Broken Identity.
The Impact of the Holocaust on Identity in Romanian and Polish Jews

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Abstract: The paper is based on interviews conducted with Holocaust survivors in Poland (30 interviews) and Romania (55 interviews). It describes how the Holocaust affected survivor identity. Two aspects of identity are analyzed — the sense of personal identity and social identity. Each affects the other but they are largely independent and the trauma of the Holocaust impacted each of them differently. Personal identity seems to be unrelated to either the type of trauma or the survivor's social situation. There are no significant differences in that aspect between Polish and Romanian survivors. Social identity is more related to the survivors' social situation prior to and after the trauma. The sense of identity, both personal and social, is dynamic and changes over time.

This paper is based on interviews conducted with Holocaust survivors in Poland (30 interviews) and Romania (55 interviews). For findings, “snowball sampling” was used. This unrandomized method is often used in the study of a social group with difficult access. The recommendations of the Jewish organization of Holocaust survivors was helpful. Later on the first respondents asked their acquaintances to participate in the study. For that study a structured questionnaire was designed. Questions covered the life history of the respondent and his/her family. The interviews were analyzed using Rosenthal's methods (1), that is the hermeneutical case reconstruction, texts are analyzed for meaning in the context of the entire text. For evaluation of the interviews the representative principle was used (2).

It is well-known that the name is very important in Jewish tradition. According to the ancient Semites, the name not only serves to distinguish one person from another but also defines the person's personality and acts as an ideal model, a personality and vital paradigm. Hence anything which has no name does not exist and people who have no name are deprived of all significance. According to these traditional notions, the name corresponds with a person's very nature and his or her qualities. This is even true of God whose name is synonymous with glory and power. When God created Earth he first gave names to everything he brought to life. The first man, the first woman and their children were also given names which were potent with meaning. This naming process has two aspects, it "distinguishes a person from other people" and it "is part of a person's personality." These two aspects are called sense of personal identity and sense of social identity. Each affects the other but they are largely independent and the trauma of the Holocaust impacted each of them differently. In this article I am going to describe how the Holocaust affected survivor identity and I am going to do so on the basis of interviews which I conducted with Holocaust survivors in Poland and Romania.

Personal Identity

“When the Heavens above had no name, when the Earth below had no name (...) and no name had a name and no destiny was destined then the first Gods were born.”

“Enuma elisz,” an ancient Babylonian text

“The man gave unto his wife the name of Eve (Chawwa) because she had become the mother of all living beings.”

Gen 3, 20.

One of the most important aspects of personal iden-
tity is the sense of continuity of the self throughout the life span, the sense of always being the same person (3) and the continuity of individual experience (4). One of identity’s major functions is to integrate individual experience. From as early as Freud, researchers have striven to discover how intense a stimulus must be to “break through the protective barrier” (5). According to Lifton (6), more than anything else trauma affects the self-structure and that injury to the self leads to other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as psychological numbing, survivor guilt, various forms of splitting, dissociation and doubling. In his psycho-formative theory he says that survivors are confronted with the task of reintegrating the self by developing new intrinsic forms which encompass the trauma.

Holocaust survivors often mention a caesura dividing their personhood and their life into before and after the trauma. This sense of complete discontinuity is well-illustrated in a fragment of an interview with a survivor: “I was born on that train and I died on that train” (7). The survivors I myself interviewed were children or adolescents prior to and during the trauma. For these men and women the beginning of the trauma usually signified the end of childhood: “Fourteen months ago I was a fourteen-and-a-half-year-old girl. Now I was going home as a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old adult” (Sonia Patty on her return from Transnistria) (8).

