

**Child Holocaust Survivors Gathering in Cleveland, Ohio,  
October 27, 2012**

**30 Years of Friendship, Healing & Education – Our Legacy  
By Robert Krell, M.D. Vancouver, B.C. Canada**

**Dear Friends,**

**I trace the origins of our self-identity as Child Survivors to the early 1980's, for me the years 1981 through 1983 were particularly noteworthy.**

**In 1981, I attended the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem. There I heard Rabbi Israel Meier Lau state, “My father, the Rabbi of Piotrowsk was killed in Treblinka, my mother died of hunger in Ravensbruck. I was the youngest survivor of Buchenwald. I was eight years old.”**

**Never mind that there may have been one or two children even younger. That is what he thought and his statement struck me like lightning. All of a sudden, I realized that my only surviving cousin, whose parents had been murdered, was six years old at liberation. And I was five, having been hidden for three years in The Hague, Holland. My second cousin Millie, age eight, returned with her parents from Switzerland. Here we were - three leftovers from the destruction.**

**It was Rabbi Lau's words in 1981 that awakened in me an awareness of our existence. Then I realized that there were children like us who experienced the Holocaust first hand but had not been recognized as Holocaust survivors. In a manner of speaking we had been overlooked in the scheme of things. In the post- war years, I had attended ceremonies involving the “older” survivors, the youths and adults who identified themselves as the survivors, particularly those from concentration camps. In fact a hierarchy**

had already formed as to who had survived the worst. Child survivors did not even find a place on that unofficial list.

And in the 1970's, I had already participated in conferences organized by and for the sons and daughters of survivors who were becoming known as the "second generation". Many of their leadership had themselves been born in Europe's displaced persons camps. So as the First generation organized itself and succeeded to establish an important presence and the Second generation identified itself, somehow we children were missed. We were first generation Holocaust survivors too young to have had advocates for our existence and experiences.

It is not difficult to see why that happened. After all we were the children of silence. We had not been offered an opportunity to talk. For obvious reasons, we had practiced learning "the language of silence", whether in hiding, or in the forests, or in the camps. The majority of surviving children had been in hiding. Silence represented safety.

So when we finally emerged, we were greeted by adults, whether survivors, mental health professionals, or well-meaning adults, all of whom encouraged us to remain silent and get on with life. They more or less insisted that the youngest amongst us, had few or no memories and in fact were therefore not particularly traumatized. I do not think their intentions were malicious when they urged us specifically not to dwell on our past. Unfortunately, there were children who wished to talk, needed to talk, needed to be heard. But they too were silenced. Amongst the adults that were a particular disappointment were psychologists and psychiatrists who should have known better. They had been prewar advocates for the importance of the earliest developmental years as the time that children developed their sense of security and identity through the availability of parenting, nourishment,

shelter and safety. So did they think that after 1945, any of us had the privilege of receiving the best of those developmental building blocks? What were they thinking? Having read what I have read, I have come to the conclusion that they were not thinking because they were afraid, afraid to face the children of the Shoah.

After my initial confrontation with reality in 1981, I had the good fortune to meet Sarah Moskovitz in 1982. I was on sabbatical leave as a visiting professor of psychiatry at the UCLA Neurosciences Institute. But while in Los Angeles I spent a lot of my time at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre preparing a bibliography on the medical and psychiatric literature of the Holocaust. The Wiesenthal centre held a Wednesday evening lecture series in which I presented a talk on the family dynamics of Survivor families. Sarah spoke the following Wednesday evening about her pioneering study of Child Survivors. She was a professor of developmental psychology at California State University - Northridge and had travelled the world to locate and interview the twenty four children who had been found at Terezin at liberation and brought to Lingfield, England for their recovery. They were very young children, suffering profoundly from their separations from their parents followed by the loss of a succession of caregivers and all this while enduring hunger and cold.

