



Voices of Holocaust Child Survivors: Learning how to Foster Resilience

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Abstract

This paper reports on qualitative research about resilience processes in Holocaust child survivors, especially those evident in hidden children. Data refers to 22 life stories collected through 19 semi-structured interviews and 3 published biographies. Collection and analysis of the life stories of people who experienced one or more traumatic events during the Holocaust (separation from birth family, hiding and parents' deportation) has been carried out, employing a long term approach focused on major life trajectories. The central focus of the research has been to explore the developmental outcomes of these survivors across the life course. The main aim of the study was to identify the protective factors that enabled child survivors to develop and grow. It is argued that this knowledge might be applied by social workers and other helping professionals working with vulnerable children and families, in order to foster similar resilient responses.

Key Words: resilience, child survivors, Holocaust, child and family care, protective factors, resilience

Resilience: General Definition and Protective Factors

Currently, the concept of resilience is considered significant in relation to children living in vulnerable families, or children who have suffered the trauma of being removed from their families for a defined period of their lives (as in foster care or residential care) or permanently, in the case of adoption (Schofield & Beek, 2005).

Understanding protective factors is of utmost importance for social workers and educators, whose professional goal is supporting and fostering identity development processes within different contexts. Parents within the family, teachers in schools and social workers in local communities have vital roles to play. Resilience has been defined as "a relative good outcome, despite the experience of situations that have been shown to carry a major risk for the development of psychopathology" (Rutter, 2000, p. 653) and, by the American Psychological Association, as "the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, ... of bouncing back from difficult experiences" (A.P.A., 2006). It is not limited to the ability to resist; but it is a process that enables people to manage challenges and stresses of life and use them in a constructive and creative way, in order to rebuild new paths of life (Vanistendael & Lecomte, 2000).

International research has been examining aspects of human resilience for some time and researchers have focused on defining the features, protective factors, and positive-constructive processes that help people resist fate's blows by developing creative abilities rather than psychopathologies. Protective factors contributing to resilience have been outlined by several researchers in the fields of psychiatry and psychology (Rutter, 1987; Vanistendael, 2001; Sagy & Dotan, 2001). According to Garmezy's subdivision (1985), those factors are:

1. individual: positive temperament, IQ, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self awareness, sociability, communication skills, empathy, internal locus of control, sense of coherence, optimism, active problem-oriented coping ability, humor;
2. familial: parental warmth, family cohesion, secure attachment, balance between affection and rules, parental support, parental beliefs and values;
3. social: social support, non-punitive social environments, school success, close relationships with caring adults, good informal relationships, community.

The process of narrating one's own story and searching for meaning is another important aspect of fostering and building resilience (Cyrułnik, 2008). A child who has experienced traumatic events often faces two different challenges: the trauma – suffering “in the reality of his or her perception of what is happening” (p. 24): an accident, violence, starvation – and the trauma – “suffering in the internal representation of what happened” (p. 24). Moreover, social representation of trauma and responses to it are also crucial, because they can deeply influence personal representation and responses.

The human condition is much influenced by the semantic memory, “the memory of the intimate tale someone creates when, in his or her loneliness, he/she tells him or herself his or her wound and what happened, and in that process one can become prisoner of his/her own past. But, as soon as one speaks or can share the tale of his/her narrative identity, when one can say: ‘I am this way because that happened to me’ and can share by words what happened, one can master a little control over his/her past [...]. A shared intimate tale can change a trial into glory if a wounded person is considered a hero, or into shame if he or she is considered a victim.” (Cyrułnik, 2004, p. 27, our trans.)

Hence, the relationship with people belonging to both informal (family, friends, relatives, neighborhood) and formal (social workers, teachers, educators, sports trainers and the like) networks, can help the child to engage in a positive or negative narrative, moving towards a tale which makes her/him remain a prisoner of the past or an explorer of a new and open field.

Resilience, Holocaust and Social Work

Several studies of resilience have focused on the lives of people who faced war, genocide, and natural catastrophes (Herman, 1992), particularly addressing the Jewish people who survived the Holocaust during World War Two. On the one hand, psychological and psychiatric clinical research on the Holocaust has focused primarily on the pathological aspects linked to traumatic experience; researchers describe survivor syndrome and pathological consequences such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Kuch & Cox, 1992). On the other hand, some researchers have focused on those individuals who were able to establish a relatively healthy and productive life, despite exposure to severe atrocities (Ayalon, 2005; Sigal & Weinfeld, 2001; Ornstein, 2001; Botwinick, 2000; Tomkiewicz, 1999).

