

Recovering Memory

"All I knew was that I had a scar above my ribs that no one ever talked about."

by Eva Metzger Brown

At age 54, I attended my first Holocaust Survivor Reunion. Because I was a child of survivors, I was asked to be on a panel called "Second Generation Children of Holocaust Survivors." I was also, however, a survivor myself, who had lived through what I had only heard my parents elliptically refer to as "terrible events" as a toddler. (I had emigrated to the U.S. at age 3, via Germany, France, Morocco and Martinique.) But because I had no memories of anything that had happened to me during those early years, I thought of myself only as a child of survivors. I also thought of myself as an American, not an immigrant. But an exchange during the conference radically altered these self-perceptions.

At the conclusion of our panel's presentation, a young woman came up to me and said, "You are a 'Child Survivor.'" I had never heard that term before, and I was taken aback. She was right. Being an American, being a child of survivors-- those were only *parts* of my story. I was also a survivor in my own right. This new "label" had a profound impact on me. For the first time in my life, I began to take seriously my own wartime experiences.

Several months later, I had another eye-opening experience. An interviewer (for the Child Development Project of the International Study of Organized Persecution of Children) asked me for my earliest memory.

"I don't have any memories from the war years," I told her. "I have only an image."

"Images are memories," she said emphatically.

I had not known; I sat there quietly, as did she.

Then I said, "My image is of blood, blood running down my face." As I spoke these words, I heard my own voice: no *feelings* were attached to this horrendous detail from my early life. The professional part of me (I am a clinical psychologist) was disturbed, recognizing how totally severed I was from what must have been traumatic. I felt a sudden urgency to know more, to try to reconnect with that child who had, in some emotional sense, been orphaned all these years.

I began reading about memory (Daniel Schacter's *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind and the Past*, and Susan L. Reviere's *Memories of Childhood Trauma* were particularly helpful), and I came to understand that "implicit memory pieces"--that is, images, smells and sounds--are as important as the better understood processes of "explicit memory," that is, memories made from words. I learned that adults have memory "traces" that should not be minimized, especially in personal histories that include trauma--any trauma, not only the Holocaust.

I decided to make a pilgrimage to Angers, France, the small city to which my mother and I had fled (from Nuremberg, just after Kristallnacht), and whence I suspected my "image" derived. My hope was that I could retrieve something there, perhaps a second image, a fact or two, a feeling.



All together, the facts I knew were these: On June 17, 1940, four of us--my mother and I (not yet age two) and her friend and apartment-mate, Hilde Lindheim, and Hilde's toddler son--were walking near our flat, on a street called Rue Fulton, when we were caught in an air attack and blown into an archway. The incident was the prelude to a more horrific bombing three days later which came to be known as "The Bombing of Angers." During that first bombing, however, our little group was the only one hit. Hilde was killed. Her son (whose name and present whereabouts I do not know) was not injured. My mother's leg was crushed by shrapnel. And myself? All I knew was that I had a scar above my ribs on the right side of my body that no one ever talked about, and that I knew never to ask about. Why bring up a subject that might cause my parents more pain? This is the classic style of children of survivors.

I must add as well that in my thirties I became privy to another piece of information. During a routine CAT scan, three fragments of shrapnel were discovered deep within my brain. (True, I had seen an early photo of myself with a shaved head, but my parents had chosen to tell me that this was because of lice.) What did I do with this new piece of information? For many years, I told only my husband.

In November of 1995 a new journey began for me. I flew to Paris with my husband, then took the train to Angers. (In 1940 I had taken a train over the identical route, but no memories returned to me from that time.) Prior to setting out, I had contacted a French Christian woman in Angers, Helene Vernhes, now 80, who had befriended my mother a half century earlier during the war and been very helpful to us. My mother still corresponded with her once a year or so. Helene had hired a German-French-English interpreter, Jurgen (who, as a Christian German, had his own emotionally complicated connection to the war) who undertook some research for me before my arrival. Searching through old newspapers and hospital records, Jurgen had discovered that, as a baby, I had been wounded in my head and side and was in the hospital, I'd been separated from my mother for four months, in a Catholic orphanage. I had not known this.

On our first day, Helene, her two grown children, Jurgen, my husband and myself talked, trying to construct the most coherent story we could from the fragments that each of us knew.

