious of it. I was somewhat skeptical about his statement then, a time when I was immersed in writing my first book, about young female factory workers and their families in rural Java (Wolf 1992). Some thirty years and several research projects and books later, I am completely convinced that he was right. Only in recent years have I attempted to understand the links between my research and my autobiography. I am grateful that the theme of this Special Issue has compelled me to take that interconnection seriously.

I am a feminist sociologist who specializes in family sociology. All of my research has focused on the complex interactions between families and massive structural change, such as industrialization, war, genocide, voluntary migration and forced migration. These events consist of long-term processes that unfold over time, and may result in family separation, loss, and trauma, depending upon the circumstances. The central thread woven throughout my research in Java, Indonesia, the Netherlands and the US, has been situating families within changing social structures and focusing on intra-familial dynamics. My personal and family history reflect some aspects of these themes as well.

Although interrogating the relationship between my scholarship and my personal life is intriguing, at the same time, it is emotionally wrenching to write about a very painful and private past. Unpeeling what is usually concealed by professional language, this essay explores the interactive relationship between my research, on the one hand, and my personal and family history, on the other. These connections are not simply uni-directional, but dynamic and interactive. Although some of my research questions may have paralleled my personal challenges, the people who participated in my research also deeply affected my emotional life and personal trajectory at different times. I will very briefly discuss my genealogical inheritance followed by a more in-depth focus on most of my research.

2. Herstory

Both of my parents fled Nazi Germany and came to San Francisco as teenagers with their parents in the 1930s. Today, they would all be considered survivors of the Holocaust. (As a sociologist, I would

argue that they were refugees as a result of forced migration, not survivors, but that is a different discussion). Unlike many of my friends, there is no one famous or important in my family. No one was highly educated or passionately engaged in building socialism, Zionism or involved in the fight against fascism. No one was amusingly eccentric or peculiar enough to be noticed in a public forum. Their lives were not full of the music, literature and cultural salons one automatically associates with German Jews, many of whom were urban, educated, well-off and highly assimilated.

Instead, my roots go back to the 30% of German Jews who lived in or very near rural areas. My people had a basic education and engaged in typical Jewish occupations one step above the peasantry—as cattle-dealers, grain dealers, and small shop owners. They were part of the merchant class and petty bourgeoisie. They were ordinary people who strove to be good citizens; indeed, both of my grandfathers proudly served their Kaiser and their Fatherland in World War I despite being too old for combat. My kin had a modest middle-class existence within their respective environments and were observant Jews. They most likely voted for safe, conservative political candidates. No wild socialists or anarchists in this family tree!

What sets my particular family apart is an unusual distinction, but not the kind that makes one proud. We seem to have an abundance of suicides. Completed suicides. Both of my parents killed themselves. After 24 years of marriage at the age of 49, my mother committed suicide. On a weekday morning, she must have taken a bottle of sleeping pills with a glass of water, put her empty water glass by the sink where it always stood, neat and compulsive until the end, and then went to bed for the long sleep. She did not leave a note. At the time, I was 19 and in my second week of classes at UC Berkeley, where I had just transferred. It happened two days before Yom Kippur begins, a rather “heavy” time in the Jewish calendar, during the High Holidays. She left behind my father, my older brother who was already working, me, and her recently widowed mother. My mother’s father, my grandfather, had died 4 months earlier, at the age of 85.

Over a year after my mother’s death, my father became very depressed and anxious, a painful dynamic he had experienced over a decade earlier. However, during the years in between those depressions, he had been his warm, humorous and outgoing self. As he slid into a depression once again, it seemed as though he was experiencing that painful existential aloneness one often confronts in early adulthood. He was hospitalized when I was still studying at Berkeley and then again later when I was in graduate school. When I was 23, I graduated with Honors in Political Science from UC Berkeley and my Berkeley relatives gave me a lovely party in their home to celebrate. I was leaving for a summer internship at the UN, after which I would go upstate and begin a doctoral program at Cornell. My father was walking around the party, telling my friends that he was going to kill himself.

Five years after my mother’s death, at the age of 56, he succeeded in doing just that. It was during the Fall semester of my second year of graduate school at Cornell. He wrote that he was sorry. I just had been in San Francisco three weeks earlier to celebrate my paternal grandmother’s (his mother’s) 85th birthday. My father was in very bad shape then. His anxieties were manifest in constant ruminations about his being alone that went in circles no matter what one said or suggested. Although he was clearly suffering terribly, it was frustrating and exhausting to be with him for an extended period. It was a painful situation all around. I had to go back to Ithaca to pursue my graduate education; staying would not have made him better. In order to separate and leave, I had to harden my heart and turn away. It was the last time I saw him.

His mother, my grandmother, lived another $1\frac{1}{2}$ years after my father died. At the end, she suffered ongoing circulatory problems in her legs which developed into gangrene and tremendous pain. The only possible remedy was a double amputation which she rejected. She was adamant that she was not going to go into an old age home. She also took her life when I was back at Cornell. Not long before, she and I had talked about suicide very obliquely in person. I let her know that this was a very different situation than my parents, yet it is still upsetting in its own way. By the age of 25, I had designed three tombstones and joked that I should add it to the list of skills on my CV.