Working on Holocaust survivors' biographies, Englander (2005, 2007) hypothesized the existence of aspects (axiological, behavioural, relational, cognitive, social, affective) belonging to Jewish culture, which furthered and fostered the survivors' ability to develop resilience after the Holocaust. Resilience in Holocaust survivors is closely related to the cultural capital of individuals, as confirmed by the results of research on children who fled Nazi persecution and emigrated to the U.S. (Sonnert & Holton, 2006).

The psychiatrist Parens (2008), a child survivor himself, underlined the necessity to take into account the temporal dimension within the concept of resilience and reframed Garmezy’s triadic process as follows:

	Pretrauma state/parameters	Transtrauma parameters	Posttrauma state/parameters
Nature of Trauma		What is it; what it means to the self, how intense its impact; how long did it take place	
Self	Age, ego functioning (strengths and weakness); superego functioning; status of psychic conflict and character defenses; history of hostility destructive load/patterns of reactivity		Previous parameters and status over time; creativity, operation of adaptation-enhancing defenses, generativity, short-term, episodic, long-term.
Family relationships	Types of attachment; quality of object relatedness.	Previous parameters and also, object losses; object substitutions; behaviors of objects in support network; behaviors of trauma-inflicting objects	Continuation of pretrauma relationships; mourning of losses; reconstitution of family relationships
Social	Community support systems including school, street, and community neighborliness and societal mores	Community support systems during traumatic era	Community support systems cultivated (self-generated), recreated, and maintained

Parens (2008, pp. 93-94)

Referring to the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we suggest addition also of the wide spatial dimension, where both physical and social context are included. Traumatic events impact upon the individual at a given point in time and within a given context. Trauma impacts upon the individual within a framework of parameters including age, stage of development, life conditions and environment of the individual. Hence, recovery, and therefore resilience, is strongly influenced by those parameters. Consequently, the contextual parameters before, during and after the trauma and whether the response is acute or chronic, are determinants for the event’s impact upon the individual and her/his reactions, both in the short term and in the long term.

The Project

Resilience is a complex construct defining a process based on the interaction of biological, neurobiological, developmental, environmental and cultural factors, and not just on a precise set of features; therefore multidisciplinary approaches to research are needed to better understand it (Southwick et al., 2008). Social work has the potential to make an important contribution to the expansion of research on resilience. Through social work research, much can be learnt about how an individual becomes a human person, not despite, but through his/her “wounds”, and how it is possible to work through painful life situations, turning them into creative resources (Cyrulnik, 2001).

From the perspective of social work with children and families, we are interested in increasing our understanding of “what it means” to raise a child well. We are keen to learn “what” a social worker can do to help the family, school and community invest resources in the development of protective factors in the child, rather than focus only on risk prevention (Pourtois & Desmet, 2000).

Research on the aftermath of violence in children shows that:

insight into the recovery process may also be gained by drawing upon the wisdom of the majority of trauma survivors worldwide, who never get formal treatment of any kind. To the extent that they recover, most survivors must invent their own methods, drawing upon their individual strengths and the supportive relationships naturally available to them in their own communities. Systematic studies of resilience in untreated survivors hold great promise for developing more effective and widely adaptable methods for therapeutic intervention. (Herman, 1992, p. 241)

We have adopted the less common perspective of “learning from the Holocaust” and not the more often employed approach of “studying and teaching the Holocaust”. The analysis of life stories of resilient Holocaust child survivors,¹ considering aspects of life before and after Holocaust, such as parental style, social networks, peer relationship, community, school, formal-informal help and the wider ecological system can be a very useful research context. It enhances our knowledge of human development. In this context, narratives of survivors can be analyzed in order to identify the specific protective factors that enabled them to develop and grow.

The main aim of the research described here was to search for protective factors that can be considered by social care practitioners working with vulnerable children and families, in order to foster similar resilience responses and the best possible development among children currently in out-of-home-care (Canali et al., 2001; Schofield & Beek, 2005).

Although we are aware of the singularity of the survivors’ experiences and that nowadays children who are removed from their vulnerable families live in cultural and social contexts completely different from the contexts of children during WW2, we assume some links between the experiences of child survivors and children in out-of-home care today. The stories of Hidden Children (children hidden by parents in foster families, orphanages or convents) manifest themes of separation, life in a vulnerable context and identity issues that could be particularly relevant for social work research and practice approaches.

Moreover, the fact that the Holocaust took place more than 60 years ago represents a relevant advantage for such studies. Choosing a long term approach over an emergency-short term one, data has been collected focusing on the whole trajectory of survivors’ lives, with particular attention to the perception of the different stages of life – child, adult, elderly – in order to understand development throughout life, not comprehensible within a short-term focus.