One of the important things about the Holocaust is that this was not a brief, isolated traumatic event but a trauma which lasted for several years. In such cases as this we can speak of a traumatic process and of attempts to salvage at least part of the self during the process. In their accounts of the traumatic period the survivors often explained that in order to survive they lived in two worlds and that this “double self” helped them to survive the war. In some survivors this splitting within the self is expressed in the feeling that “that happened to somebody else” or in their current “double” life — living at once in actual reality and in their “second self.” One Birkenau survivor told me that during his whole stay in the concentration camp he and other prisoners fantasized about life outside the camp. “One did not work in Birkenau. There were roll-calls and selections. We knew that we would be selected either for work in Germany or for the crematorium. We incessantly talked about food. Most of us were from wealthy families and we talked about what we used to eat at home at weddings and feast days. Another recurrent theme was what will happen if we survive” (Ol). Even today when this survivor sees bread in the supermarket he immediately remembers the ration of bread he received at concentration camp.

In the words of a survivor from Poland who had been in the ghetto and then hidden on the Aryan side: “It’s come to this that every form of violence ... When I think that someone is killing a flying butterfly I immediately think about the Germans who killed people. All these acts of violence on nature. When I’m at the park and see a child pulling leaves from a tree I want to tell it off. But I don’t because the mother is nearby. So I think to myself, ‘It’s just as if you pulled a baby’s head off.’ It’s very tiring, it’s as if I were forever living back in those days, you know” (St). “Often when I am walking in the street or even sitting at home (...) I read about something trivial, somebody threw something at someone, or apologized to someone, and all of a sudden I see a scene from the ghetto before my eyes. And I no longer know what I am reading” (Ja). “It accompanies me all the time. I cannot get rid of it” (Ja).

It is important to remember that the material we are analyzing here, i.e., interviews conducted many years after the trauma, was gleaned from survivors. These men and women experienced trauma which often lasted many years and they have adjusted to life after the trauma. The interviewees often pointed out that they survived “by chance.” The importance which they attribute to this expression may have something to do with guilt and the oft-repeated question “why me?” “When I visited families, parents who lost their children I always felt that they were thinking, ‘Why did you survive and mine did not?’ They never actually said this but I could feel it. (...) I keep asking myself why I survived and I keep looking for an answer but I have never found one. I see it as destiny. Everyone has a destiny of some sort” (Ja).

These same individuals often told me that will power, the wish to live and faith in survival were important survival factors. We know that people who lost hope were less likely to survive. Another important factor was retention of at least a bit of “normality” which helped to maintain sense of continuity. A
survivor from Transnistria said: "This bit of normal life, this light which gave me great pleasure, was the school which a teacher from Campulung organized. She divided the children into groups and gave them lessons. Not every day but every second day I think. But it was school nevertheless. We had math, French, history, geography and zoology. This was more than normal, it was quite fantastic" (Sa). The teacher herself recalls that she wanted the children to feel that they were at school. "What did the school look like? A table, and beside it a desk and beside that a bed on which my dying father lay and me the teacher. I tried to create an atmosphere which would help the children feel that they were at school" (Fr).

One quite extraordinary testimony is the following account of a ballet dancer who was sent to Vapniarka, a camp in Transnistria, together with a group of Jewish intellectuals who had been accused of communism. "This was an extermination camp. People died of typhoid and then the next group would be brought in. (...) From morning to evening we had a program prepared by this group of Jews, most of them intellectuals, artists. We had a separate building and a separate administration. (...) Cultural life in Vapniarka was fantastic. I can’t imaging it being organized better anywhere else. We had this program from morning to evening. With walk time, and lecture time, and singing time, and story-telling time. We had no books so we told each other stories and had discussions. One would talk about Shakespeare, another would tell us about one of Sadoveanu’s novels. (...) I danced regularly at our barrack. If anyone from outside happened to come by he was appalled. We looked like corpses, very skinny. (...) A violinist who had worked with a symphony orchestra played so that I could dance. I danced various things just to clapping or rhythm beating. We were never bored. We were like a family. Everybody helped everybody else. We kept so clean that nobody got typhoid" (Es).

We can say that to survive the trauma one had to have a sense of continuity, to retain part of the self. This could only be done by splitting into the part which remained in the reality of the concentration camp and the part which went on living just as one had lived before.