Many people have experienced one parent's suicide and the complicated mourning that comes in reaction to a sudden, deliberate death. However, both parents killing themselves seems to be rare enough that it emitted an involuntary gasp of astonishment from the first psychiatrist I saw. My mother's suicide was shocking and earth-shattering. She and I were in the middle of our separation dance, nowhere close to being done. Her action forced a premature but final separation and felt like an enormous rejection. Of course, I understand it was an act of desperation and despondency that was not directed at me personally, but my heart and my head speak different languages.

My father's suicide was less shocking in that we knew it was possible and had asked him not to do it. Even so, his death was no less painful. In fact, this second suicide created even more devastation because it rendered me parentless and orphaned, imploding the ground under my feet. I doubt he was conscious about his timing but he died on the same day as my mother, on the Jewish calendar. This means that the Jewish ritual of remembering a loved one's death on the day they died, their *yahrzeit*, falls on the same day for both of my parents. It is just before Yom Kippur, the most serious and somber Jewish holiday.

Both of my parents were only children, so I have no aunts, no uncles, and no first cousins. My parents' suicides were a huge blow to their elderly mothers from which they never recovered. On top of all that, my brother and I were left to care for our grandmothers because the middle generation had opted out. I felt completely alone in the world with no map or guide to lead me through. I was unmoored and the parent ships had sailed away.

Among middle class young people, the decade of one's 20s is a time to explore, develop and establish one's self professionally. I think about the support we gave our son when he took a gap year abroad after high school, and when he began university a year later. We celebrated his launchings and provided a secure base for him to fall back on if needed. In contrast, it seemed that each time I tried to launch, I was hit by a meteor. Then, the launching pad self-destructed so there was no going back. For an American middle-class white person in the later part of the 20th century, I lost my parents and my home very early in life.

After my mother's death, I began to lie. The silent, shocked reactions I got from peers and adults alike when I told the truth about the cause of her death quickly cured me of honesty. Instead, depending upon my mood, I would say that she died from a heart attack or cancer. I was ashamed by my mother's suicide. For reasons I do not understand 45 years later, I felt that it reflected badly on me and others would think something is wrong with me. I felt permanently tainted, as though marked by some glow-in-the-dark paint that would prevent me from succeeding once revealed. After my father died, I no longer had that sense of shame but I continued to lie, assigning one or the other illness to each of them. I still lie, although in recent years, I have told the truth to a few people. Despite all the time that has passed, sometimes I can tell it in a matter-of-fact manner and other times, I cannot. It never becomes less sad. In this article, I am "coming out" about their deaths for the first time and it makes me very uncomfortable.

There is an intervening factor that helps explain how I got from my mother's death when I was 19 to becoming an adult and a sociologist. Immediately after my mother died, I was taken under the wing of my mother's first cousin who was my mother's age and was like an aunt to me. She was a psychotherapist who practiced and lived in Berkeley and was on the faculty in Psychology at UC Berkeley, specializing in Clinical Psychology. She was a black sheep in my extended family because she had broken away, married a non-Jewish man, and she rejected many traditional family obligations. She used the opportunity of immigrating and becoming American to distance herself from family duties, unlike my mother who remained the dutiful daughter until she suddenly quit. This relative was one of the most educated family members and, compared with my nuclear and extended family, the only one who seemed to really enjoy life. After my mother died, she made it clear to me that I was going to go to graduate school and have a career, creating expectations no one ever had for me, including myself. Her support was fundamental throughout my education and my formation as an adult.

This abbreviated family herstory underscores a stark irony. Due to multiple and converging factors, my mother's suicide propelled me in a direction neither I nor anyone else could have imagined. Somehow, with a lot of help, I received a Ph.D. AND got a job at the University of California, both of which are achievements beyond my wildest dreams. My life has been richer and more meaningful because this relative intervened when everything imploded and she pushed me in a new direction. However, I hesitate to call it the "silver lining" of my mother's suicide because it does not take away any of my loss or pain. Yet, it is an unintended, welcomed, and a very lucky outcome because it could have been very different.

3. Staying Alive: Surviving the Holocaust

In 1979, the year after my father's death, I dropped out of graduate school for a semester because I was overwrought with anxiety and in a very dark place. Luckily, I got a job as an assistant in a public school kindergarten that met in the morning. Mornings were my worst time of day, so focusing on the needs of 30 five year olds distracted me completely and afterwards, I was able to return to my own research. I was working on developing a dissertation prospectus focused on women and work in rural Java. Additionally, I audited an Anthropology course focused on Life Histories so that I could practice that methodology in English before going to do my fieldwork in Java. I wanted to interview someone whose background was familiar, someone Jewish. I needed a "guinea pig" so that I could gain methodological skills before doing fieldwork 10,000 miles away, in Indonesia and in Indonesian. The Anthropology professor sent me to a Holocaust survivor named Jacob Geldwert who lived in the flats of Ithaca, where he and his wife ran a corner "mom and pop" grocery store called "Red and White." Little did I know how much meeting him would change my life in ways that are unrelated to methodology.

In a short telephone call, Jake, as he was known, encouraged me to come to the store one evening and there I met him and his wife, Jeannette (nee Shayne). A survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Jeannette made it clear that she did not want to be involved in any way with talking about the Shoah, but Jake was talkative and spoke with me while he was behind the butcher's case, handling pork. That first night I found out some basic facts—Jake was brought up Hasidic (ultra-Orthodox) in the town of Oświęcim (known as Auschwitz), was in four concentration camps and survived a death march together with his next youngest brother. His grandparents, parents, and four younger siblings were murdered; only Jake and his brother survived. Jake also survived a store robbery in Ithaca where he fought an armed assailant with a broom. The robber aimed his pistol at Jake's head and tried to shoot, but the gun did not go off. A metaphor for Jake's life. The robber pistol-whipped Jake's forehead but he and Jeannette returned to work the next morning as usual.