The rationale for the project was that:

- social work can learn valuable lessons from life stories of hidden child survivors of the Holocaust (Cohen, 2007) who developed resilience;
- understanding protective factors in human development can be improved through the long term analysis of life stories of resilient individuals; this can allow us to identify those elements that today can foster resilience in children in out-of-home care;
- there are aspects (axiological, behavioural, relational, cognitive, social, affective) belonging to Jewish culture, that may foster the survivors’ ability to emerge from the trauma, rebuild their lives and successfully confront the challenges of further traumatic events.

Method

Two different research paradigms or approaches have been used to deepen understanding of resilience processes (Shapiro, 2008): one focuses upon the cross sectional or longitudinal outcome experiences of traumatized people; the other one is ethnographic: analysis of narratives or case studies of single person or groups (Hauser, Golden & Allen, 2006).

Since we were interested in the subjective perspective of the individual and her or his subjective truth, our research has employed a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lodico et al., 2006). As this study was specifically focused on narrative research with Holocaust survivors,

we took as guidelines what Kestenberg and Fogelman (1994), Kangisser (2005), and Shapiro (2008) suggest in relation to personal truth, psychological aspects in survivors' tales, narration as construction of identity, and the therapeutic value of the interview in research.

Many studies have proved the importance of life story narratives in social work; they state that narration can help a person recognize her/his own development and contribute to scientific research regarding the understanding of life processes. Through narrative and autobiographic method, we aimed "to meet life stories" of resilient Jewish child survivors and learn from them.

The storytelling situation creates conditions whereby the subject feels he/she is being listened to and the telling can also become a dialogue. In this way, the person is encouraged to self-explore and to develop a personal description of their life. Furthermore, these issues are related to the possibility that telling one's own story influences the development of resilience (Cyrulnik, 2004).

Ethnographic research results do not aim to be generalized in a statistical way (Suedfeld, 1996); on the contrary, they can be used to enhance social work knowledge through in-depth exploration of individuals' biographies.

Body of Research: Tools, Data Collection, and Analysis

The units of study consist of narratives of 22 Jewish Holocaust child survivors, who experienced hiding during WW II in order to survive the Holocaust. Narratives have been collected through:

- 19 semi-structured in depth interviews with survivors – mostly hidden children, but also 1 child refugee and 1 child deportee – collected and transcribed by M. Ius (2007-2008), 14 in English and 5 in Italian;
- 3 published biographies that we chose because their narrative style is comparable to the collected interviews: Black-Gutman H. (2001). *Crossing the Borders of Difference*; Millman I. (2006). *The hidden child*; Vander Zee, Innocenti R. (2003). *Erika's Story*. We worked on the Italian version of the stories of Isaac and Erika; therefore the extracts that will be quoted, were translated by ourselves.

The collections of Yad Vashem (Jerusalem, Israel) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington D.C., U.S.A.) have been examined to collect other data (oral or written data, photographs, film, audio tapes) concerning resilient hidden child survivors.

At the beginning of each interview, the project rationale was shared with the interviewees with the aim of involving them in a constructive reflection about their own life trajectory in order to help children nowadays. The interviewer attempted to listen to, recognize and collect the personal knowledge of each survivor, understanding that the interview is something constructed together by interviewee and interviewer. Therefore, child survivors within the sample were invited to share recollections of three periods of time: before, during and after the Holocaust; the interviewer administered a flexible semi-structured interview schedule to elicit this information. Interviewees all agreed to use their real names in papers as a way of allowing people to know their stories, to enhance the knowledge of the Holocaust and, because most of them are well known within Holocaust institutions. Interviews lasted 1 hour and a half on average; they were audio-recorded and transcribed (16.219 word types, 197.126 word tokens). Textual data collected by one researcher has been codified and analyzed by two researchers utilising both researcher-developed and commercial software (Atlas.ti, www.atlasti.com) for content analysis. In the coding process, portions of narratives were given codes according to the themes they addressed and that were chosen using both top-down (the theoretical framework about protective factors of resilience) and bottom-up (reflections and ideas coming from the interviewees) approach. Then, each trajectory has been rebuilt using only the coded excerpts in order to deepen

the understanding of the single voices about his/her life line. After that, single voices were “put into a choir” in order to allow the researchers identify common aspects and protective factors related to resilience. The results have been discussed with social work and Holocaust scholars and researchers, and are being shared with the participants as the final step of the research via mail, since it is not possible to meet them again because of the geographical diversity of their places of residence.

Units of Study: Features and Outcomes

Since “narrative approaches allow us to witness the individual in her or his complexity and recognize that although some phenomena will be common to all, some will remain unique” (Josselson, 1995, pp. 32-3), it is not easy to provide a precise categorization of the features of the 22 individuals included in the study sample; their experiences are both similar and different. Their narratives could be also presented singularly, as “case studies” or “life story studies”.

