

Shulamit Reinharz

Shulamit Reinharz is the Jacob Potofsky Professor of Sociology, the founder and current director of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, and the founder and current director of the Women's Studies Research Center, all at Brandeis University. An advocate for the study of Hebrew, she has published thirteen books and is currently involved with major efforts to make the Hebrew language attractive to American Jews. Her book in progress titled *A Memoir in Four-Hands: My Father's Holocaust Experiences in Germany and Holland*.

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The Facts

My father, Max M. Rothschild, spent six weeks in Buchenwald after *Kristallnacht*; my mother, Ilse H. Strauss, was terrorized but never sent to a concentration camp. Young German Jews, one from a religious Zionist background, the other from an assimilated family, my parents survived the Shoah by fleeing to Holland in 1939 and going into hiding after the German invasion. My father's parents also survived the war as did his two sisters who were sent to England on a *Kindertransport*. My mother's father, a lawyer, died of starvation in the Gurs concentration camp in Pau, France, where my grandparents had been shipped from Germany; her mother, a German *hausfrau* was deported from Gurs to Auschwitz, where she was killed. My mother's two sisters survived the war by getting into Palestine. I was born in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1946, thirteen months after the liberation.

The Assumption

Human beings are born as helpless babies and can survive only if adults nurture and protect them. Especially in the early years, the adults' influence is very great and shapes the personality and outlook of the child, even if the outcome is a rebellion against the parents. It is reasonable to assume that when Holocaust survivors became parents, they shaped their children with regard to many aspects of the Holocaust, such as whether it is good or bad to be a Jew, whether people are basically good or evil, whether the world is a safe place or not, whether one can trust authority, and more.

The Theory

Each child comes into the world with a narrative the parent(s) define in advance, whether consciously or not. Damaging narratives might include "This child is extremely vulnerable because the Shoah could happen again, or simply because the world is anti-Semitic," or "This child will never know he/she is a Jew," or "This child stands for all the children, or a specific child, who died in the Holocaust." Positive narratives might include "This child is a miracle that

demonstrates that we survived and the Jewish people is still here," or "I will let this child know what happened to us so that she/he will be strong."

My Narrative

I was blessed with a positive narrative: I was evidence of the survival of the Jewish people. My parents—deliberately or not—spoke about what happened, not in long speeches but in snatches of stories here and there. My father became a rabbi and used the theme of the Holocaust in many of his sermons. As a child, I was told stories about my amazing appearance at ten months or so, when I arrived with my parents in the United States, where my grandparents had found refuge. I was the first grandchild and was "adopted" by my grandparents' friends whose ability to have children was disrupted by the war.

My Take on the Narrative

Despite the generally positive climate of my early years, my attitudes toward the Shoah as a young child were complex. First, I was extremely proud to have been born in Amsterdam and liked seeing the expressions on people's faces when I told them. I was not blond or blue-eyed. How could I have been born there?

I also remember being afraid of officers, particularly police officers. Not specific individuals but police in general. The evil forces in my "bad dreams" were not devils or "boogeymen." Rather, they were the police, who would come and get me if I misbehaved. I also feared corporal punishment, which I somehow deduced or heard was practiced in the public school where I went to first grade in a suburb of Boston. I have no idea if there really was such punishment, but I believed that the principal carried it out in his back office with a paddle. In other words, I had picked up that there was violence in the world, that it was close at hand, practiced by people in authority, and that I was vulnerable to it.

My parents enacted the narrative of my being a symbol of the survival of the Jewish people when they gave me a Hebrew name—Shulamit. I was never ashamed of having an uncommon name, and as I grew older, I loved telling the story of what my name meant and why I had been given it. To explain "Shulamit" required and enabled me to talk about my parents surviving the Shoah and the fact that I was Jewish. It also enabled me to tell the inquirer that it was a Hebrew name found in the Bible. I repeated the stories my parents had told me about my mother's sister who had died in Palestine and for whom I had been named. I was proud of all of it. I regularly "taught" my non-Jewish (and sometimes Jewish) friends about Judaism, the Hebrew alphabet, the Holocaust, and Israel. I put myself out there and still do. Recently, for example, I rode in an elevator with a woman and her adult daughter. As I exited, the older woman said, "God bless you; Jesus loves you." Instead of just moving on, I responded, "Does Jesus love me? I'm a Jew." She said Jesus does love me because the Jews are one of the chosen peoples. I said, "Chosen for what? We've had a pretty difficult history." She said, "You have suffered because you have not accepted Jesus as the son of God." Her evangelical anti-Semitism appalled me.