In their daily lives, Jake and Jeannette adhered to Orthodox Jewish practices in that they kept kosher and Jake always covered his head with a skullcap at home, or a hat, while working in the store. The first evening that I met him, Jake told most of his stories with a smile and even laughed at times. His cadence in English reflected years of Talmudic training in the way that he told a story. First, he would lay the groundwork and then he created a problematic through a question (e.g., "and so how did he do it?" "and so, how did I answer him?") and then he would answer his own question. His sentence structure in English mimicked that of Yiddish, his mother-tongue. I felt comfortable listening to him. I loved the way he spoke and his Yiddish accent.

Jake's demeanor that evening was life-changing for me; in fact, it was a pivotal moment during the worst time of my life. After I left the store, I realized that if he could still smile, laugh and have a twinkle in his eye after all he had been through, then I too could and would get through this very difficult period. I am not suggesting that our experiences were parallel or comparable in any way. That is the point. My losses paled compared with his experiences. What were two suicides and losing my parents next to the murder of his parents, grandparents, four younger siblings, aunts, uncles and many cousins in addition to years of torture, degradation and starvation, losing his home, his homeland, his way of life?

Meeting Jake did not take away my grief but it gave me perspective. I visited Jake every week to solicit his story. This research began as practice for the “real thing” in Indonesia but later became a research project in its own right. My initial work with Jake was not guided by questions connected to my past; however, the subject of this life history deeply touched and helped me personally.

After the war ended, Jewish survivors were sent to Displaced Person (DP) Camps in Germany. Like the other Jewish survivors, Jake and Jeannette wanted to leave Germany and emigrate elsewhere. Jake had wanted to join his brother who had emigrated to Palestine. But Jeannette had lost her entire family—her five brothers, her parents, and the younger sister who had been with her in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Her only living relative was an aunt in upstate New York. Jeannette longed for family, so Jake and Jeannette went to upstate New York.

Jeannette’s American relatives ended up disappointing her tremendously and did not become the close family for which she yearned. Jeannette’s cousins in Ithaca employed Jake in their grocery store. The first blow was that they forced him to work on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath, keeping him from observing the religion he held dear. After all he had been through, it was a shock to realize that family, not the Nazis, were now preventing him from practicing his religion. Because of this, Jake and Jeannette then wanted to move to New York City or to Israel where they could live in an Orthodox Jewish environment and practice Judaism. However, they did not have the funds to do so; they realized they were stuck.

Jeannette’s relatives exploited Jake, paying him below minimum wage and making him work overtime for free. The cousin’s wife visited the store and worked very part-time. She was verbally abusive to the workers, Jake included. It took years for Jake to quit; the first time he walked out, Jeannette’s male cousin begged him to return. He finally was able to quit one day in reaction to a long tirade of verbal abuse from the female relative. After seven years, he had had enough and refused to return to their store. He was without work for many months but eventually they purchased their own grocery store from a grocer who lived in Ithaca and wanted to retire.

After I finished Jake’s life history, my relationship with them continued. They invited me for Sabbath meals and for Jewish holidays. About a year after meeting Jake and Jeannette, I left to do fieldwork in Indonesia, but no matter where I was in the world after that, I always stayed in touch with them. I saw them when I returned to Cornell and visited them in Ithaca many times after I began working, after I got married, and after I had our son. I called them regularly until Jake no longer could manage a phone conversation due to dementia. Both of them lived well into old age and died in their 90s, something they never would have fathomed when they were in camps.

4. Families and Industrialization in Java

My dissertation research and the resultant book (Wolf 1992) focused on young village women in Java, Indonesia and their sometimes contentious relationships with their families of origin as they sought work in Western-style factories, what we would now term global sweatshops. Traditionally, Javanese women have considerable autonomy and controlling their own wages was not new or unusual. These factory daughters spent some of their wages on small consumer items they enjoyed that parents could not have afforded to purchase them. They also participated in a rotating savings group (*arisan*) and had savings such as gold jewelry and sometimes a little livestock. However, it was clear that their employment was not part of some “household strategy,” but initially, a source of conflict for some parents. After I departed, there were a series of crop failures. During my re-study, I found that families with a factory worker were able to use their daughter’s savings to stay afloat, and that changed villagers’ views of this emergent proletarianization.

Although factory workers were clearly exploited by the factories that were backed up by highly patriarchal personnel managers who were former military men, these young women felt empowered by their work and their wages to push at patriarchal boundaries at home, to gain more independence. I argued that even though they knew they were being exploited, they greatly preferred working in a factory rather than on their parents’ land. Neither their wages nor their savings resulted in structural

change that would have improved their lives in the long-run, but I argued that we also cannot ignore what these jobs meant to them. They are social agents in their own right and know their own lives better than Western academics.

Young women pushing the boundaries with their parents resonated with me due to my rebellious teenage years, but that was not central in terms of my personal connections. However, as a feminist, I was disturbed by the unequal power relations that existed between me and those I researched. Although I had warm, ongoing relationships with a number of the young women and their families since I lived in the village for over a year and then returned a few years later, it became clear to me that my career was being built on their poverty and they did not benefit at all economically. This simply increased the inequality between us, quite the opposite of what I naively had hoped for when I began the project. This led to my writing a long essay for a book I edited about feminist dilemmas in fieldwork (Wolf 1996) and likely kept me from pursuing further research in poor countries.

