

## **The Violence of the Survivors\***

Leah Aini

When I was a child, my father, a Holocaust survivor, used to beat my older siblings with a club he called "the wet stick." On me he took mercy and imposed a different role: to listen, from the age of four, to stories of how he survived in the camps, so that, in due course, I would record his memoirs. My siblings were spared these stories, which merged victims and violence in identical and unrestrained language that would eventually even lapse into sexual allusions toward me. On them, whom he named after his parents who had perished, he imposed a different task: to produce grandchildren and "return" his family to him. But in the compartmentalized division of roles he instituted among us, there was one common point: before he would beat them, my father would ask me to wet the club for him with tap water. He forbade me to watch the brutal display itself. Once, when I was about six, I stopped and inquired as to the reason for wetting the club. His answer was etched into my heart with blood: "That's what the kapo taught me—a wet stick hurts more."

My father, Itzchak Aini of blessed memory, born in Greece as Isaac Yeiny, was no monster. But when he was released from the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where he was tortured for two years, two weeks, and four days (an eternity in terms of the Holocaust) as a 22 year-old man who weighed 25 kilograms, the seal of violence was branded on his heart. This, along with his silence with my siblings, his talking in my ear, and the rage and madness that he directed towards all of us, were symptoms of his traumatic reaction to violence unlike any other in the history of humanity.

Nevertheless, my post-traumatic father—and I am humbled by his suffering—made every effort to continue to survive and get up every morning and conduct, once the nightly terrors had subsided, a devoted family life. He was not the only one. Along with him, insisting on believing in life once again, giving birth to and raising children, were most of the Holocaust survivors who had absorbed, over the course of their time in the death camps, nothing but violence, sadism, and humiliation. Make no mistake: I am humbled by their suffering as well.

Yet, in my autobiographical novel *The Rose of Lebanon*, the protagonist, Vered, a soldier, says to Yonatan, the wounded soldier whom she nurses during the First Lebanese War: "I am not ashamed of being the daughter of a hay seller. I am **afraid** of being the daughter of the Holocaust survivor." That is the absolute truth. I was afraid. But along with my fears, the book raises general questions. For instance, where did the violence of the Holocaust that was absorbed into our parents' hearts disappear to at the end of the war? How did those orphans cope with it in their everyday lives, when the 'beautiful sabras' in their new homeland did not help them, and the young country alienated itself from their wounds and was ashamed of their victimhood? And how are we coping with it?

### **The New Israeli Home**

The answer is in the introduction: the violence of the Holocaust found an outlet in the new Israeli home. Sometimes the survivor would keep it locked in his soul, through a secretive silence accompanied by emotional alienation, and other times, or in parallel, he took his violence out on his children. There were,

of course, those who coped in different ways. But the seed of violence, which was also nourished by feelings of loss and vengeance, and which was embedded like poison in the hearts of quite a few survivors, was and remains a secret best kept by a Zionist silence.

An unfathomable gap stretches between the image of the Holocaust survivor that the Israeli establishment, with its myriad selective mechanisms of memorial and memory, planted in my imagination as a schoolgirl and as an adult, and the one I experienced in the homes of my father and other survivors. Israeli discourse has always made sure to portray the survivor as a defeated person who was protective of his children. Authors who were the children of survivors, classified under the chilling term "second-generation" writers, were integrated into this effort, depicting in their books a model of the silent mother/father.

Literary research has explained that these authors began to write in order to break their parents' silence, which was "protecting their children." This convenient image was further upheld by writers who wrote about the Holocaust based on literature and their imaginations, and created survivor characters who isolated themselves, remained silent, and were "protective of their children" alongside hallucinating and detached characters with a saccharine and romantic side.

All of this, as mentioned, was nothing like what was going on in the homes of the survivors I knew. In these homes lived active and involved survivors who were holding on to groups of orphans and any remnant of a remote blood relation as a substitute for family, while the Holocaust held a reign

of terror there (and by the way, the number of children of survivor parents who died, as well as the number of children of survivors who committed suicide, is significant). These parents, whether they spoke or remained silent, also raised their children with wet sticks, lashings with electric cables and belts, and sadistic behavior, sometimes focusing their abuse on one particular child. So it was with Holocaust survivor parents from Poland.