The survivors included in this study can be described as 22 people, 14 females, 2 males, born in Jewish families between 1923 to 1944, and raised in different European countries – 7 in Poland, 4 in the Netherlands, 3 in Italy, 2 in Croatia, 2 in France, the rest in Belgium, Germany, and Hungary. Erika does not know her birth country. Interviewees all agreed to use of their birth names when we refer to them or quote their voices.

They all suffered the trauma of the Holocaust and many of them passed through more than one experience of survival – ghetto, hiding, deportation, political refuge; however, all the stories we encountered can be identified by two features:

- *hiding* – to hide yourself and/or your personal identity;
- temporary or permanent *separation* from family both physical and relational – from all of your family, one parent and/or your social context – the traumatic events made a break with past, dividing biographical lines.

Moreover, we can define these individuals as resilient in that:

- despite all they went through because of the Holocaust, at this time, their principal life outcome is not a mental illness or disease; it's an appropriate level of overall wellbeing: emotional, familial, working and financial stability, and an active role within the community;
- they feel resilient; this is evident in *personal representation*: since we were interested in their point of view of their own experiences, it was necessary they have a resilient *personal representation* of their own story. A resilient self-concept was experienced by each of them and they all identified with this;
- they are perceived as resilient; this is evident in *social representation*: they are recognized in their social context and community as resilient. Interviewees were located through contact with scholars and survivors' affairs' directors who perceived them to be resilient.

Due to different contextual conditions, the survivors faced war situations that impacted upon them from the age of a few months for the youngest children, through to 15 years for the oldest in the sample. Although Virginia was 20 years old at the end of the war, her narrative has been included in the study due to the contents of her narrative and because she was 15 when anti-Jewish laws were promulgated by Fascists in Rhodes. At the time of writing, the individuals included in the sample live in 6 countries: 9 in U.S.A., 7 in Israel, 3 in Italy, the rest in the Netherlands, Australia and Germany.

In the following table, data are shown relating the survivors' war experience to the situation of living with some member of their family – parents, siblings, relatives, very close friends – or suffering a situation of total separation, being the only member of one's family in a specific living situation.

Table 1
Living situations of interviewees

Living situation during WW2		With whom?	
Hiding	19	sole member	8
		whole family (parents – siblings)	4
		mother	4
		parental figure (uncle, housekeeper “the 2nd mom”)	2
		sister	1
Deportation	2	mother in Bergen-Belsen	1
		sister in Auschwitz, separated from the rest of family	1
Refugee	1	at first with whole family – then alone in institution	1

12 of the interviewees survived World War II with their entire family, 1 with her sister and 9 are the only survivors of the family. 16 people lived a period of complete separation from both parents during the war; among them, 6 were reunified with the birth family (2 reunified with the mother, but after 2 years she died and they were adopted, then placed in a children’s home and later moved to a kibbutz), 8 lost their families and were adopted, 2 were able to enter into adult life autonomously. Fortunately, the fathers of the 3 children who were in hiding with their mothers survived. One girl who was in hiding during the war with her whole family (parents and 9 children) suffered post-war separation; both parents died and she grew up with her siblings.

Table 2
Separation experiences of interviewees

Experience of separation		Family reunification		Life after war	
Separation from both parents	16	Yes	6	life with family	4
				adoption after mom’s death	1
				children home after mom’s death	1
		No	10	adoption	8
				autonomy (the oldest)	2
Separation from father	3	Yes	3	life with family	3
Parents’ death soon after the war				life with siblings	1

After the war, 12 of the survivors moved abroad and faced the situation of being immigrants in a foreign country as child or adult, depending on the time of leaving birth country; 7 undertook Aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel).

All of the survivors married (4 later on divorced) apart from one, who remained single. All of them built families and had children (58 children in all, 1 adopted) and 19 also have grandchildren; we don’t have information about the 3 others. In relation to education, it has been noted that almost all of these survivors achieved a high level of education: 13 graduated from university, 4 of them achieved doctorates, 7 finished high school and only one had to interrupt her schooling – she had to go to work because of her familial economic conditions after the war following the death of both parents.

No survivors included in this study have used social services for assistance; it is interesting that most of them in adult age have worked in the helping professions. In fact, 10 people worked in the field of social and health care: 3 social workers, 4 teachers, 1 physical therapist, 1 child psychologist and 1 cardio-surgeon. The latter 2 were also involved in academic activities, as

research assistant in the case of the former instance, and as professor in the case of the latter. Another 2 are professors in physics at university level. Moreover, the group includes 1 business man, 2 business assistants, 1 local newspaper editor, 1 shopkeeper, 1 art historian, 1 museum guide and 1 book writer and illustrator. The data on 2 people are not available.