5. Returning to Jake

After I got tenure, now living in California, I wanted to re-do Jake's life story more professionally. I wanted to honor Jake and his history. In the late 1990s, I brought my little family to Ithaca one summer, for ten days, to do daily recordings with Jake. He and Jeannette had retired and sold their shop and we sat in his living room where I interviewed and taped him. I wrote an analytical essay about Jake's pre-war and wartime life in which I included his post-war life, a topic usually overlooked in Holocaust research. This was published in a book with Jake's life history (Wolf 2002).

In my essay, I gave considerable attention to the disturbing dynamics between Jeannette's American Jewish family and their vulnerable and dependent European relatives who were homeless and stateless, having survived genocide. When I gave talks about my research on Jake, audience members often shared similar stories about exploitative relationships in their own families, between a sponsoring relative and a Holocaust survivor. These are post-war histories about which we know little because we presume families are altruistic. With one exception, I cannot recall any Holocaust survivor speaking or writing about family conflict in prewar or postwar times. Prewar times are usually viewed with tremendous nostalgia and the kinds of problems Jake confronted after the war are never solicited in testimonies or written about in memoirs.

The one exception is Professor Ruth Kluger's (2001) book *Still Alive*. Kluger came from a cultured Viennese family and wrote about her abusive mother with whom she was deported to Theresienstadt and then to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She is blunt about the way her mother treated her throughout her life, including after the war into her old age, and portrays a very difficult relationship. Kluger argues against assumptions of family altruism among those who were living under Nazi rule. "... we all know the reality: the more we have to put up with, the less tolerant we get and the texture of family relations becomes progressively more threadbare." (Kluger 2001, p. 52).

This touches on a difficult and related personal inheritance regarding US Jewish families aiding their kin still in Europe under Nazi rule. I grew up in intimate contact with my three grandparents—my father's widowed mother, and both of my mother's parents—including weekly Sabbath meals. My maternal grandmother always told me how my grandfather had helped many family members leave Germany and had helped to support many of them after the war. My grandparents also transmitted the notion that family is central and sacrosanct. My grandfather was generous to me and my brother, as he gave each of us a savings account with money for our college education when we were born. However, he was a very stingy person in general, something he was quite proud of. My brother and I had an image of him as benevolent; we were devastated when he died.

When I was about 30, a relative I liked very much (my grandfather's nephew and my mother's first cousin) told me a very different story about my grandfather. I knew that my grandfather had had a US bank account long before Hitler and, as a result, my mother's family was better off than other refugees. My relative told me that at different times in the mid-to-late 1930s, my grandparents offered affidavits to two different families but in each case, they excluded certain members of that nuclear

family of origin. An affidavit formally promised that the sponsor would take financial responsibility and that the immigrant would not become a burden to the government. In one case, they offered affidavits to my grandfather's youngest sister and her youngest daughter, but not to her husband and her oldest daughter; in the other case, an affidavit was offered for my grandfather's great niece Mia, who was about 6 or 7 years old, but not her parents.

Both families refused these partial offers. The first family got affidavits from a non-Jewish stranger, but Mia and her parents were murdered at Auschwitz. Instead of being generous and altruistic, my grandfather, and to be fair, my grandmother as well, were cold-hearted in a life-and-death situation. They used their money as power, providing affidavits for those whom they approved of, but not for those whom they disliked, for whatever reason. Apparently, other relatives felt my grandparents were to blame for the deaths of little Mia and her parents. I was shaken and stunned by these stories; everything I had been told and believed was upended.

The relative who told me these stories, Manu (Manfred), was the son of my grandfather's beloved oldest sister who had died young from the Spanish flu. Manu had finished his exams to be a lawyer and a judge in Germany shortly after the Nuremberg Laws were passed, in 1935, and, therefore, was banned from practicing the profession for which he had studied for years. He had been active in the Socialist Democratic Party (SDP) and had to flee to Holland because the Nazis wanted to arrest him. He survived in Holland by doing odd jobs completely outside of his training, such as working as an upholsterer or creating displays for store windows.

In light of information I recently gathered, it is clear that my grandfather refused to give Manu an affidavit as well. He was only able to get out of Holland very, very late, in 1939, sponsored by my grandfather's older brother who also lived in San Francisco and very likely had less money than my grandparents. After arriving by ship in NY, Manu needed train fare to get to SF to join the rest of the family. He asked the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) for help. Their policy was that if the person in need had relatives, they first asked the relatives for the funds. My grandfather paid for his nephew's train fare across the country (or reimbursed HIAS). Instead of writing a letter to welcome Manu to the United States, he wrote a scathing one, accusing Manu of scamming and conning him. These stories were deeply shattering and my grandfather's pedestal crumbled into dust. I had nightmares. Why did my grandmother fabricate an image diametrically opposed to what he (and they) actually did? Did she really believe he/they were benevolent? This was yet another transformative loss of childhood innocence, particularly with regard to the belief they had taught me—that one always helps family. I had to confront romanticized notions of my own family and the lies with which I had been brought up.