At Lingfield they came under the care of Alice Goldberger, a social worker, and eventually each child was adopted, one by one. So Sarah interviewed them over thirty years later and wrote the brilliant and touching book, “Love Despite Hate – Child Survivors of the Holocaust and their Adult Lives”, subsequently published in 1983 by Schocken books. I had found a soul mate. Sarah was not herself a Holocaust survivor but suffered the loss of

family in the Shoah and was enormously sensitive to the plight of the Holocaust children. In 1982 she called a meeting of some child survivors who lived in Los Angeles. I attended that founding meeting but learned later that the initial attempt to form an organization had failed. Back in Vancouver in 1983, Sarah called and urged me to return to LA and try to inspire and motivate the group. I spoke to about thirty potential members at the University of Judaism, on “Some Unique Aspects of Child Survivors”. It worked. I concluded the talk with this comment “It is simply my hope, that having had the chance to talk with you, our being together might lead to some discussions on how to effect a program. No doubt we have all had our problems with adjustment, with feeling marginal, with grieving over our losses, with struggling with our identity and our religion and our G-d, but we cannot do so forever. Even we who are the younger ones of the survivors do not have the luxury of great amounts of time left in which to forge our legacy. The time is now.”

Obviously this was a plea for us to explore ourselves not alone or even with a friend and/or therapist but with one another, the persons most likely to understand the challenges we had faced and which were far from resolved.

Sarah picked up from there and the Child Survivor group of Los Angeles flourished under her leadership and that of the talented and dedicated individuals that emerged from within the group. With her brilliant book and compassionate efforts to heal children who had survived, she truly deserves recognition as the “mother of the Child Survivor movement.”

It was not the only effort but it was an important one. In other places, the awareness of Child Survivors was stirring, simultaneously in New York and Philadelphia, in Chicago and Montreal and elsewhere. So forgive me for not attempting to list all the important meetings, people and places. But I

**focus here on a rather singular perspective, namely self-discovery in 1981, Sarah's leadership in 1982 and our successes together in 1983.**

**Then in 1984, I organized a panel of Child Survivors who were themselves psychologists and psychiatrists to present at the American Psychiatric Association Annual General Meeting. The topic: their lives. Our lives. Three hundred psychiatrists crowded our room. Several friends and colleagues had told me they only came for a few minutes and to please excuse them for leaving to other sessions. No-one left that room for three hours. I edited the presentations for a special section published in the 1985 Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry devoted entirely to Child Survivors of the Holocaust. There I attempted to define who could be considered a Child Survivor.**

**Sarah Moskowitz, the psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg, and I had heated discussions as to formulating a working definition. I concluded in my article that we should define a Child Holocaust Survivor as one aged sixteen and under in 1945 and that those seventeen and over would be considered an adult survivor. Believe me I am aware of the fact that those who were seventeen or eighteen in 1945 may have spent their entire adolescence in Nazi occupied territories, hiding and running for their lives. Therefore, they were children at the time of their ordeal. But the definition was meant to account for an additional phenomenon, namely what happened to youngsters in the immediate postwar period. The vast majority of those under sixteen were placed under some kind of guardianship that led to placements in homes or orphanages and in many instances, a resumption of education.**

**Those over age seventeen were far more likely to insist on a degree of independence and to participate in the decisions about immigration.**

**So a distinction between these age groups is helpful with respect to the trajectory of postwar lives.**

**For the purposes of our gatherings, we make no such distinctions. We welcome the Kindertransport children who were spirited out of prewar Prague, Berlin and Vienna, the children who managed to survive in concentration camps, and the hidden children – we are all brothers and sisters under one roof.**

**Only seven percent of all Jewish children in Nazi dominated European countries survived. If we add the escapees aided by youth Aliyah, as well as the children sent to safety just before war broke out, the total numbers of Jewish child survivors still does not exceed ten percent. Nine out of ten of us were murdered. We cannot afford to exclude a single person who needs to be part of us, partners in healing and remembrance, in education and the preservation of memory.**

**From those early years, we learned of our need to be together. Who else would listen to our stories? Who else could assist to break through our silence? The various fledgling organizations converged and the First Gathering of the ADL/Hidden Child Conference was held in New York with 1600 participants, the majority of whom were Child Survivors. That was 1991.**

**For me, 1991 marked the tenth year of my preoccupation with establishing Child Survivors as an identifiable group with its own distinct features, struggles, and opportunities. I served on the International Advisory Committee and spoke at the Gathering on “Hiding During and After the War”. My remarks then concluded with the following: “I see no way out but to abandon silence, reaffirm our identity as Jews, emerge from powerlessness, state our demands to our politicians – to Congressmen, Senators, Governors,**