Giving Voice to Child Survivors: Findings

In the following paragraphs, we present data about 3 of the protective factors analyzed: significant others, narration and perception of personal strength.

Significant Others

All the stories report relationships with others: friends, foster and/or adoptive parents, siblings, relatives, educators and partners. Those are relationships through which they received help and support, such as different ways of hiding or important relationships, where the significant other played the role of “resilience tutor” (Cyrułnik, 1999). Referring to the temporal subdivision, Parens (2008) suggested we find again the heterogeneity of the experiences and the different ways in which “significant others” show their care, both during, and sometimes after the war. Through the 5 stories of children who experienced foster family placement and adoption, we can see how important it can be for traumatized children to experience the presence of a significant caregiving adult.

Multiple attachments (Palacio–Quintin, 2000) are shown in their narratives: foster and adoptive parents all played the role of resilience tutors; once children became attached to them, they became a secure base for their future life and relationships.

Erika (Ius & Milani, 2007) was thrown from the window of a train going to Auschwitz when she was just few months old. She does not know anything about her biological parents; she has no information about them: she doesn’t know any family names – even her own name, birth day and place. Since Erika was an infant at the time of separation from her birth family, her adoptive mother could have hidden the truth from her and maybe Erika would never have known about her origins. On the contrary, this “woman” decided to tell her everything, giving her a complex but real and coherent identity. She allowed her to know her past and her Jewish origins, and helped Erika to integrate into her own identity all the elements of her story.

“Someone picked me up and I was given to a woman who took care of me and risked her life for me. She figured out my age and invented my birthday. She named me Erika. She gave me a home, fed me, dressed me, and sent me to school. And she loved me.” (Erika) (Vander Zee, 2003, p. 14)

Hadassa was in hiding in Christian family, pretending to be an Aryan child and she lost both parents. She had to change her name several times and had to hide her identity in order to survive or to be better accepted. Being an orphan, she suffered the experience of feeling different from other children and not belonging to a family like others:

“There was a period of time, then, when I was nobody’s child” (Hadassa) (Black-Gutman, 2001, p. 22)

but afterwards, she was given to a couple and they became her parents

“I was pleased to have parents just like other children. One thing was made clear to me by my new parents. I was not to let anybody know that they were not my real parents. Welo became a

most loving, affectionate and protective father, and I soon attached to him strongly. He was a man of integrity and compassion, with a very fine analytical mind [...]. In September of that year Welo and Gusta formally adopted me. My name was no longer Hadassa Ester Braun Kahane. It was now Hadassa Gassenbauer ... though at home I was still called Dasia, the diminutive form of Hadassa." (Hadassa) (Black-Gutman, 2001, p. 24)

Marysia, currently a university professor of physics, explains "I have 3 mothers"; her story is worth considering in relation to multiple attachments. She experienced different situations from the age of two and a half to ten years. She was separated from her mother and lived until five years of age with the Bialowarczyks – Waclaw and Lucina, a Christian couple who became her family. She had a very good experience with them. Her mother survived the war and when she went to take Marysia back, the little girl didn't recognize her mother and didn't want to go with her. The Bialowarczyks decided to take her mother into their home also in order to allow her to restore the relationship with Marysia. After few months, Marysia and her mother moved to Warsaw, where they lived, maintaining contact with the Bialowarczyks. Unfortunately, after 2 years, Marysia's mother died in a car incident. Her former foster family wanted to adopt her, but a maternal uncle refused and she spent about two years with him. As she says, she had "a very bad time with him" and afterwards she was adopted by a Jewish couple with no children, who became her third secure base for her life.

"I was ten, ten and a half; I wasn't a very happy child at that point and I wasn't really developing properly emotionally. And when they took me, they really put all the love they had into me, and built an environment for me which was so positive, so nurturing. I remember my mother told me that at the beginning I got very angry when anybody came to visit, and of course their friends wanted to come and see their new daughter; when they realized I was upset about it, they told all their friends not to come and visit." (Marysia)

It must be mentioned here that Marysia later apparently gave her own daughter similar love and the best environment she could, when she adopted her.

Isaac, children's book writer and illustrator, had to change his hiding places several times. He experienced wonderful relationships with his foster mothers, his peers and educators in school, but also a bad relationship in one family. He became the son of Madame Devolder, they shared everything: bad and good things, food, work.