Not only did the present interviewees survive the trauma, they also managed to adjust to life after the war. Nearly every one of my interlocutors had a relative who had committed suicide. Some of them had attempted suicide themselves. "My mother committed suicide on the twentieth anniversary of the uprising in the Targu Mures ghetto" (Gh). During the interview this respondent recalled a fact he had apparently forgotten, i.e., his own attempt to hang himself just after he returned from the German camp to his now Jew-less hometown. What role did the sense of radical change within the self and loss of identity play in this decision to take his life, one wonders. The importance of this factor is testified by the following excerpt from a letter written by a 21-year-old man who committed suicide after three years in Transnistria: "Now, I think, I am a man in the full sense of this word. Within two years, unfortunately, my life advanced in great strides. I know more about life than I would have were I to have lived a hundred years. In this short time I gradually, gradually ‘managed’ to lose faith in man whom I had once considered a higher being but now I know that he is a beast. (...), I have become introspective and understand myself better than anytime before. Engaging in self-talk I discovered that I am not who I thought I was, I have become disappointed with myself and with you not once but many, many times" (9). Those who survived mention a process which they underwent, a process of reconstructing their trust in themselves and the world around them. "I understood that it is very difficult to get to know a person except in special situations when we really get to know him. I also began to analyze my own reactions in this sense. (...) To wonder what I would have done in this or that situation. You ask me if I trust other people but that means that I do not trust myself either. And that’s how I came to the conclusion that I do trust people because I know that no-one is completely good or completely evil" (Li).

Some survivors mention a sense of change of self, a change which is at odds with their previous life path and their previous moral system. Langer calls this the “impromptu self” (7). This applies to both life in the camp and after liberation. One survivor of a German camp told me how he and a group of friends toured Germany attacking and beating chance travellers. "I was in a rather savage state. We travelled with sticks and cleansed the trains of Germans" (Gh). This same respondent also told me how
important it was for him to maintain his dignity in the camp: “There was this organization in the camp. Somebody contacted me and suggested that I share half of my bread ration with the sick. I agree and this was a source of great support for me. The feeling that I was human, that I was able to control my hunger” (Gh). This is consistent with many other recollections of the strength which could be gleaned from maintaining one’s identity: “I never broke the fast (Yom Kipur). We sat down to the tables and nobody ate. The SS-man said, ‘What’s going on here? What are you folks up to with this food?’ It was bean soup that day. And he held his bayonet right beside me. Without even looking at my sister I told him that if he wanted to kill me he was welcome but so what? I wasn’t going to eat! My sister didn’t touch her food either. Others began to eat. He didn’t kill me. (…)

With such ambition I could move head on …” (Ry).

To return to the significance of names, the Holocaust experience shows how threatening deprivation of one’s name could be. This was perceived as an assault on one’s identity: “We were taken to the men’s camp ‘E’. Nobody asked us our names, or what town we were from, or even what country we had been deported from. This bored Feldwebel who was guarding the entrance simply jotted down +465 in a ledger. (…) This was entirely unexpected. We knew that we could be deprived of various things: acquired wealth, acquired rights, pleasure and freedom, peace and happiness. But as long as you live nobody can deprive you of your name. That’s what we thought. (…) When the first person in our group died and was thrown onto a trolley together with ten other corpses which had been collected from other barracks, without even asking who it was, what his name was, what part of Europe he came from, that was that, we had been stripped of our identity” (10).

The Jews who crossed the Dniester were also deprived of their identity cards. “At the bank of the river Dniester stood a group of Romanian gendarmes who told us to throw any documents we had into the basket. From then on we had no identity and anyone could be an anonymous victim of all sorts of aggression.” The author of this recollection described how, in an act of despair, he had handed his medical diploma to a Romanian army officer who was also a doctor. “A year later here comes a soldier sent by this doctor to give me back my diploma. A little light in the darkness of Transnistria!” (11).