**the President. Have you told your story to your children or other people's children? Have you written your account or recorded it? Are your relatives remembered at Yad Vashem, or in your own cemeteries? Do you participate in Yom Hashoah services?**

**There is much to talk about, much for us to discuss. It seems rather obvious so late in the day that we must overcome the inevitable psychologic consequences of having survived as children. But we know these psychologic consequences are not abnormal, they are the normal consequences of a horrendous past. There is no true psychopathology to obstruct our vision. Nothing can block our emergence as we shed silence, stop hiding, and begin to exercise the rights of empowerment. We have earned those rights by making it this far, against such staggering odds.”**

**For many of you, your lives as Child Survivors in the open, speaking with family and friends, and for schools and universities, perhaps did not start until just after 1991, likely in 1992. Therefore may I wish all of us a happy 20th anniversary, or 24<sup>th</sup> if you attended one of the earlier gatherings.**

**At the New York Gathering there were too many profound and meaningful occurrences to mention, between Abe Foxman's emotional and inspiring opening address and the closing one by Elie Wiesel. But I do want to remind you of Elie's words on "Hidden Memories". He said, "of all the crimes conceived in fanaticism and hatred, the war against the Jewish children will remain the worst, the most vicious, and the most implacable in recorded history. ...We now know that Hitler's Germany made the Jewish child its principal target. In condemning our people's children to death, it sought to deprive us, as a people, of a future. For the children who did survive Hitler's Germany, laughter and joy were largely eliminated from their lives.**

**The children who were “hidden” especially have never ceased asking themselves the question: Where is our childhood?”**

**From that 1991 meeting we became collectively aware that Child Holocaust Survivors deserved a legitimate place in the spectrum of those who personally experienced the Shoah. Yes, we also were eye witnesses, younger and with different memories, often only fragments but memories nevertheless.**

**Three books of accounts were written and published within a year of that gathering, by Andre Stein, Jane Marks, and Paul Valent. These initial stories revealed some names already familiar to us, Yaffa Eliach the Holocaust historian, Ervin Staub who as a psychologist examined “The Roots of Evil” and “Genocide”, Abe Foxman, the executive director of the ADL who provided invaluable leadership to the Hidden Child Conference, Clem Loew, psychologist and psychoanalyst and Andre Stein himself who contributed his own experience to one of these important books.**

**The organization flourished under the leadership of several key individuals and child survivor gatherings became an annual event. I had the honour of giving keynote lectures at many gatherings, including those in New York and Jerusalem, in Houston and Seattle, in Washington, DC and Toronto, in Montreal and Denver. Then I gave the keynote lecture in Amsterdam in 2005, titled “A Little Dutch Boy Returns.” Although I had been back in Holland a number of times, there was something special about being with my fellow child survivors on this particular occasion.**

**I published some of my lectures, in a book titled, “Child Holocaust Survivors: Memories and Reflections” back in 2007 and which can be found on Amazon.com should you be interested. I broached the various topics that**

seemed to be of common concern to all of us. I will briefly return to those for they concern us still, even as we grow older, especially as we grow older.

Our continuing struggle concerning certain issues and preoccupations may have consequences for our own children, perhaps even our grandchildren.

It should be evident now, in light of our self-discovery, that when the children of Holocaust Survivors were identified as the second generation with the help of Helen Epstein's insightful 1979 book, "Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with the sons and daughters of Survivors", the topic related entirely to the children born between 1945 and 1965. These were the children born to older survivors and they are themselves now aged 60 – 65.

Because Child Survivors had not been specifically identified as Holocaust Survivors, our children, born between 1970 to 1985 were not recognized as being second generation children. But they are. And they are younger by about twenty years. And are there differences? You bet. After all, the older second generation individuals came of age during the 60's, the younger ones during the 80's. Even the nature of society was different. The older second-generation were born to adults with significant amounts of prewar Jewish learning and raised their children accordingly. They also had command of many languages and had strong accents. The younger second-generation were born to children who may have had minimum exposure to a solid Jewish upbringing and in fact, spent most of their war years hiding their Jewishness and embracing Christianity. The parents of the younger second generation knew less of Judaism, fewer languages, but perhaps managed to adapt more readily to their new homeland.