Madame Devolder accepted me to stay with her [...] She was a tall and strong woman, with a deep voice, cheerful laugh, warm face. I liked immediately. [...] She treated me as if I was her son. I was Jean Devolder. [...] It was a quiet and peaceful life, but it was never easy. We lived on few things and we were often hungry. But even when there was almost nothing to eat, Madame Devolder shared it with me. [...] Madame Devolder enrolled me to school." (Isaac) (Millman, 2006, p. 48)

After some time in a children's home, Isaac was adopted by a family and moved to the U.S.

In 1952, I was officially adopted by Meyer and Bella Millman and I got their name. At the beginning, it was difficult to get used to another country and to consider two strangers as my parents. I did it in the course of the time and with Millmans' help, they were always patient and fond with me. They sent me to school and then to university. (Isaac) (Millman, 2006, p. 76)

Dora was in hiding with her old non-Jewish uncle, the husband of her mother's sister. While he was with Dora, his wife was deported and Dora's little brother fell ill and died; he continued to take care of her like a loving father

"because he played the violin and I had studied the piano, we played together, the music was always very important in the house, [...] we played together, my uncle who raised me. It was a very

important strong bond it was actually a parent-child bond [...] and it's a very important bond, and, as you said, a strong adult, an important adult in your life, who really sincerely accepts you and loves you." (Theodora)

and he adopted her

"my non-Jewish uncle, had at that point already adopted me officially, and he adopted me as soon as he could, not after the war, after it was clear my parents weren't coming back." (Theodora)

Stefan is at this time a retired cardio-surgeon and he is one of the two children in the sample who was separated from his parents and later reunified. He says he does not perceive the war time as a traumatic period, because he was always with someone from his family. When he was seven, he was taken into hiding by Sofia, the housekeeper who always had been with Stefan's mother. Either during life before and after the Holocaust, Stefan had two maternal figures: his mother and Sofia.

"(I was) always with a person I knew and who was a continuum with the past [...] I didn't pass through this period as an abandoned child, because I always had a person I knew from the beginning, before my birth; for me it was like having a mother, not the same but almost." (Stefan)

Boris Cyrulnik (2004) refers to the case of people in difficult situations who find new strength and have a better life, thanks to the relationship with his or her partner, and also becoming parents, having children and building a family. Of course, in research and in social work, we know situations of couples where people "recycle" with a partner the dysfunctional dynamics they have experienced during their earlier life. However, Cyrulnik argues that one's own partner can be that significant adult who helps the other to rewrite his or her own story from a resilient perspective. Actually, in one of our stories, the marriage was the way of keeping one's own identity hidden and only the divorce was the breaking point for no more hiding. These excerpts from conversations with three women explain the importance of their husbands in their lives.

"Thank God! I mean, he is with me today and he helped me immeasurably to become who I am today. He pushed me to start speaking about my experiences [...] I started not until 1985." (Charlene)

"I married a wonderful man when I was 21. He was able to soothe my lacerating pain and to understand my wish for family. We have 3 children and now we have also grandchildren. In their little faces, I see mine." (Erika) (Vander Zee, 2003, p. 16)

"We actually lived here until unfortunately he passed away, very young, he was 63 when he died and [...], and that's the major trauma in my life, that is, I think, the most major trauma of any of the traumas." (Theodora)

Shifting from Hidden Life to an Open Tale

As shown above, the possibility to tell your story, to turn it into a narrative and to have someone listen to you, has been shown to be very protective.

In Louise's narrative, it is clear just how important the relationship with Selma was in working through experiences during the Holocaust. Selma, after having lost her parents, went into hiding with Louise's family, all together into a very small room, so that after the liberation Louise was scared of being in open spaces. Her parents' reaction to liberation was to focus completely on the future, forgetting the past and becoming totally silent about it. They weren't able to respond to Louise to learn about her past. Selma was the significant adult who listened to Louise's words and needs, and gave her respectful answers.

"Then, as children you talk about resilience; children are resilient, your parents tell you something and ok, and you accept it but then we got older; you remember these things and you want an answer, and I had no answers except from my friend Selma; I spent my summers with her and I knew

I couldn't ask my parents, they didn't want to answer so I asked Selma and she answered [...]. So with Selma answering my questions she made sure not to go into some topics that she knew that my parents didn't want to go into." (Louise)

Selma was so respectful of Louise's parents' wishes that she kept silent in relation to part of the experience Louise had repressed, and Louise knew the story just a short time before her father's death.