The survivors often mentioned how they felt that they had changed completely after the trauma and this seems to be unrelated to either the type of trauma or the survivor’s social situation prior to and after the trauma. It has to do with the very nature of trauma. There are no significant differences between Polish and Romanian survivors. What is more, this change is “universal” and is associated with various kinds of trauma. For example, dissociation within the self has been closely analyzed in victims of family violence. The similarity is probably due to the victims’ age — their weakness, vulnerability and total helplessness. According to research quoted by Herman (12), trauma has a particularly devastating effect on children and adolescents who are unable to adjust and develop personal identities.

Social Identity

“Don’t jump while it’s moving, name David. You’re a name that dooms to defeat, given to no one, and homeless, too heavy to bear in this land. Let your son have a Slavic name, for here they count hairs on the head, for here they tell good from evil by names and by eyelids’ shape.”

Wisława Szymborska, “Still”

According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity can be defined as the sense of belonging to specific social groups associated with emotional meaning (13). In the case of Holocaust survivors we need to ask how the traumatic experience affected their sense of belonging to such groups as Jews, Poles and Romanians. My interviewees basically belong to three groups depending on their affiliative wartime experiences:

1. Individuals who survived the whole war as Jews. They were submitted to anti-Semitic legislation, were in concentration camps or ghettos, or were deported. All my respondents from Romania belong to this category.

2. Individuals who survived at least part of the war
on “Aryan papers.” They had to conceal their origins.

3. Individuals who were young children during the war. Their recollections of wartime are either fragmentary or nonexistent. They found out about their origins and usually about the loss of their biological relatives after the war.

Most of my Polish interviewees had been in the ghetto and then remained in hiding on the “Aryan side.”

Melchior has given a detailed account of the problems with social identity experienced by Polish Jews who had survived on “Aryan papers” in “Zagłada i tożsamość” (14). One major issue here is the extent to which acquired survival strategies consisting of pretending to be someone else affected these people’s post-war identities. It looks as if this effect varied and was far from equivocal. From today’s perspective it is easy to trace these individuals’ decisions concerning their “external” identity, i.e., the decision to continue to “remain in hiding” by keeping their “Aryan papers,” to conceal their Jewish origins or to revert to their Jewish identity. What is more difficult to trace is the evolution of these men and women’s approach to their own identity over a longer period of time, particularly if we take into consideration the complexity of self-reflection concerning one’s own identity.

The following account given by a woman who survived the Warsaw ghetto as a little girl and then hid on the Aryan side may help to illustrate the evolution of one’s attitude towards one’s own identity. After the war this interviewee lived in a Jewish orphanage. “I did not in the least bit want to be Jewish anymore. I accused them of being Jews in this orphanage. They were all Jews, but I was not. I was not Jewish, I did not want to be Jewish. I simply thought that I had been hurt so badly, suffered so exquisitely, that I didn’t see any point in being Jewish. Let them all be Jews, but not me. (...) But listen, to prove that I was not Jewish I would get down on my knees and pray. (...) They complained about me to the carers, they complained to the headmistress of the orphanage. But the headmistress never said a word to me. (...) There came a time when I finally accepted the fact that I was Jewish, that it would make no difference. I went to the headmistress and handed over my prayer book with the holy pictures and asked her to keep it for me and said I would come to collect it one day. Of course when I was due to leave for boarding school in Warsaw the headmistress came out with this prayer book and told me to take it back” (Ja).

In order to survive, Jewish children were placed in new families, i.e., they were “deposited” in Polish families or convents. The older ones understood their situation and actively cooperated to remain in hiding. This was a source of incessant fear but it also helped them to gain clarity as to where they were and who they were. No matter how their guardians treated them, most of my interviewees felt that the situation was transitional and they awaited the end of the war and the return of their relatives.

