

By Rachel Schon

Before I commenced the workshops, I had mixed feelings regarding what it meant to be a 'third generation Holocaust descendant'. In some ways I doubted the term and felt that I had no right, sixty years after the event, to connect myself and my comfortable lifestyle to the horrors experienced by those who had gone before me. However, I could not shake off the feeling that the knowledge of my grandmother Sophie's loss and experience was an important part of me, even the source of many of my deepest held convictions. Yet apart from this surface awareness my own response to the Shoah was something I had never really explored or given the space it deserved.

Therefore, when I saw the poster advertising the 3GH workshops at the Wiener library, I knew instantly that this was something I wanted to involve myself in. Approximately a month later, a group of about eleven of us gathered in Bloomsbury. It was amazing in itself simply to be brought together with others with the same history, yet this alone would have not been enough to encourage the depth of reflection which was to come. I was impressed by the inclusive yet challenging style of facilitation; instantly we were encouraged to touch on personal issues and not to hold back from expressing our feelings as accurately as possible, through drama, art and writing. Our first major 'activity' was to spend some time thinking about what being a third generation descendant meant to us with the aid of an A3 sheet and some pastels, and then to present this to the group as a whole.

For me this was a very productive, exciting and difficult hour. I was able to for the first time connect all those parts of my life which seemed to me charged with the legacy of my grandmother's experience. Many issues came up: family- both close and those scattered in the search for asylum, identity- Jewish and otherwise, anti-Semitism, the importance of social action, faith in humanity (or its absence), feelings on the subject of Israel/Palestine and a strong sense of 'there but for fortune go I'. Also exciting was the experience of both presenting my thoughts and hearing different responses drawing upon the experience of others. At the end of the first session I left disturbed by the subject matter, stimulated by the day's reflections, and mindful of the challenges I faced in reconciling the many questions which had surfaced.

Help with my own personal journey came from reading, and served as a supplement to the discussions which took place in the workshops. I am a student of theology and religious studies, and over the time the workshops took place I had the task of writing an essay on the subject of forgiveness. Unsurprisingly I wished to approach this subject with the Shoah in mind and spent time reading Simon Wiesenthal's 'The Sunflower'. This tells of Wiesenthal's concentration camp encounter with a dying SS man who begged him for forgiveness, and contains the reflections of many eminent scholars, religious and otherwise, on the appropriate reaction in such a circumstance. Entirely by coincidence I had newly discovered in a charity shop another text which I found very meaningful,

and this was 'An Interrupted Life: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943'. Etty was a young Jewish woman in her late twenties who lived in Amsterdam until her 1943 death in Auschwitz and who developed a very outward looking philosophy in response to the events taking place around her.

In addition to my reading, I spent time researching the personalities of my great-grandparents and finding details related to their deportation. An emotional evening saw me finding both distressing details relating to their murders and also new information regarding a commemoration of their lives by the citizens of the Austrian village, Mödling, from which they came. I found these findings hard to assimilate because both represented information which Sophie had never known. In some ways I felt that I therefore had a responsibility to process the new discoveries not only for myself but also for her.

Personally, I was deeply touched by the commemorations in Mödling. I had always thought of my great-grandparents as having been erased by history, forgotten by all save their own family. Yet the evidence I had found online showed that somewhere outside of our homes, they had been thought of and even been given a permanent memorial, something hitherto denied them. Brass 'Stolpersteine' [stumbling stones] listing their names, dates of birth and deportation had been placed outside their former home. The sculptor responsible, Gunter Demnig, has laid 11,000 such memorials in Germany and Austria with the intention that people should literally 'stumble' across his work in the street and so be constantly reminded of the individual cost of the Shoah.

In some ways the effort by Mödling seemed too little, too late, coming as it did one year after Sophie's death who was surely the one person to whom the memorial might have had real significance. I also knew that, ironically, in death my great-grandparents were now the lucky ones, and in many ways that their individual memorials symbolically represented all 62,000 Austrian Jews who were sent to death camps. I was conscious of a very mixed set of emotions within me, yet the one thing I could unreservedly be glad of was that Sophie had never known the information I had uncovered relating to their deaths.

Having spent this evening it was clear that my family's history was something capable of provoking a very deep and important response within me. Yet I still did not know how best to respond to the emotions that had been generated. This was something which the workshops were able to help me with, especially with regard to sharing experiences with others in similar situations. At the second workshop, we took part in an activity which attempted to map our 'group response' to our status as third generation members. After a slow start, this became a very exciting process with many thoughts being expressed particularly about Jewish identity in the light of the Holocaust. Not being brought up Jewish myself, this was something I found quite hard to identify with, although I could certainly understand its provenance. However, I could not lose the feeling that an appropriate

response to the phenomenon of racial genocide could only be to reach out beyond boundaries of ethnicity and religion. Indeed, the central theme which emerged from our group work was the importance of our shared future, and our roles as young people in influencing this future.

Slowly I came to the realization that the only constructive response to being a member of the third generation was a moral one. Most people are shielded from the reality of evil taking place in the world, yet for us the Shoah was a part of our history and something that we could never lose. Reading 'The Sunflower' had impressed upon me the truth that the awful events which took place at that time could not be explained simply by blaming the reality of evil on 'the other'. The events of the Holocaust go beyond blame being attached simply to individuals- in some sense all of society shares the guilt, simply for facilitating a climate in which such crimes continue to take place. As the third generation, with the privilege of being somewhat more distanced from events than either our parents or grandparents, I felt with others that we were the first to have the space to reflect and make unforced decisions about how we wanted to lead our lives, always in the light of the real experience of the relatives that we had known and loved. And for me, this showed itself as a moral imperative, influenced by the thought of Etty Hillesum and beautifully expressed by Pastor Martin Niemoeller:

'First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out, because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the communists and I did not speak out, because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out, because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me, and there was no-one left to speak out for me.'