"I had a brother that was born at the end of the war; [...] after 3 days the little boy died; but I have never heard that. From Selma I found that out about a year before my father passed away, [...], because my mother let it slip, and I have said "what are you talking about" and she said "well you know this is your little brother" and this is a strange story that all my life, we sang this little lullaby, [...] in the lullaby is the name Matthew and we thought it was just a nice name, it was a family song; I sang it to my children and I never realized, and then when my mother said that we had this little brother, I said "Mom, was his name Matthew?", she said "yes" [...], all my life I've sung this song, I sang it to my children, I thought it was a family lullaby; I had no idea, they made up this song when my little brother was born, so that's how much my parents didn't want to talk Selma never told me." (Louise)

Strengths

We asked "Looking back over your whole life, in your opinion what are the strengths that helped you to develop, and grow and build your life after the Holocaust?" We didn't aim to assess but, on the contrary, to uncritically collect the personal point of view of interviewees on their life trajectories,

Several different strengths were reported; survivors refer to individual, familial and social aspects.

Charlene underlines the value of her first years of life with her parents and the way her mother spoke to her during the ghetto period:

"I think the strength was because I have such a salient background, such good examples that prepared me, I guess, to handle things. I don't know from where the strength came but I must give credit to my parents and to the entire, I guess, upbringing in the life before the war. I was so secure and even later in the ghetto I survived in the ghetto because I felt loved and I felt cared for. My mother had the wonderful, I guess, talent of injecting hope when there was no hope. [...] All throughout our lives in the ghetto my mama would come home from work, black and blue, as I said, from beatings, and hungry and yet she would dream and tell us to help her dream and plan a party when papa would come home [...] and what we would serve, how we would welcome him [...] everything was always positive and I know that she didn't feel so positive and hopeful and yet she fed me on that hope that perhaps helped me survive later." (Charlene)

Charlene escaped the ghetto and spent almost two years hidden alone in the Polish forest, going through an extremely hard time; however she kept that hope:

"It was very difficult, it was a nightmare. But had I given up the hope that I would someday find my mother, I don't think I could have survived; yeah, it was to find my mother." (Charlene)

Marysia feels herself strong, a fighter, underlying again the secure attachment with her adoptive parents.

"Yes, there was Holocaust, there was my biological mother getting killed, not having a good biological uncle, the '68 in Poland, [...], things like a stone which you have to overcome, [...], I feel I am a

fighter, I think I got a lot of that from my adoptive parents from the love they gave me that made me strong [...] because they gave me so much, they let me become a strong person. They made me feel secure, so even when things were going bad [...] I was sure of myself, I was secure" (Marysia)

The nature of Josy's strengths would seem to be the opposite of those of Marysia. She is a retired social worker. After the Holocaust she got married and had 3 children, two of them born with disabilities. It was difficult for her and her family. Her strengths appear to come from the relationship with her husband and from her personal qualities, such as patience, awareness, curiosity and altruism.

"one of the strengths also I think is my relationship with my husband, finding someone who makes me feel stronger and better, [...], my relationship with my husband has been very helpful; yes, I have a good thing, I always think you can't have everything good, so I have one thing good, and the others [...] I think having a question in mind, you know being patient, it also shows in my work [...] to be patient with people, to be understanding of them, you can never judge the person by the way they look because inside there is all kinds of stuff [...] I think being comfortable with myself, it's actually a long time, being conscious with my life, with my parents, with everything that happened, and you being a patient person, [...], so I think that's, that's a pretty good strength just being understanding of people, you know, being inquisitive, wanting to know, and being helpful." (Josy)

The case of Halina is representative of all those experiences where the situation after the war was even worse than before (Suedfeld, 2001). All her family survived, but they moved to England and it was hard to integrate into a completely different world (family, society, friends, school). Her mother died after a short time and the relationship with her father became problematic. Her mother was a former swimming champion, and sport looks like the heritage in Halina's life that enabled her to start her recovery.

"In Maccabiah club, since I was so shy, table tennis was my saving; I mean, I just played every night, [...] I got socialized, I didn't have to go on dates, I was able to just play table tennis, and 1953, I got chosen to be representing England in Maccabiah games, which is the Jewish Olympic games in Israel" (Halina)

That was Halina's opportunity to visit Israel; she felt really welcome and started releasing the sense of having to hide herself that she still had; only in playing sport did her confidence improve.

"this was my discovery, and I was just so happy, ([...]) I met my family, my aunt had 4 children; they were wonderful to me, they fought out for me, you know; that's not what happened in England, I didn't ever meet any people, so I discovered warm people and a beautiful country" (Halina)

In the new country she developed a strong sense of belonging to Jewish culture and celebrated the opportunity to openly feel and express that she is Jewish. Still today she identifies herself with Jewish people, and underlines the importance of education and belonging to a community,

"I think we are very resilient, and that's why education is so important because they have always said you know that they can't take it away from me [...] I really think there is no another group of people like us, being thrown around the world [...], we kept our community together, we helped each other, [...], we help, and you know we build these communities, we have the Synagogues where we go; that's the one thing I don't leave, being a member of a Synagogue, because I like the community." (Halina)

and she feels happy

"I think we are very tough, I think we appear gentle but we are not, I think we have this strength inside us, [...], because we survived such terrible things, we had to survive, we fought so hard, [...],

