

## Caring for Our Aging Survivor Parents

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Member of the American delegation but speaking as a private individual.

Children of Holocaust survivors face numerous challenges as we help our parents age with dignity. As we age we *all* confront physical, psychological and financial changes. For our parents, these changes are profoundly impacted by their experiences in the Holocaust.

Survivors often have medical conditions that began during WWII. Injuries and illnesses from those years can haunt survivors today<sup>[1]</sup>. In the US we do not have universal health care and since most survivors have multiple pre-existing medical conditions<sup>[2]</sup>, they are denied long term health insurance even if they can afford to pay the high premiums.

Diseases of age, such as dementia, are experienced in a qualitatively different way by survivors than by other people<sup>[3]</sup>. Many survivors show signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which can include flashbacks and nightmares<sup>[4]</sup>. Other disorders include: depression, guilt, and paranoia. Unfortunately, there are very few programs that help the survivors with their unique emotional issues of anxiety, loss and loneliness<sup>[5]</sup>.

What happens if short term memory goes? Long-term memory often brings survivors back to the war years so they must relive the horrors again and again. With loss of memory comes loss of language. The last language learned is the first one lost and for American survivors that can mean parents and children no longer share a common language.<sup>[6]</sup> It is extremely difficult to find health care workers who can speak to our parents in the European languages of their childhoods.

We also must educate health care workers about the special sensitivities of survivors, such as why dogs, uniforms, confinement or loud noises generate anxiety<sup>[7]</sup>.

There are experiences that are unique to survivors in America. Some children of survivors live far from their parents and have to travel cross-country to care for them. Also, there is no uniformity of care in all 50 states. For example, Florida provides the lowest amount of state funding for home and community based services of all the states with significant survivor populations and there are long waiting lists for limited resources. Many social service programs that are available in other states do not exist in Florida<sup>[8]</sup>.

In New York survivors struggle due to the high cost of living. As rents rise they cannot stay in their homes but they cannot afford assisted living or nursing homes<sup>[9]</sup>.

Home health care is crucial! Survivors lost their homes and independence during the war. Losing these again is unthinkable so most prefer to age at home and view institutionalization as a death sentence. Home health care is less costly than

institutionalized care but it is very expensive and can cost thousands of dollars a month<sup>[10]</sup>.

Which brings us to financial concerns: while we have lost many survivors, there are survivors who are living into their 80's and 90's and have lived beyond their savings. Current data (report pending) from the Jewish Federation system in Los Angeles shows that about **half ( almost 50%) the Holocaust survivors are living at or below the poverty line and struggling to afford basic needs on a daily basis.**<sup>[11]</sup> Tragically this tracks national data published in 2002<sup>[12]</sup>. As children of survivors, many of us go to heroic measures to care for our parents even to the point of putting ourselves in financial jeopardy in order to protect them.

But where is the money that was solicited in the name of the survivors? Many unanswered questions about the Claims Conference persist so there **must** be a thorough investigation with total transparency and accountability<sup>[13]</sup>. Investigators must speak directly with survivors and social service professionals to examine the flow of money for local survivors' needs, be they in the US, Israel, Europe or elsewhere<sup>[14]</sup>. Anyone who speaks with investigators must be assured that there will be no retaliation against them for speaking honestly and that they will not risk any loss of funding<sup>[15]</sup>. If there is nothing to hide the Claims Conference should welcome such an investigation.

Additionally, the controversial Claims Conference policy of the 80 – 20 split, 80% to survivors' needs and 20% to education and remembrance, needs to be revisited<sup>[16]</sup>. While there are survivors unable to buy food or medical necessities, THEY MUST be the 100% priority.

There is a sense in our community that when it comes to Holocaust survivor families it is “about us without us”. We reject that and insist on having our voices heard. Therefore I respectfully make these three recommendations:

1. Each country should have an independent advisory board including representatives of the survivor community, elected by the survivor community—NOT appointed. This has to be organic: from the grassroots up, not from the top down. Consulting with them often will ensure that you stay connected and true to the mission of helping survivors.

We, in the survivor community, have already established a network (**GSI**)<sup>[17]</sup> by which we can communicate with each other. Your countries' advisory boards can join us and speak directly with their counterparts elsewhere.

2. A large representative group of elected survivors, plus their children and grandchildren, **MUST** participate in the Claims Conference. These representatives must be accountable to their brothers and sisters, not to the Conference or to member organizations of the Conference.

3. Rather than straining every country's budget to care for aging survivors, why not go to those companies and institutions that have unfinished business with our families? One

suggestion: each country should demand that insurance companies who sold policies to Jews before the war publish all relevant names so survivors and heirs can check for legitimate claims. ICHEIC and past practices raise troubling questions<sup>[18]</sup>. How many cases have been successfully settled<sup>[19]</sup>? How have appeals been handled? How transparent is the process? Have claims of success by the defenders of ICHEIC been exaggerated<sup>[20]</sup>. Is there any conflict of interest by people who are handling the issues? These same questions can be asked about banks, real estate, and art<sup>[21]</sup>.

No business concern can be granted legal peace until the survivor community gets legal and moral peace<sup>[22]</sup>. In the US the right of access to courts for insurance claims must be recognized and restored<sup>[23]</sup>.

