

Light from the Ashes

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Social Science Careers of Young
Holocaust Refugees and Survivors

Peter Suedfeld, *Editor*

Ann Arbor

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We dedicate this book to all children, past, present, and future, whose lives are violently ended or disrupted by war; to the nations, organizations, families, and individuals who—in the past, present, or future—dedicate themselves to rescuing, sheltering, and nurturing such children; and to the memory of Mary Engel, our friend and colleague.



Preface

Peter Suedfeld

The idea for this book emerged from a symposium at the annual meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP), held in Vancouver, British Columbia, in the summer of 1996. I was in the midst of a period of reminiscence and introspection, tracing possible relationships between my experiences as a Jewish child hidden with Christian identity documents in Budapest during World War II and my subsequent private life and scientific career. During the previous few years, I had become aware for the first time of several colleagues in the social sciences who also had had their childhoods disrupted by Nazi persecution; a few had consciously associated that set of events with their later pursuits, but most—like me up to very recently—had never thought about such a connection.

In organizing the symposium, I asked several of these colleagues to participate. My request was for them to think about the paths of influence that led from childhood persecution and upheaval to the adult choice of profession and research focus and to be prepared to discuss both their personal and professional autobiographies openly at the conference. This was a difficult task for all of us. I, in fact, tried to shirk it by merely chairing the symposium and not actually talking about my own introspections, a strategy that in the event was foiled by the insistence of the panel and the audience.

The session was a huge success. The presentations were revealing and touching, the analyses insightful and enlightening. The room was packed; for the first time ever at a scientific meeting, I saw members of the audience in tears as eminent colleagues and longtime friends revealed aspects of their histories and personalities they had never before mentioned. Some told me later that it had been the most important session they had ever attended, and the presenters themselves felt that it had been a major event. Several people in the audience approached me, then

or later, to tell me that they too were refugees from or survivors of the Holocaust.

It was this last experience that led me to organize this book, in which social scientists who had been children or young adolescents under Nazi domination could explore how early trauma and adult career meshed with each other. As the plan unfolded, colleagues suggested other names. I eventually decided that the book should focus on individuals who were engaged in research but not exclusively or primarily research about the Holocaust itself; who represented a range of disciplines and subdisciplines within the social and behavioral sciences; and who had made their postwar life in different countries. However, because fluency in writing English was a necessity and because the identification of appropriate people was done through expanding circles of personal acquaintance, the list ended up with some bias toward scholars working in North America and toward psychologists.

When around two dozen prospective participants were identified, I wrote to each, explaining the nature and goal of the book and inviting them to participate. Not all of those who were invited are represented in the book. One was too ill to write a chapter; a couple had just published autobiographies and did not want to write another one, even one with a specific and different focus; and two, both of them friends and eminent colleagues of mine, did not want to confront or to publicly dissect the theme as it applied to their own life. The rest of us could empathize with this reluctance; we, too, had avoided such a task for decades after the war and even now were stressed by undertaking it.

The Greek origin of the word *holocaust*, meaning a sacrificial offering that is consumed by flames, is very different from the Hebrew word *Shoah*, a catastrophe or major disaster. However, both words have entered common usage as a reference to the Nazi persecutions and mass murders, specifically the attempt to annihilate the Jewish people, and are often used interchangeably.¹ A number of writers and survivor groups have carried the burnt sacrifice metaphor further to refer to the consequences and aftermath of the Holocaust in terms of ashes. I chose *Light from the Ashes* for the title because I believe, and I think the chapters in this book confirm, that reflecting upon the events of the Holocaust can be illuminating. For those involved in producing the book, it has led to greater self-knowledge; for our readers, we hope it will be a contribution to Holocaust literature and to the psychology of science.

NOTE

1. I thank René Goldman for bringing the difference to my attention.

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