The mother told stories compulsively, and the father, who "remained silent," humiliated and beat his young son severely simply for being dark-haired, while he never laid a hand on his blonde-haired daughter. The miserable father felt he would fail to save his son if disaster struck again. And how did the son respond as an adult? Yes, with silence, since, indeed, good parental intentions were abundant in these homes. Protection was not. The undefeated survivors could not control their anger, their violence. Their down-trodden, beaten, ashamed, yet compassionate children, who lacked the legitimacy to go against their parents—the victims of the atrocity—were the ones who defended themselves with silence.

### **Brothers and Sisters in Holocaust Violence**

Indeed, although I had been aware of it, I was deeply moved by the intensity of the responses of many readers who were suddenly revealed as my brothers and sisters in the violence of the Holocaust and its erasure, from the moment my book *The Rose of Lebanon* was published. Readers who were children of survivors and others who had not dared to drain their wounds found their voices, wrote, and called me, crying bitterly, embraced me, shaking and tearful, at lectures, and told me that we shared "a common father." Of course.

This silence, alongside the silence of the children of survivors who were no less tormented by the violence of the secret, is what also unwittingly allowed the establishment, which in any case dominated and silenced the survivors, to exploit them and the Holocaust for their own purposes.

Indeed, this establishment consists of all of us. However, while an individual citizen may be entitled to live in denial, the same does not hold true for a (changing) leadership, with its many branches, which is led instead of leading, and which is surviving instead of taking responsibility.

Sixty-six years after World War II, the State of Israel, which did not give an equal share to all its communities in the legacy of Holocaust memory, is acting like a post-trauma victim, frightened and insensitive, and still looking for ways to harass the few survivors who are still with us. The establishment, which sees everything through the smoke of the crematoria, intentionally fuels the sense that "we are the only victims" and reaps militarism and racism.

Every Holocaust Memorial Day and at what is referred to as the "March of the Living," instead of helping survivors and the needy, the President and the IDF Chief of Staff, heading battalions of soldiers and teenagers, visit the crematoria in Auschwitz in order to dedicate the Israeli-Zionist baptism of fire. The Holocaust has become synonymous with the army, security, fighting, and national identity. Is it any wonder that in the excitement of another military operation turned war, Israelis rush off to battle carrying the knapsack of the Holocaust on their backs?

This knapsack contains no personal first-aid kit, and sometimes even no water, but mainly it is devoid of civil consciousness. It holds no questions, such as, for example, "have those who sent us to war really done everything possible to avoid bloodshed, our own bloodshed?". And on the other hand, "are our representatives really doing everything in their power to promote our wellbeing and improve our lives?".

"Your father is my father," a reader in a bookshop said to me in a broken voice. I looked at the woman, who was about fifteen years younger than I, and knew that it could not be. "No," she was quick to explain. "My father has been shell-shocked since the Yom Kippur War. But I was raised on violence. Every day my father would force me to sit on his knees as he opened photo albums and told me about his friends who were killed, burnt, while he stayed alive...". Yonatan, the soldier in my book, was wounded in the Lebanese War, because he was afraid of it and tried to commit suicide. I went to see him despite my father's objection. I also said "Enough!" to my Isaac-like father, because I knew that if I surrendered to the branding of his sacrifice I would lose my mind or commit suicide myself.

I am not ashamed of the stick. It is our duty to protect ourselves. It is our duty to remember, to research and document **all** remnants of the Holocaust. But it is not for us to be the "Second Generation," or the third or fifth. Until when must we be born with the slaughtering knife of the Holocaust in our hearts? How can we even dare to place the memory of their suffering alongside our own when we have a country and a choice? How long will we wallow in violence? The supreme lesson in humanity commanded by the Holocaust is this: Love

those made in your image as thyself. It is time for us to remember and never forget this as well. It is time for us to grow from our wounds.

\*Leah Aini is a well known author in Israel. This article was first published (in Hebrew) on Ynet (the website of Yediot Achronot, a leading Israeli newspaper, on May 2, 2011, Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel).