

By Tom Friedemann

Often, if you've grown up with something unusual in your family, you only come to realise it's not the norm later on in life; when it dawns on you that this isn't something everyone else has. In retrospect I don't think that I can remember there ever being a time when having a holocaust survivor for a grandparent was something I felt comfortable about or that I assumed was normal. While it was only much later that I realised that this fact somehow set me apart, specifically that it entailed my being Jewish, there was always a sense that this thing was darkly unusual. I'm not sure if it was the mild taboo of raising the topic with my Grandma or the lack of knowledge that resulted from her silence that fuelled my fascination with the topic but either way the Holocaust became something that was never too far from my thoughts.

Unlike other parts of my family, I can't claim to have had grandparents who stole bread from the dinning table only to horde it away in a bedroom wardrobe as a result of starvation in the camps. My Grandma was rescued on the Kindertransport but her reluctance to talk about her old life in Germany and the mystery of what happened to much of her family carried a sort of quiet trauma of its own. Certainly the pain of not knowing has been harder on my mother than on me as she's a generation closer to it but I think this is the sort of thing that echoes down the generations. I now feel, however, that the mystery was something that had to be maintained by my Grandma as a coping strategy. According to the Yad Vashem archives there is little mystery about the essential details of what happened to my Great Grandparents (that they were deported to Kaunas Lithuania and shot on arrival) and my Grandma's brother traced my Great Grandparents' deportation long before my parents ever began researching. Yet only a few years ago, in one of the few conversations about the subject I remember my Grandma being present for, I distinctly recall her claiming not to know what had ever happened to her parents in such a way as to question not the circumstance of their murders but if they had even died in the camps. I can only assume that this and her near refusal to talk about her upbringing or journey to this country is her method of coping and something that I can't ever be critical of. Perhaps in some way she was also trying to protect my mother as she grew up, as it seems she told my Granddad a little more; about being made to give the Nazi salute in school or of her father and brother being arrested by the authorities and returning having been beaten. Since I know very little about what my Grandma actually experienced I think my mother and I have tended to empathise more with what she ultimately lost rather than what she witnessed.

The small amount of knowledge I had weighed heavily on my mind. At primary school age I'd been told that my 'Grandma's parents made sure she escaped from the Nazis but that they didn't get out in time' and so I carried an image in my mind of German soldiers bursting in through the front door of my Grandma's house, her parents bundling her out of the back door while being grabbed themselves. Gradually I was able to educate myself about the Holocaust; through reading books about it in the school library when we were supposed to be reading fiction or secretly watching Schindlers List when my parents had decided I was too young to see it. This process of educating myself about the Holocaust is something that continues to the present as I'm currently an M.A History student.

There has however been another outcome of trying to comprehend this aspect of my family background and this has been to do with my Jewish identity. For a long time I knew that what had happened to my Grandma and her family was the result of them being Jewish but being brought up in rural Suffolk we were as assimilated and married out as possible and I had no idea what being Jewish was. While I can understand my Grandma's desire to integrate once she was in England, I've never understood why, unlike her cousin and brother (who later emigrated), she didn't integrate into the Jewish community. At my overtly Christian primary school I remember being confused upon hearing that Jesus was 'king of the Jews' in assembly and I also was aware that my Grandma looked noticeably different to most people. However because of my Grandma's thick German accent I initially came to mistake being Jewish as something German. On rare occasions we would go and visit our only Jewish relatives in the country and would see Jewish objects and then dream in sepia about the people I'd seen in family photographs. It was a long time before I discovered that I was Jewish according to Jewish law and by the time I got to A-level I had a strong desire to find out more about this group of people. At university I had my first encounters with organised Jewish life and while at first I wanted to experience Judaism because I hoped it would connect me to my lost family I eventually gained a deep love of Judaism itself. I would however say that wanting to become more Jewish has probably always had something to do with wanting to somehow undo the Holocaust. As well as travelling to Israel a couple of times I've also adopted some Jewish observances; mainly celebrating the major Jewish holidays and putting on Friday night meals for my family when I'm at home. While my attachment to Judaism has certainly taken on a life of its own unrelated to the Holocaust, if ever my enthusiasm shows any signs of waning the thought of all those who died because they were Jewish and were unable to continue being so undoubtedly reinvigorates me.

Finally getting to meet other people from a third generation background as part of the seminars at the Weiner Library, I found for the first time people who had had the same experiences as me. Certainly the sense of not knowing was a common experience among many of us and I think we felt naturally endeared towards one another because of it. Reflecting back on the Holocaust now I think I view it on many different levels; some personal, some historical and some religious. Despite being surrounded by non-Jews in my upbringing and everyday life I still can't help feeling that the Holocaust and anti-Semitism is something that happens where Jews and non-Jews meet. What I have come to feel quite strongly is that since my third generation status seems to have become such a big part of me I have to try and take something positive from it. Yet being third generation itself has never really felt like a particularly useful or promising identity, being Jewish on the other hand somehow has much more appeal and I've never really lost my sense of wonder about the lost generations that came before me. Now I feel that the human loss and misery of the Holocaust can never be undone, healed or made up for, my Grandma's suffering can never be reversed and humanity will always be scarred by what it did to itself during the Holocaust. However I do feel that the Jewish people collectively can recover from this episode; they won't ever be able to go back to how things were before the Holocaust but as a cultural, spiritual and national group they can and are regaining their former strength.

