

Yom Ha'Shoah Feature

A Child of Holocaust Survivors Learns to Cope by Writing Poetry

By Janet R. Kirchheimer

New York (JTA) — With Yom Hashoah — Holocaust Memorial Day — approaching on April 9, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be both the child of survivors and the daughter of immigrants.

The Holocaust has had, obviously, an enormous impact on my identity and place in the world.

To be honest, I have never felt truly American. I grew up in two different worlds: one that didn't exist any more and one in which I didn't feel at home.

Like many children of immigrants struggling with the culture of America, I grew up in a time when it wasn't chic to be a hyphenated American. I remember trying to explain to some non-Jewish

friends that my parents were German Jews.

They couldn't understand how one could be both German and Jewish. Even though their parents were Irish or Italian Catholic, they couldn't grasp the concept. It was not possible to be defined by more than one identity.

I struggled with the question of whether I was an American Jew or a Jewish American. This was a serious question in the Jewish community during my late teens. How was I going to define my cultural identity?

I felt pulled to be American. I felt pulled to make aliyah to Israel. I felt pulled by some Jews who didn't want to be reminded of the Holocaust or greenhorns, as newcomers to the United States were

known.

Many times, I felt I was on the outside looking in. There were times when I wanted to jump into the melting pot, to be able to blend in. It was so inviting. I could forget. I could be a plain old American kid, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the porch swing in my overalls and baseball cap. But I couldn't. Neither could most of my friends who were children of survivors.

Some of us had parents who told the neighborhood kids that the numbers on their arms were their phone numbers; some of us had parents who told stories of the Holocaust every night over dinner; and some of us had parents who never told us anything.

My father won't wear striped clothing or live in a house surrounded by a fence. The part of me that still feels on the outside is sometimes unnerved by the phrase,

"make your selection," or by words like "camp," "train" or "affidavit." Words that are just words for most people resonate differently for me. So do places. Sometimes I can't go into a pizza parlor. It's the ovens. I can't push my way onto a crowded subway train or watch my father as he empties the ashes from the gas grill.

There are cultural identities that choose us and there are cultural identities that we choose. The Holocaust was an identity that chose me, and I chose to keep it. I have tried to run away, but each time I tried, the stronger the pull was to come back.

Finally, I stopped running. I asked my parents to tell me their stories. I have become a poet, writing about being the daughter of Holocaust survivors and my family's stories.

As I've gotten older, I've come to believe that my identity struggle

is what makes me a part of American culture. Maybe the melting pot of America is really a melding pot, and being a part of American culture means that it is possible to have more than one identity.

I am Jewish, I am American, I am the daughter of Holocaust survivors, I am the daughter of German immigrants — and that is just the beginning.

And maybe American culture is changing too; it's now more acceptable to be all of these things. I can be a hyphenated American with as many hyphens as I choose. ☆

Janet R. Kirchheimer is the assistant to the president of CLAL - The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. A daughter of Holocaust survivors, she is completing a full-length collection of poems dealing with her extended family and the Holocaust.



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Tanya

By Peter Medvinsky

(To the sacred memory of Tanya Marcus and all other known and unknown martyrs and heroes of the Holocaust.)

The man who entered my compartment on that train
Crossing the winter-gripped Ukraine
Looked twice my age, but strong and tough;
The kind whose war-time youth was rough;
He said "Hello," then paused a bit
And took his seat.

The train was crawling; we were looking outside;
Another town was in sight;
A park, a church, a monument
To a Resistance fighter hanged...
"They honor heroes," I said,
And turned my head.

The man looked grim, a muscle was twitching on his face;
"Young man, I fought in those days;
Was shot at; killed men with a knife;
Have seen brave people in my life;
The most courageous of them all
Was a young girl.

I first met Tanya in the fall of '41;
Kiev had just been overrun;
I was a soldier, had to hide;
The partisans were hard to find;
Tanya and her Resistance friends
Saved me from death.

I wish I had," the man continued, "the words
To tell you what a girl she was;
Her gentle beauty to describe;
Her magnetism; her love of life...
And no photos of her
Survived the war.

Then came the day all Jews were ordered to report;
Most obeyed. Tanya did not;
I saw that eerie march of death:
Graybeards, cripples, women, babies...
The laughing Nazis machine-gunned
Then everyone.

I did not see Tanya smile ever since that day;
"For us is left only one way,"
She said; and soon began the hunt;
Forged documents; a small handgun...
A one girl army she became
After that day.

When Tanya struck, her blows stunned the Nazi gang;
The ones she killed were of high rank;
Gestapo dogs were running wild;
They searched for many days and nights;
Even SS-men from Berlin
Were flown in.

She was betrayed. We tried to save her, but we failed.
We later learned that in the jail they tortured her beyond belief;
Death came to her as a relief.
She was just twenty. Not a word
They got from her.

After the war I met some high-ups and, in vain,
Urged them to honor Tanya's name;
They made it as plain as they could:
"Jewish last names don't sound good;"
This is the world that we live in —
Cruel and mean."

The man got off the train and vanished in the night;
But not before leaving behind,
With me: his last look, long and hard;
The memories that I must guard;
The fire that has not ceased burning
In my heart.

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Anti-Defamation League Seeks Volunteers for "Confronting Anti-Semitism"

Confronting Anti-Semitism is a two-hour interactive session for students and adults. The Program goal is to facilitate discussion within the Jewish community about issues of anti-Semitism and provide effective techniques for response. Video vignettes and case studies of typical incidents trigger this communication and are followed by a discussion led by an experienced facilitator. Participants are encouraged to share personal reactions and possible responses to these incidents. ADL's Washington, DC

Regional Office will be conducting a Train-the-Trainer program this spring or early summer for a new group of individuals who will be trained to become facilitators for Confronting Anti-Semitism. The Train-the-Trainer program consists of one eight-hour session. During this time participants will have an opportunity to experience a Confronting Anti-Semitism workshop as well as co-facilitate portions of the agenda in front of the group. Participants must attend the session in its entirety to be (Continued on page 26)