Secular Education

After moving from Boston, I attended New Jersey's excellent public schools from grades K through twelve. The towns in which I lived had few Jewish children and I found myself proudly explaining why I did not recite the Lord's Prayer at the start of each school day. And when the school instituted one "Chanukah" song to be learned along with a plethora of Christmas carols, I was the only one who could pronounce the Hebrew words of a Zionist pioneering song that had nothing to do with Chanukah, but I let it go.

Jewish Education

To reinforce my identity and knowledge, my parents continuously educated me Jewishly. Their love for my father's parents led me to adore my grandparents, who remained strongly Jewish but rejected American synagogue life. Since we spent the major Jewish holidays with them, I internalized the ideas that family and family gatherings were unassailable, the idea of the transmission of Jewish identity from generation to generation, and the value of Jewish knowledge. In addition to this informal education, I received formal Jewish education as well. I was enrolled in Hebrew school from a very young age until I went to college.

Zionist Education

Second, and extremely important, was my parents' Zionism, especially that of my mother. My father had been eager to get to the United States after the war to reunite with his parents and two sisters. As mentioned above, my mother's two sisters had escaped to Palestine/Israel. After a short while in the United States, my father began to work for Zionist organizations, where he befriended people with similar ideas. My parents and these other couples and young families prepared to immigrate to Israel, which we did a year and a half after arriving in the United States. As my mother said, I didn't survive Hitler in order to live in Malden, Massachusetts."

The positive valence of Israel became deeply engrained in me when my mother began telling me stories about her life as a teenage girlfriend of my father. As a way of distancing themselves from their hostile Nazi environments in Germany, they joined Zionist youth groups, particularly the socialist Zionist Habonim, which had a program to help German-Jewish teens acquire agricultural skills they could use on a kibbutz. This took the form of farms or camps to which German-Jewish youth flocked for fun, social life, and an alternative to the horror around them. My father's Zionist involvement actually saved his life, when the Zionist youth organization to which he belonged got him and others out of Buchenwald with a permit to go to Holland.

Zionism and Israel were the most positive entities imaginable, and we moved there when I was three years old, planning to spend the rest of our lives there. If Israel had only existed a decade earlier, the murder of six million Jews could not have happened, my father told me. My parents experienced endless challenges—disease, lack of food, marauding Arabs, lack of electricity—but

especially for my mother, it was heaven. Israel meant sunshine, outdoors, happiness, rebirth. My sister was born there. But my father's dreams were not fulfilled, and we soon returned to the United States. Although my father loved Israel and traveled there many times, sometimes for long periods, it was my mother who passed her overwhelming love for the country—its language, its culture, its landscape, and its people—on to me. When I was twelve years old, she took me to Israel for eight weeks, and I, too, fell in love with the people and the land. My attachment was so great that I determined to marry an Israeli—which I did. He and I have continued the tradition of giving our children Hebrew names—Yael and Naomi—and inculcating an involvement with Israel, which turns out to be the core of the work that each of them does.

“Second-Generation” Membership and My Work

Given that they were refugees, a point my father reiterated frequently, my parents were unable to help me deal with selecting a college and other challenges of being a teenager. And so I learned to be self-reliant. I chose sociology as a major in order to understand the United States, my adopted home. I chose to earn a PhD in part because my father had one and we all valued education so highly.

My research as a sociologist has had many foci, including numerous studies in Israel and various historical projects. And over the last twenty-five years, I have devoted much of my time to feminist research and activism, which I define as continuing the process of self-liberation in which my parents were engaged.

After earning a full professorship, I directed the Brandeis University Women's Studies Program for a decade, using the position to create a myriad of opportunities for students and faculty. As director of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and the Women's Studies Research Center, two facilities that unite dozens of scholars and students in explorations of gender or of the nexus between Jews and gender, my work today consists largely of organizing, helping, promoting, and in every way joining forces to improve the world. I resonate with the motto of my university—"Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue."

Final Thoughts

Both my parents died in January 2013 at the age of ninety-two. In the years preceding their deaths I began writing a book about their lives, utilizing the hundreds of documents they had somehow saved from their youth in Germany and their rescue in Holland. But I also asked them pointed questions. My mother's dementia made it difficult for her to answer, but my father was coherent until the end. One of the last questions I posed was "If you were to give me a single idea that you derived from your Holocaust experience, what would it be?" He answered, "That there are good people in this world." He was referring to all the people—Jews and non-Jews who had saved his and my mother's lives. Unbeknownst to me, I had completely internalized that attitude and have become a very trusting person who sees the value of each human being.

Ultimately, that idea is deeply Jewish (we all are created in God's image} and a very satisfying way to live.