I don't appear to be tough but I am, I mean, I had my problems; my mother died, and then my first child, having to give him up, very tough, very tough, very tough stuff, and here I'm happy, and I was able to bring up my other son well; he is a happy kid" (Halina)

Conclusions

Revisiting the rationale of the research, we claim the trajectories we analyzed are useful in reflecting on protective factors that promote resilience and which can be applied to social work with children in out-of-home care. Some protective factors refer specifically to Jewish culture; these have to do particularly with the sense of belonging to a community.

In general terms, we found that these narratives of hidden child survivors confirm that traumatic events assume different meanings when they are considered in a long-term perspective; they challenge a more deterministic view of human development. All of the survivors in this sample have adapted positively in later life and have developed well, despite seemingly terrible odds against this. This does not mean that suffering doesn't exist; rather it means that they have lived with their trauma as a part of their life and not as the main aspect.

Moreover, the data shows that double or triple familial belonging or bonds (familial, social, religious) can promote an integrated adult identity. When biographical omissions are avoided and children are allowed and enabled to know, comprehend, remember and narrate their trajectories of life within a framework of continuity (Moro, 2007) they organize their trajectories into a single narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1997). These life stories confirm that children are able to maintain their relational development, building continuity between different situations. They can develop multiple attachments (Palacio-Quintin, 2000; Cassidy, & Shaver, 1999), both strong and "light" attachments, without experiencing immobilising disruption. The secure attachment with a foster family or an adoptive family can sometimes allow a child to improve the often problematic attachment to her or his biological family. Hence, the findings suggest that a child can sometimes develop secure attachments, even after the trauma of separation. Subsequent attachment can positively affect previous insecure or disrupted attachment, and this can avoid the splitting of life experiences – determining the present foster family, the "good family", and the past biological family, the "bad" one (Neil, Beek, & Schofield, 2003).

Children may meet and maintain bonds with "significant adults" (parents, foster parents, siblings, social workers or other adults) who take part in their personal story as "development tutors". These significant adults can help the "narrative child" to build different meanings about her/his trauma experience (personal-social representation).

Research findings offer social workers working with children and families in residential homes and social agencies the following insights.

It is crucial to maintain an open perspective towards the future of children and not to lock them into imprisoning stories. Therefore, social workers can become significant others themselves, or can work to improve relationships within the community in order to help adults to be significant to children; they can help adults to become *good listeners*, and to support the process of "new identity" construction, integrating new situations into the personal story.

The narratives we analyzed show that help and support for survivors emerged from daily life, the "normality"; engaging with music, sport, being a member of a group, reading a book, writing or drawing, and giving expression to one's own creativity, may all work as protective factors. It could be said that the normality of everyday life allowed these children to become resilient. Hence, these findings suggest social workers may have not only therapeutic tools at their disposal, but also socio-educational and community based tools and strategies to work with children and families.

Parental support is important to help parents to build relationships with children based on presence, relational stability, deep acceptance and a feeling of belonging to a culture and a value system that allows a person to develop belonging and continuity.

The element of unconditional love must be seriously taken into consideration; in all the stories of child survivors, we found instances where people encountered a turning point such a transformative loving relationship:

- as children – biological family, foster family, adoptive family, significant adult;
- as adults – partner;
- as parents and grandparents – children and grandchildren;
- as citizens – other people living in the community.

Since individual life narratives and strengths may be very different, we are asked as researchers and social workers not to overlook the crucial aspect of diversity and not to be trapped into the false illusion of the methodological homogeneity. Further research must be undertaken and new social work tools developed in order to better identify and actualise people's strengths and empower them fully. Cyrulnik claims that "an individual may change his or her *internal working model* when he or she grows older and reworks his or her narrative to change the meaning attributed to the fact" and that also society may change its *external working model* (2008, p. 32). Therefore, social workers must not only work directly with people in need, but they must also be active in the social network to foster a more positive and open society. Gardens may be full of coloured flowers when people water *dark soil* with drops of resilience.

Note

1. Child survivors are defined as "any Jewish children who survived in Nazi-occupied Europe, by whatever means, whether in hiding, as a partisan, in the ghettos or in the camps. To be considered a child survivor, the individual, must have been no older than sixteen at the end of the war." Given the different cognitive and emotional levels of the children at different ages, when trying to understand the experiences of the child survivors, it is important to relate to them according to their different ages at the time of occupation." (Kangisser, 2005, p. 2)

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