An adult survivor, seventeen years or older in 1945, even in Poland where war broke out in 1939, had eleven prewar years in which to study, to

establish a strong Jewish identity at home and in school. Their powerful memories of tradition and family could be resuscitated in post war life and if they chose to do so, passed onto family. But children under sixteen and younger in 1945, had fewer years in which to establish the necessary building blocks to a fully Jewish existence. Those of us under age eight in 1945 had virtually no prewar life or early Jewish experiences in conscious awareness. We did not know we were Jews, and in hiding we were required to assume a Christian identity. For a time to be a Jew meant death, to be a Christian signified life, or at least the possibility of survival.

How did those of us deprived of a Jewish identity in early childhood, recapture a significant structure of our traditions to pass onto our children? Some succeeded, many not. At least the older survivors had a significant memory bank when faced with the decision to abandon or re-embrace their Judaism. We were forced to forge that identity in less than ideal circumstances, often bereft of family, in the absence of parental guidance. Then what could we pass on to our children?

Therefore, we have struggled with our identity and also with our shame and our rage. Why shame? Children hunted unto death are likely to conclude there may be a reason they have been chosen. Perhaps they have done something wrong, not been good enough, quiet enough, observant enough. The young child's universe is small. It seldom extends far beyond parents and immediate family at first. That is why when parents divorce without explanation, the child thinks it may be his or her fault. The fantasy, the dream, the hope: "If I had behaved better they would be together. If I behave better, they will reunite and we will be a family again." To feel responsible in some way invites a sense of shame. I have done something wrong. But that is not all. Because of the horrendous circumstances, perhaps just barely beyond

**awareness but nevertheless experienced as an outrage – a sense of rage develops towards the outrage being committed.**

**It is not the kind of rage to which one can or even wishes to respond with revenge. But one can respond with a desire to seek justice, to teach and to document the story.**

**It is likely that this is at least one of the paths chosen by Child Survivors who appear to inspire their children towards certain ideals which I believe to be common to many of us. In the first workshop I conducted for about fifty to sixty Child Survivors in New York in 1991, approximately two thirds were in the helping professions. While the older survivors had on the whole, gone to work, married and started families, the younger survivors had returned to school. Favorite educational objectives seemed to have been degrees in nursing and medicine, psychology and social work.**

**And that in part may serve as our legacy, a passionate commitment, born of our healing one another, to healing others. Our thirty year journey has taken us from a life of silence and attempts to maintain that silence to sharing our intimate experiences with each other: empathic loving listeners who know our deepest secrets and whose experiences have empowered us to share those stories with others, whether personally or on audio-visual tape as well as through memoirs and art.**

**And if by chance, you have not done so, do this year commit to recording your testimony. Our children and grandchildren will cherish it. The story must be told and it must be passed on. I trust they will figure out how to use this legacy to attempt to build for themselves and others, a better world.**

**I recall Elie Wiesel's words, "Tell the right stories and people will do wonderful things."**

**Brief Biography of Robert Krell M.D., F.R.C.P.(C)**  
**Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychiatry, The University of British Columbia**

Dr. Robert Krell was born in Holland and survived in hiding. The Krell family moved to Vancouver, Canada where he obtained an MD from The University of British Columbia and eventually became a Professor of Psychiatry.

In his psychiatric practice, Dr Krell treated Holocaust survivors and their families as well as Dutch survivors of Japanese concentration camps.

He established a Holocaust education program for high school students in 1976, an audio-visual documentation program recording survivor testimony in 1978 and assisted with the formation of child survivor groups starting in 1982.

Dr. Krell served on the International Advisory Council of the Hidden Child Gathering in New York in 1991.

He founded the Vancouver Holocaust Education Center which opened in 1994 and teaches 20,000 students annually.

For his activities in Holocaust education and remembrance he received in 1988, the State of Israel Bonds Elie Wiesel Remembrance Award and in 2011, Boston University awarded him the Hillel Lifetime Achievement Award “for bringing solace and understanding to generations of Holocaust Survivors.” On January 27<sup>th</sup> 2012, Dr. Krell was the Keynote speaker at the United Nations during its International Day of Holocaust Commemoration.

Dr. Krell is married and has three children and six grandchildren.

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