Whole families were murdered and the banks and insurance companies kept the assets. Wasn't that enough? The goal today must be recovery of individually traceable assets, plus provision of sufficient funds to address the basic needs of all survivors for the remainder of their lives.

We cannot rely on private donations<sup>[24]</sup>. We must be creative in finding solutions to these challenges. We should develop a treatment and care plan for all survivors in need and maintain them, to the extent possible, in their homes with adequate help and financial support. With a united and focused effort we could, for example, demand that insurance companies— who have held European Jewish families' assets all these years— provide long term health care for the remaining survivors in need<sup>[25]</sup>.

Finally, we and our children continue to carry on our family legacy. We are going to remember, commemorate, educate and advocate<sup>[26]</sup>. We are your natural partners in this process and welcome the opportunity to work with you.

<sup>[1]</sup> *Nazi Victims Now Residing in the United States: Findings from the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, A United Jewish Communities Report*, December, 2003

<sup>[2]</sup> *Study shows survivors suffer from more cardiac problems than peers*, Haaretz.com, April 21, 2009

<sup>[3]</sup> *Record number of Holocaust survivors seek counseling*, The Jerusalem Post, April 11, 2007

<sup>[4]</sup> Brom, D., Durst, N. & Aghassy, G. (2002). [The Phenomenology of Posttraumatic Distress in Older Adult Holocaust Survivors](#). *Journal of Clinical Geropsychology*. See also *Many Holocaust survivors live with PTSD*, The Tampa Tribune, April 30, 2009.

<sup>[5]</sup> *Surviving The Past*, TIME, January 7, 2002.

<sup>[6]</sup> Kershner, Ruth, MSW. *Caring for our Aging Survivor Parents Workshop*, World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust Conference, Alexandria, VA, November 2008

<sup>[7]</sup> *Caring for Aging Survivors of the Holocaust: A Practice Manual*, Baycrest Centre, Toronto [Caring for Aging Survivors of the Holocaust: A Practice Manual - Baycrest](#)

<sup>[8]</sup> *Jewish Family Service, Inc. of Broward County: Holocaust Survivor Assistance Program. May 1, 2009.* See also *NJ State Association of Jewish Federations (NJSAJF) Funding Support for Surviving Victims of the Holocaust.*

<sup>[9]</sup> *Surviving Surviving*, The Jewish Star, June 16, 2009; see also the original video: <http://www.vimeo.com/5064899>.

<sup>[10]</sup> *Association of Jewish Family Service Agencies of New Jersey Holocaust Survivor Assistance Program*

<sup>[11]</sup> Gillen, Michele. *The Forgotten Survivors*, CBS-WFOR, Miami, 2001

<sup>[12]</sup> *Poverty Stricken: Many Aging Shoah Survivors Are Living a New Nightmare*, Jewish Journal, November 24, 2006; *Surviving Surviving*, The Jewish Star, June 16, 2009; see also the original video: <http://www.vimeo.com/5064899>; *Losing Count*, New York Times, June 14, 2007; *What About Holocaust Survivors?* New York Jewish Week, September 3, 2008; Sheskin, Ira M. "Estimates of the Number of Nazi Victims and Their Economic Status." Attachment 3 of Plan for providing Assistance for Needy Nazi Victims in the United States Submitted by the Holocaust Survivors' Foundation, USA, Inc., January 30, 2004.

<sup>[13]</sup> *Claims Conference seeks to block documentary*, April 28, 2008, Online Jerusalem Post; ***Huge Profits Casts Shadow over Holocaust Survivors Organization***, Spiegel Online June 3, 2008; *Claims Conference ordered to pay*, June 1, 2008, JTA

- [14] *Despite the promises, the bills keep coming*, Haaretz, March 30, 2009
- [15] *Claims Conference to Holocaust survivors: Criticize us and lose aid*, Haaretz, May 8, 2009
- [16] *Debate Over Holocaust Restitution Funds Intensifies*, JTA (n.d.), and *Holocaust Restitution and the Claims Conference Controversies over Organizational Accountability*, Jewish Currents, July 2006
- [17] *Generations of the Shoah International (GSI)*, [www.genshoah.org](http://www.genshoah.org)
- [18] *Aging Nazi victims say panel obstructs justice or else*, Los Angeles Daily News, September 25, 2003; Holocaust Survivor's Foundation-USA *Summary Of Holocaust Insurance Issue—2009*
- [19] *Justice for Holocaust survivors*, Miami Herald, November 26, 2008
- [20] *Still seeking justice for Holocaust victims*, Miami Herald, March 1, 2009; *Unlike Madoff, European Insurers Remain At Large*, Huffington Post, April 9, 2009
- [21] *Justice, Before It's Too Late*, Washington Post, December 22, 2007.
- [22] *Imperfect Justice* by Stuart Eizenstat, p.268 – 272
- [23] See Holocaust Survivors' Foundation – USA letter to President Obama, January 30, 2009.
- [24] *Homebound Holocaust survivors may lose funding*, Jewish Standard, April 24, 2009; *Survivors' funding falls victim to budget crunch*, New Jersey Jewish News, August 14, 2008
- [25] *Giants and Jets fans join uproar over stadium naming rights bid by firm with Holocaust ties*, NY Daily News, September 11, 2008
- [26] *Atonement still due Holocaust survivors*, Washington Jewish Week, September 12, 2007

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