Kluger's (2001) memoir includes similarly distasteful family stories. Immediately after Ruth and her mother arrived in the US after the war, their sponsoring relative stated that he expected to be repaid for their ship tickets. "In America, we pay our debts," he explained to them (Kluger 2001, p. 177). A few weeks later, these well-off American Jewish relatives who sponsored them invited Ruth and her mother to Thanksgiving dinner. At the dinner, the relatives talked about Ruth's father, a doctor who had fled to France and then was deported and killed. These relatives could have saved her father but they did not feel any compunction to help him because they were related to Ruth's mother, not him. Ruth noted that they had a clear conscience about what they did and did not do. "The dinner was long, the food was rich and the condescension unrelenting," (Kluger 2001, p. 177).

What is the moral of these stories about my grandparents hoarding their money and refusing to save their kin while other refugee families took on extra jobs and took out loans to bring relatives out of Nazi Europe? On a personal level, I had to confront that while I am still grateful to my grandfather for making my college education possible, he and my grandmother had engaged in horrific behavior that sickened me. One broader take-away is that we tend to assign an almost saintly status to Holocaust survivors and people like my grandparents who spent some time under Nazi rule would be considered as such. Some Jews who were victimized by the Nazis were not necessarily kind people to begin with and their experiences did not necessarily change that behavior. Later in my career when I interviewed

Holocaust survivors for a different project, I had to confront this issue head-on—a few people I interviewed were simply flippant, arrogant, or even aggressive. Ruth Kluger (2001, p. 66). wrote “... the cause of survival was almost pure chance. So we few survivors are either the best or the worst.” Surviving the Holocaust should not be equated with agency, smarts, goodness or anything else.

6. Children of Immigrants

In addition to Jake’s life history, my other research project after tenure focused on children of Filipino immigrants in California. That project allowed me to continue my interest in Southeast Asian families after having written about Javanese families (Wolf 1996). When immigration scholars analyzed post-1965 immigrant groups from Asia and Latin America to the US, Filipinos stood out for several reasons. First, they tended to arrive already fluent in English and highly educated; many were professionals. Second, compared with other immigrant groups, they had the lowest rate of welfare recipients and, third, a high rate of home ownership. In other words, they quickly adapted and assimilated into the middle class. Due to the US colonization of the Philippines, their educational system was shaped by the colonizers, and therefore, made their adaptation to American society much easier and faster compared to other immigrant groups.

My initial foray into this research revealed contradictory evidence. High school teachers and counselors with whom I spoke in a Northern Californian city where there is a high concentration of Filipinos told me that their Filipina students excelled and were always the Valedictorians and Salutatorians. (They did not say this about the Filipino male students). However, after parents had pushed them to do well academically, parents then persuaded many of them to stay home and attend a local community college. Given that there are two excellent University of California campuses within an hour or less driving distance of this city, the question became why were parents pushing these young women to excel and then putting on the brakes?

Another piece of this puzzle came from a survey about youth at risk, conducted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in a number of US cities. In the San Diego survey, the CDC found that especially young Filipinas but also young Filipinos had extremely high proportions of suicidal ideation. Thus, one of the most successful middle-class recent immigrant groups, seen as a “model minority”, appeared to have high levels of severe emotional distress among its young. This kind of contradictory evidence needed an explanation that can only come from qualitative research.

I solicited volunteers through the Filipino Student Association at UC Davis and conducted five focus groups. The volunteers were bright and enthusiastic, the kinds of students one wishes to have in a class. I started by my asking them about the meaning of family for Filipinos and they extolled the importance of family in general in Filipino culture. Then, a little later, I told them about the CDC survey findings about extraordinarily high rates of suicidal ideation and asked what they thought and whether they could explain it. Their responses revealed how isolated and desperate some of them felt, trying (and sometimes failing) to live up to their parents’ expectations. Many broke down and cried as they recounted how afraid they were of their parents and how alone and isolated they felt.

The fear of gossip that could shame their families had kept them from sharing these feelings with Filipino friends or relatives and there was absolutely no chance that they would talk with their parents about it. This fear of shaming their families had kept them from seeking help through the counseling services on campus. Some admitted to having had suicidal thoughts and others knew of someone who had been suicidal and some who tried to kill themselves

The focus groups were very intense and heartbreaking. I would sit in my office and cry after each group finished. I cried for them and for myself, understanding deeply those feelings of aloneness and even the suicidal ideation. I also wanted to take care of these wonderful young people somehow. I got in touch with a Filipina therapist in the campus clinic and shared my findings with her. She tried to start a support group in the Filipino student organization but no one responded. Perhaps in some way, as a non-Filipina, I was “safe” in terms of possible gossip and they were able to speak openly about

their feelings. Over the years, I still receive the occasional email from Filipinas who have read my article (Wolf 1997) and want to tell me how strongly it resonated with their family experiences.

7. Shifting to Jewish Families

From 1997 to 1998, my husband, young son and I went to The Hague for one year. At the end of that year, after doing a fair amount of reconnaissance among scholars and community leaders, I began a new project with a very different focus—hidden Jewish children in the Netherlands during World War II. My interest in this topic was sparked years earlier by a Dutch journalist who had found that after the war, the Dutch government did not put great effort into reuniting Jewish children with their families after they had been in hiding, but rather, *withheld* some of them from kin, including parents. Elma Verhay's (1991) research unveiled a shocking and shameful history of the country best known for hiding Anne Frank. While scholars are aware of state-supported kidnapping of indigenous children in settler-colonial countries, such as Australia, Canada and the US, this particular history of keeping Jewish children from their kin was a different kind of kidnapping or stealing.