The little ones had no memories of their original families and their situation was quite different. Their foster parents often did not tell them that they were foster children. They learned this by chance from neighbors, other children at the playground or from their more distant relatives. Sometimes the foster mothers told them the truth on their deathbeds. Two respondents discovered the details of their origins elsewhere yet their foster mothers still adamantly denied the facts disclosed by more distant relatives. From the very start, Mrs. L. grew up convinced that she was not her parents’ biological daughter. Her parents refused to talk about it, however, and they never told her outright that she was adopted although she had heard it many times from others in the form of invectives. She learned her true history from a neighbor when she was 17. This induced her to continually seek information about her family, to find out about birth dates and surnames. She still hopes that she will one day find her real family. “All my life I have been waiting for something, looking for something” (Li). This searching theme is recurrent in this group of survivors and it can be seen as an attempt to build one’s identity with its rediscovered snippets. “I have this album called ‘The Warsaw Ghetto.’ I look at the photographs and try to find my mother. And then I suddenly reflect that I have no idea what she looked like. (...) But I also think that any of these children could have been me” (In).

Discovery of the truth leads to serious identity problems with respect to nationality, religion or continuation of tradition. One survivor told me what an
important experience it was to find out a few years ago what her real name was, who her parents were. She also received photographs from her childhood. And all of a sudden she knew that she did not come from “nowhere.” This is the need to “belong,” shared by all the survivors, the need to learn something about their lost family. It was very important for this particular interviewee that an aunt had tried to find her after the war. She says that she felt she was “somebody.” What does it mean to be “somebody”? “It means that someone wants you” (Jg).

In many of the reports it is this emotional aspect rather than the purely informational aspect which is so crucial for filling in the gap, defining oneself. They not only “were,” they also “loved me,” “cared,” “did everything they could to enable me to survive.”

In that group we could talk about the “missing identity,” after the war they often feel different from the other survivors, they try to gather together through organizations and websites (“Children without Identity,” “Missing Identity Website”).

“Who are you?” I asked my interviewees. “A Jew? Pole? Romanian? Hungarian? In the “Romanian” group only one person from a mixed marriage told me that she was “in the process,” that she was “becoming more and more Jewish.” All the other respondents unequivocally declared that they were Jews. In stark contrast, a considerable number of the Polish respondents said that they had dual, Polish-Jewish identity. Why is this? There are possibly several reasons why they define themselves this way.

1. Degree of pre-war assimilation, religion
Those respondents who felt very clearly before the war that they lived in a different world, either for religious reasons or cultural reasons, have a greater tendency to think that they are quite evidently members of the Jewish minority and to identify themselves as Jews. One apparent difference between the Polish and Romanian groups is that well-assimilated Romanian Jews still feel that they are Jews, whereas well-assimilated Polish Jews often indicate dual identity — they feel that they are both Jews and Poles.

2. Loyalty towards the family which perished (towards the “name”), loyalty towards the family which survived
Another important determinant of identification, especially in the Polish group, is a sense of loyalty towards the family which did not survive. Even if this family was not at all attached to Jewish tradition or the survivor was too young a child at the time to have any memories of the pre-war days, the fact that the family perished because it was Jewish means that the survivor cannot possibly ignore his or her Jewish identity. In such cases we would say that identity is built around the fact that the individual survived the Holocaust (15). This group characteristically mentions the great impact of membership in the “Children of Holocaust” organization on its sense of identity. The decision to return to one’s pre-war, Jewish name was very important for these men and women. “When I returned to Kraków just after the war I was Natan Gross once more. (…) Given names and surnames are important. One has to be able to wear them so that they make sense” (16). One survivor who decided to retain his “Aryan papers” nevertheless entered his parent’s conspicuously Jewish names into his documents. “Because that’s what I wanted. I was a Jew and am a Jew. I wanted this trace to remain” (Sk). This loyalty applies not only to the family’s “Jewishness” but also to its decisions to assimilate. One interviewee responded very sharply to my question whether her Christian name was her original pre-war name. She felt that I was negating her parents’ decision to assimilate. Individuals who were taken care of by Polish families feel that they are Poles and emphasize their relationship with the rescuing family. “I am one and the other. In the same degree. I really will not cancel the Pole because, first of all, this is where my life was saved (…) this miracle really happened in my life. I owe this to Poles who gave me every bite of bread (…). They had nothing. They shared all they had with me, endangering their lives so terribly. I cannot forget that Poles did this for me” (Jp).

