

Synopsis of *Flares of Memory: Stories of Childhood During the Holocaust*

In a series of writing workshops at the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh, survivors who were children or teens during World War II assembled to remember the pivotal moments in which their lives were irreparably changed by the Nazis. These “flares of memory” preserve the voices of over forty Jews from throughout Europe who experienced a history that cannot be forgotten. Ninety-two brief vignettes arranged both chronologically and thematically recreate the disbelief and chaos that ensued as families were separated, political rights were abolished, and synagogues and Jewish businesses were destroyed. Survivors remember the daily humiliation, the quiet heroes among their friends, and the painful abandonment by neighbors as Jews were restricted to ghettos, forced to don yellow stars, and loaded like cattle into trains. Vivid memories of hunger, disease, and a daily existence dependent on cruel luck provide penetrating testimonies to the ruthlessness of the Nazi killing machine, yet they also bear witness to the resilience and fortitude of individual souls bombarded by evil.

The following excerpt is from the book’s Introduction:

The Book’s Purpose and Meaning

This book is intended first of all to serve as an educational agent. It is for Jews and non-Jews, students young and old. It is for those who want to know about the Holocaust, as well as for those who want to ignore it because the details are unpleasant, or because it is easier to do so. It is for people who have been taught incorrectly, having learned in school, for instance, that there was something good about Adolf Hitler. It is for the deniers who would distort truth and rewrite history.

Asked why they feel it was important to write these stories, the workshop participants responded on several levels. They alluded to the need to record the events of the Holocaust, to keep them in the world’s memory. The writing, most said, is for future generations. For “if the past does not matter, why worry about the future?”

It seems clear that the writers intended as well to bring out crucial and pervasive questions about the Holocaust. Writers asked such questions openly or by implication in their stories. Sometimes questions were on a personal level: How was it that we did not see or believe what was coming? How could we know where to turn or whom to trust? How could such vagaries of fate have decided that this person lived while that person died? How was I to know what the right choice was in a given situation, or—worse yet—the moral choice? Ultimately the writers asked or implied the universal questions: How and why did the Holocaust happen? Or even, as a few asked about their darkest moments, the deeply symbolic query “Where was God?” The questions reveal the chaos, the illogic, and senselessness of Holocaust events.

The questions, like the basic incidents in the stories, are not new ones in the world: scholars as well as other victims have voiced similar ones. Such questions,

unanswerable because the Holocaust was like no other event in history, point up some of the difficulties in the continuing effort to gain a historical perspective on it. Of course, atrocities and mass murders have been committed on groups of people before and since the Holocaust. What was different about this event was the openly expressed and thoroughly planned intent to eradicate not only certain "undesirables," but a whole people, the Jews, from the earth. What was different was that the Germans actually created a department of the government to deal with the "Jewish question." An efficient, institutionalized machine was invented to carry out this intent—from denial of rights to deportations, from humiliation to starved slavery, and on to the mobile killing vans, gas chambers, and ovens.

The survivors' questions, finally, point up the sheer incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. The Germans' ability to enlist the enthusiastic cooperation of ordinary people in many countries to commit extraordinary, indeed inhuman, acts of brutality against innocent victims young and old, largely based on pervasive anti-Semitism, seems beyond belief. What is almost as amazing and appalling is that for the most part, the rest of the world, including the leaders of the United States of America, let this happen—turned their faces the other way, and ignored it.

The stories in this book are important; they move us to imagine a reality, a truth, which is beyond understanding. And the survivors' questions within the stories constitute an essential contribution to education about the Holocaust. For the confusion and doubt they express teach us to be continually alert, to learn to recognize the faces of evil, and the harbingers of their reappearance.

Perhaps, finally, it is the passion with which the writers describe these events and raise these questions that matters. For the pain and hope that inform that passion compel us to care. When writers would read their stories aloud in our workshops, we heard the passion in their voices. As the world loses the remaining survivors, we stand to lose that first-person immediacy; we will have the facts of the Holocaust, but we will be in danger of forgetting the lesson of caring about the incredible suffering the Holocaust brought upon its victims.

Because the passion is written down in these stories, even though it is often subdued and restrained, it will continue to exist in the pages of this book. We must pay attention to the passion, for it resounds through the ashes of the dead. It keeps alive the haunting specter of cruelest murder, of endless loss.

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