Initially, I wanted to interview former hidden children who had been at the center of this fight. However, as I began to interview middle-aged former hidden children, I found that even those who returned to their surviving parent (or parents) encountered a great deal of trauma. Therefore, I decided to interview any and all former hidden children regardless of whether they had been involved in this controversy. I focused on their hiding experiences but what became most important was how they recreated and reconstructed family both right after the war, and then later in their adult lives. I analyzed how different kinds of postwar family relationships were formed within foster families, kin, and among friends. I also focused on how they formed their families of procreation as adults. Within my sample, there were a number of people who had been fought over after the war, unbeknownst to them at the time. Sometimes, the fights were between surviving kin on different sides of the family. The State had made the final decision based on the recommendations of the committee mentioned earlier, headed by an orthodox Calvinist lawyer. Most committee members were Protestant and felt that if Jewish children were living in Christian homes, it was God's will. It was not an issue of race, as in the cases of indigenous peoples elsewhere, but of religion and saving Jewish souls that would be damned otherwise.

Over a period of several years, I interviewed 70 former hidden children most of whom lived in the Netherlands and others who lived in the United States and Israel, resulting in the book *Beyond Anne Frank* (Wolf 2007). These former hidden children explained that for them, the wartime period of hiding (either clandestinely or integrated into the family) ranged from being the best time of their childhood to a few terrible situations, but most felt that their hiding time was bearable. However, unlike concentration camp survivors, their trauma began *after* the war: "My war began after the war," was a familiar refrain. Those who had a parent or parents who survived told heart-wrenching stories of not recognizing them after a two-year separation when they were quite young. Surviving parents returned with open arms and their children ran from them, screaming, often to their hiding mother who they thought was their mother. Almost all of the participants cried when telling their stories, remembering their terror as children as well as their post-war situation. It was impossible not to tear up or cry with them sometimes.

What ensued in reconstructed biological families when both parents survived was a reconfiguration of separate individuals who were somehow connected, but not at all close. Participants explained that at that time, as young children, they were angry at their parents for abandoning them and for taking them away from their foster family. They did not trust their parents not to leave them again. Parents were also survivors of either hiding or concentration camps and had to put their entire lives back together, from finding a place to live to earning a living. We now know that the postwar Dutch government kept the stolen Jewish property of the small percentage of survivors who returned. Jewish survivors were unable to reclaim their apartments or their savings. Thus, parents were extremely occupied with basic survival.

Notions of “bonding” are contemporary social constructions and generally, at that time in history, that is, after the war, most adults discounted children’s emotions and their memories. Most parents did not ask their children about their experiences. Some of these parents claimed that **their** wartime experiences were much worse than their children’s, creating a hierarchy of suffering. The parents who had more children after the war seemed to be closer to them than to their prewar children. Reconstructed biological families of origin never worked again emotionally for the hidden children in the cases where both parents survived, about one-third of my sample. They were considered “lucky” by other hidden children, but they were very unhappy.

My sample included many who former hidden children who were orphaned after the war and then placed in Jewish orphanages. Some of the orphanages were cold and punishing whereas others were more caretaking. The orphans created their own families amongst themselves, relationships that lasted their entire lifetimes. At that time, assumptions about gender were such that if only a father survived, the child was treated as an orphan and sent to an orphanage, unless or until he remarried. If only a widowed mother survived, her children were returned to her. Such gendered assumptions were challenged when a few of those mothers were unable to care for their children, including one who committed suicide.

Hidden children who were orphaned were sometimes reunited with aunts or uncles and joined their families, but they all felt like step-children compared with their cousins. Some were very unhappy with their relatives and one was removed due to her aunt’s abuse. The only family groupings that seemed to go well for the hidden children were among those who stayed with their Christian hiding family and were later told about their parents and their Jewish heritage, as well as those whose widowed mothers did not remarry. However, taken together, these add up to perhaps 10 percent of my sample. Among the majority of my sample, their family experiences with any and all kin after the war were very problematic if not very negative. In three out of four cases where they gained a step-parent, they were sexually abused (two girls and one boy). These instances suggest that we should put aside all assumptions about reunited families after war or genocide, relationships, including Jewish families.

In this research, I was struck by how the majority of these 70 survivors managed to somehow cobble together a decent if not good life, including a good family life, after having suffered so many traumas. Only a small number of them were emotionally disabled and never fully functioned as adults. However, the ability of the vast majority to carry on is what I termed “tender resilience,” meaning that they were seemingly well-adapted people who bore some traumatic scars. Most of them had some ongoing fears or problems such as insomnia or anxiety that flared up in certain situations, but they were highly functional and some were successful professionals. The vast majority had reasonably satisfying marriages, nice family lives and good work lives or occupations, or at least two of those three.

When I began this project, I could not have known its personal relevance to me but the underlying question of how one constructs and reconstructs family after a cataclysmic disaster has been the leitmotif of my life for decades. Family has always been very important to me and I have tried to cobble together a “chosen family” consisting of friends and relatives, and have had the joy and worries of having my own family of procreation. Similar to the majority of former hidden children who displayed “tender resilience,” I too carry my scars close to the surface and am easily “triggered” in my daily life by all kinds of things that can make me very sad and even tearful. But I am also a high-functioning person who has managed, somehow, to put together a meaningful life.