3. Fear — hiding in “the wardrobe”
Another important determinant of self-identification is fear, the sense of threat. As in the previous quotation concerning negation of her origins by the girl in the orphanage, some of the interviewees are still “living in the wardrobe,” as they themselves say. They are living in a dual identity but this is a different dual identity from the one experienced by those individuals who base their life experience on loyalties.
When fear is the underlying factor, it would be better perhaps to speak of a “torn” identity. The two identities are in a state of conflict and none of them feels comfortable.

4. Attitudes towards “others” — Poles, Romanians, Hungarians and their involvement in the Holocaust

The representation of “others” is quite different in the recollections of Polish and Romanian respondents. This is because of the historical situation where most Poles were “silent witnesses” whereas the Romanian and Hungarian armies took an active part in the dislocation and deportation of the Jews. In the eyes of survivors from Poland the rescuers counterbalance the denunciators, whereas in Romania the local community was actively involved on the fascist side. This perhaps is why the we-they distinction is so incontrovertible that none of the respondents from this group said that they felt they were Jewish but also Romanian or Hungarian.

5. Preservation of the wounded post-Shoah Jewish world in Romania and its total annihilation in Poland (group identification)

The vicissitudes of the Jews in post-war Poland was quite different from those of the Jews in post-war Romania. In Poland, the Jew’s world was completely destroyed whereas in Romania, where many more Jews survived, and Jewish communities were not wiped out, there was more opportunity to have a feeling of anchorage and belonging. The Romanian respondents often had Jewish friends and acquaintances, belonged to Jewish organizations after the war and took an active part in the life of the Jewish community, whereas for many of my Polish interviewees establishment of the “Children of Holocaust” organization was the first opportunity to meet other Jews. For some survivors, membership in this organization gave emotional meaning to their former awareness of their Jewish origins. “I’m Jewish because my parents were Jews and I’m in this Society and I love these girls very much” (Jp).

To conclude, I would like to point out that sense of identity, both personal and social, is dynamic and changes over time. Two contradictory tendencies in the survivors’ reports illustrate this well. The tendency to forget and the tendency to remember as much as possible. One interviewee gave me a text which he had written containing the following passage: “For thirty years I have been trying to forget. For thirty years I have been struggling to detach myself, to stop thinking about what happened then and there (...) And I can’t” (10). Some respondents first tried to forget then began to revert once again to their reminiscences: “After the liberation I wanted two things — to eat my fill and to wash myself. When I ate all I wanted and washed I wanted to forget, to forget everything. So did most of my friends. This explains why I didn’t talk about this with my children, my wife.” But ever since he visited Birkenau this respondent gave up trying to forget the past. “I stopped trying to forget because all the memories came back of their own accord” (Ot). Another interviewee also told me about her attempts to forget: “I always worked a lot and still do, so as not to think about what happened” but also “I can’t pass a book on the Holocaust and not buy it. I have this sickness for the Holocaust and everything that happened to the Jews” (Mb). The purpose of this dual recall-avoidance process is to reintegrate the trauma with current life as a tragic but important part of the past and thereby to regain a sense of continuity and identity: “This year June 30th was on a Sunday, just like it was 62 years ago. I was very moved during those days but I wanted to go to a restaurant to celebrate the fact that I survived and I also said the Iskor for those who died on the (death) train. (...) I live with these memories and they help me in that if anything unpleasant happens, I think that every day after June 30th 1941 is a gift for me. My whole life after this day is a gift because I could well be dead” (Ja).

We see how remembering plays an important function for building personal and social identity (which we could see as facets of a whole identity). It is also important as a self-narration, whether occurring in dialogues in the family, with therapists or interviewers. It concerns always bearing witness and construction of the identity. The dialogue between survivors and listeners is often difficult. Primo Levi described it as a common dream in concentration camp — after the war the survivor tries to describe his experiences to the family but nobody listens to him (17). That social alienation and distancing of survivors is described in social context as
the “conspiracy of silence” (18) and in family context as a “double wall” phenomenon (19).

The reconstructing of the past is important for survivors helping them to reconstruct their identity but listening to them is also important for us and the future generations.

References