On the second day, we walked--the idea being to try to retrace the steps my mother and I had taken on June 17, 1940. We met up at the Hotel de France, admired the flowers in the square together, crossed the bridge over the railroad tracks (the same tracks as in 1940), and headed towards Rue Fulton. It was a gray, quiet day. The street was narrow, and Helene walked ahead, intent on trying to remember which exact building my mother and I had lived in. She stopped everyone who looked over 60 or so, asking if they remembered the bombing on this street and the four people who had been hit, two young mothers and two babies. She garnered no new information.

I was walking behind the others, trying to be quietly receptive to the surroundings. Suddenly I felt a powerful chill and was sure I would faint. Norman, my husband, sensed something as well, and he turned around, walked back, and put his arms around me. We stood there. Feeling dizzy, I waited for an image to hit me--an image of myself as an almost-two-year-old, my young mother, my little playmate, his mother, a calamity. Had I been in my stroller in this exact place 55 years ago, or had I been walking with my little friend? Nothing. Suddenly, I felt something completely unexpected, an *enormous* sadness coming up and up and up, as if from some huge, dark underground place. Up and up, intense, like an inner black cloud freeing itself from the downward pull of gravity. What surfaced was a great and heavy *sadness*. The others continued walking. I began to weep.



Later that day we visited the hospital grounds, a square that consisted of many buildings, including the Catholic orphanage where I had lived for four months, and an imposing church. The single building that remained unaltered from before the war was the church. As I passed in front of it, that same unbidden, primordial sadness welled up inside me from some deep, deep place of hiding. Tears spilled again.

On my return to the States, some people asked me, incredulously, "You went to Europe to find a *feeling*?" Yes, without really knowing what I was searching for, that is what I went to Europe to find. For me, finding my own genuine feelings of sadness has made a tremendous difference. I now see Rue Fulton and it is next to the railway station and over the bridge from the Hotel de France. I see it expressly as it is and as it was. I feel the pain of being there with my mother and another mother who is "murdered" there. I feel how very wrong it is for this to happen to a little girl, her mother, her mother's friend, and her mother's friend's son. I feel grateful that I was able to stand in that dangerous place again, 55 years later, with a husband who held me in his arms, and made it safe.

I have recovered much as a result of my pilgrimage. My work as a clinical psychologist has been greatly enriched and expanded to include new work with the children and grandchildren of those who have survived genocide (or other forms of trauma). I am now a trauma specialist. Once I was able to *feel* my story as actually "mine," I was able to begin grieving my own losses and heal from wounds deeply felt within my being. I feel newly connected within myself, and energized and empowered to be available to others in fresh ways.

When I witnessed the Oklahoma bombing on television and saw the little child limp in her rescuer's arms, I knew that was my story. Until recently, the world (including the mental health world), did not recognize that very young children *also* have stories that have an indelible impact upon them, and that they need to be listened to and validated.

I was raised in silence, and I was made silent. I raised my own children in silence. But my trip to Angers was the beginning of the end of that. I now talk about the Holocaust, write about the Holocaust, and am open to my grown children's questions for the first time.

My mother's amputation is no longer a secret that everybody sees. Her great-grandchildren see the prosthesis and ask questions. I now know how deeply one generation's traumatic experience spills into the next and the next and the next... especially when coupled with silence. I can now talk with my grandchildren about the war and feel it is safe for all of us: because I am still their grandma who laughs and talks and hugs no matter what difficulties befell her in the war as a very young child.

Most significantly, perhaps, my revisit to Angers gave me three female heroes, each of them a new presence in my life that has been strengthening and liberating: first, my mother, who survived the war with one leg, which not too many amputees did; second, Helen Vernhes, who altruistically went out of her way to save an endangered Jewish family; third, myself, because I went back and trod that road where no one in my family was "allowed" to go. In doing so, I broke through a great inner numbness and fear. I breached the "concrete wall" of silence, and freed myself from many unconscious ghosts. The gains from this have changed my life. ■

Eva Metzger Brown is the project director of Intergenerational Healing in Holocaust Families and a clinical psychologist and mediator in private practice in Amherst, MA. This article is part of a yet-unpublished memoir Through the Concrete Wall: A Child Survivor Comes Out of Hiding.