When my son was perhaps about 6 years old, I was reading to him in bed at night and must have laughed at something in the book or something we talked about. He said, “Mommy, you laugh too much!” and of course that made me laugh even more. He could not have known how deeply that touched me. While I have wonderful memories of my father laughing, I do not have any such memories of my mother. Smiling, yes, but not laughing, and certainly not with me. Some 20 years later, I still treasure my son’s words.

The hidden children project was the most significant and rewarding research I have done thus far. Many of those I interviewed thanked me because no one had ever interviewed them about their

post-war experiences as hidden children. If they were interviewed for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project, they were not asked much about their post-war lives and some reported even being cut off. Others had not been able to talk about their past until recent years and their interview with me was their first experience of going into depth. The interviews were very emotionally intense, similar to a long, condensed therapy session in many cases.

I have experienced abandonment, separation, aloneness, and loss, up close and personal. These traumatizing events have left their mark on me and I carry them into the field just as I carry them elsewhere. They create what anthropologist Shannon Speed (2021, p. 16) calls “embodied knowledge.” Over the years, many friends and colleagues told me that they would not have been able to undertake this kind of project because of the harrowing stories. That was hard for me to understand as I felt so “at home” with the materials and liked the intensity of emotions involved. This all felt very natural and normal to me due to my embodied knowledge.

In addition, my embodied knowledge contributed to the kinds of questions I knew to ask. My gentle probing allowed many participants to mine feelings that normally are protected or closed off in their crypt, deep down in their memory palace. It also helped me to engage with their emotions compassionately. Speed would argue that this embodied knowledge gave me a deeper understanding of the hidden children’s experiences and ultimately, contributed to knowledge production.

Many of the former hidden children’s narratives played a similar role for me personally, as did Jake’s history. They were extremely painful stories and the majority were simply unimaginable. Like Jake’s history, I often felt as though my personal history paled by comparison. Writing this article has forced me to consider whether working with these sorrowful and often heartbreaking histories helped me cope with my own past. Was it a way to remind myself constantly that life dealt worse fates to others? Was it a way to displace my own story and focus on others? In some strange sense, I am now wondering whether working with these materials allowed me to legitimately feel upset but not about myself. Analyzing the narratives and writing the book was an emotionally laden experience because of the nature of the materials, but I thrived with that intensity.

8. Trauma and Resiliency after the Shoah

I began my next project where the last one ended, with an interest in resiliency, because of the unexpected number and proportion of former hidden children in my sample who were very high-functioning. As I was casting about for a more specific focus, I began reading the extensive literature on and by children of Holocaust survivors, also known as the “second generation.” The early scholarly literature in the US came from psychologists and psychiatrists who noticed that the majority of their patients were young adult children of Holocaust survivors. They defined the maladies observed as a kind of post-Holocaust syndrome absorbed by offspring from their survivor-parents, usually their mothers. These early definitions evolved into a discourse of trauma, the intergenerational transmission of trauma and PTSD.

In the vast literature on and by children of Holocaust survivors, it has become commonplace to focus on pathologies and assume that the second generation is traumatized due to the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Without doubt, some survivors were irrevocably traumatized by their Holocaust experiences and created highly dysfunctional family relationships that left severe, long-lasting emotional scars among their offspring. However, the majority, although not without scars, managed to piece together their lives and create new families. However, while some writings presume a widespread intergenerational transmission of trauma among children of survivors (COS), it is impossible to generalize because only a minority of COS are included in those studies. Much, if not most, of the research had been based on self-selected samples, often from psychologists’ patients or a clinic, with a few exceptions. Robust quantitative research using control groups in multiple countries—Israel, the US, and Canada—has **not** found significant differences between COS and their peers in terms of any indicators connected to trauma, nor has a meta-study that compiled all data from

all studies of this particular group (Van IJzendoorn et al. 2003). However, these findings are largely ignored by many in this field (Danieli et al. 2017; Stein 2014).

In the Humanities, much of the literature on COS is located in Memory Studies, an interdisciplinary field. My research on the intergenerational transmission of trauma within the families of Holocaust survivors attempts to marry a qualitative evidence-based social science approach with concepts from the Memory Studies literature. However, Memory Studies focuses almost entirely on trauma to the exclusion of other kinds of emotions. For example, postmemory (Hirsch 2001) a central concept in Memory Studies, initially was developed to refer to the experiences of the Holocaust that children of Holocaust survivors inherit from their parents, a structure of transmission, but its main focus is trauma. Indeed, most of the Memory Studies literature presumes trauma and does not question its existence.

My current research is based on an analysis of 35 interviews of COS focused on their parents and their upbringing (Wolf 2019).¹ Respondents were volunteers from the Hartford synagogues and Jewish community. In the interviews, respondents described their parents' histories, how their parents dealt with the Holocaust and what their family lives were like. The interview was loosely structured with a few broad questions, but none about trauma. Curiously, trauma was barely mentioned. A few participants described behaviors that strongly suggest that a parent was traumatized, but overall, it was far from prevalent. One could counter this absence of trauma by pointing out that this was a self-selected sample and highly traumatized COS may not have wanted to volunteer for this research. However, despite self-selection, which is prevalent in most research on COS, I would argue that the absence of trauma either directly or indirectly, is significant.

My analysis of the interviews suggests while a minority of survivor-parents may have transmitted some or all of their Holocaust trauma, they also transmitted other emotions that became memories as well, including love, affection, humor, family rituals at birthdays and holidays, and the like. Trauma was not necessarily the sole and persistently dominant family memory among this group of COS. Any transmitted trauma may co-exist alongside what Ann Rigney (2018) has termed memories of positivities. Memories are dynamic and the respective dominance or persistence of any of them can change over time during the life course.

After hearing my presentation at a conference, Marianne Hirsch, author of the concept of postmemory and a child of Holocaust survivors, told me that the positive memories I discussed are nostalgia. She dismissed any memories of positivities as embellished, but accepted memories of trauma as authentic. Thus far, I have received positive reactions to my findings and arguments from people who come from two different groups—psychologists who feel that some COS readily adopt the diagnosis of PTSD when it is not appropriate, and some children of Holocaust survivors who appreciate my contention that they are not necessarily and completely traumatized, and welcome more nuance and a fuller picture of themselves and their families' lives.

I still wonder why I am so invested in an outcome that goes beyond trauma. Claiming trauma is ubiquitous in US popular discourse but in my view, the intergenerational transmission of trauma among COS has been overstated and non-traumatic outcomes have not been researched sufficiently. The epigenetic research on COS and trauma (Yehuda et al. 2000) is used widely by some popular writers as "fact" and "proof" that COS were born with trauma in their bones and blood (Rosner 2017, p. 149). However, there is no proof that that COS have this epigenetic trait and the research is not claiming any kind of emotional or biological destiny. In fact, it is highly conditional—some COS may have this epigenetic (note, not 'genetic') make-up that could lead to a reaction of trauma in certain circumstances. However, Yehuda makes it clear that consciousness can deflect a traumatic reaction.

What exactly is propelling this insistence of trauma among COS? During the 1970s, children of Holocaust survivors found each other and started a movement, inspired by those of oppressed minority

¹ The interviews came from the project "In Our Own Voices" at the University of Hartford, under the direction of Dr. Avinoam Patt who generously shared the videos and transcripts with me.

populations and identity politics (Stein 2014). Alleging trauma may bestow a form of victimhood on COS which was in keeping with the different racial-ethnic movements in the 1970s. However, Ashkenazi American Jews have white privilege, whether they feel they are white or not. Insisting on their trauma and the resultant victimhood may be a mechanism that denies or at least obscures the white privilege enjoyed by those particular American Jews today.

Back to the more personal sub-texts, it is reasonable to ask: were my parents traumatized by the Holocaust? Am I a prime example of the intergenerational transmission of trauma? With regard to my parents, I do not see a direct link between the Holocaust and their suicides. It is possible that becoming refugees and settling in a new land with a different culture exacerbated certain underlying dynamics that existed before Hitler came to power, but only indirectly. Fleeing their home country and living in a new country where families were not as tightly knit put more pressure on both of my parents from their parents which could not be dispersed or shared because they were only children. Clearly, there are other issues and dynamics involved but due to space limitations, I cannot elaborate on them here.

Only very recently have I wondered whether I am traumatized. While I readily admit that as a result of my parents' suicides, I am "messed up," I have never even considered using the language of trauma. What does resonate with me is the language in the theme of a Granta (Gilmore et al. 1991) edition almost 30 years ago: *The Family: They fuck you up*. But nothing new there. My feelings of loss can be overwhelming at times, and it does not take much to trigger these feelings. My husband tells me that I wake him up at least once a week, yelling or screaming in my sleep. Even if I am traumatized, and I probably am, it is a label I resist embracing because in contemporary North American culture, it is linked to victimhood (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Perhaps my research on memories of positivities has been an unconscious way to shift my historical lens and find a counterbalance to this heavy weight.

9. Closing Thoughts

All in all, my research has served to challenge assumptions about families. Families are not necessarily sites of cohesion, consensus, or strategic planning; families are not necessarily altruistic toward their kin, even in dire situations. Jewish families reunited after the war were not sites of comfort or connection for hidden children and Holocaust survivors are not saints. The resiliency of former hidden children is impressive, as are the positive family memories among children of Holocaust survivors where some have assumed there is only trauma. Trauma is not necessarily the only family inheritance among children of Holocaust survivors; it is joined by other memories, including positive ones.

In terms of the effects of other aspects of my personal life on my professional life, I have been a leading activist for better parental leave policies on my campus. After those policies were created, I became a Work-Life Advisor, helping pregnant or adoptive faculty members navigate their parental benefits. I became a certified postpartum doula a year ago and started a new program at my university, a support group for faculty parents of young children, to help them strategize about combining parenting with the demands of academia. I take great pleasure in supporting others during this vulnerable and stressful time in their lives; I wish that had been available when I had my child. It is time to turn away from the heaviness of the Holocaust, and focus on more life-affirming work.

Writing this article has been painful at times, thinking back to my parents' suicides and my younger self, but revelatory as well, in terms of personal connections to my research. I hope that this writing experiment helped me shed some baggage, but it is too early to know. Writing this essay has also made me very uneasy. I was trained to think about broader structures and inequalities, not to do "me-search." Of course, we are all very present in our research process and that needs to be acknowledged to some extent, but I am uncomfortable with center stage in this venue. I keep asking "so what?" How does my personal relationship to my scholarship contribute to knowledge? Being a witness to loss in my own life has allowed me to collaborate with those I interviewed to encourage their own witnessing, eliciting stories of loss but also stories of resilience. I have used my own story as a strategy and methodology to create new knowledge and to practice a more compassionate sociology.

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