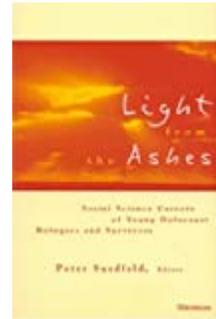




Peter Suedfeld, ed. *Light from the Ashes: Social Science Careers of Young Holocaust Refugees and Survivors*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001. x + 446 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-09745-6; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-06745-9.



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Child Survivors and Their Postwar Professional Lives: Counter-Narratives of Success and Psychological Adjustment

In the academic study of the Holocaust, the research on survivors and their written and oral expressions has traditionally constituted a significant and vast field. The last fifteen years have witnessed a notable rise in works that exclusively analyze the postwar fate of Holocaust survivors. A prominent segment of these studies has singled out child survivors as well as the children of survivors.[1] Many of these works were written by psychologists, but historians also have taken an interest. More recently, authors have turned to the postwar fate of specific groups of survivors such as the child inmates of the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar.[2] An increasing number of these scholars have challenged the established consensus of pre-1980s psychological literature. These older studies generally described survivors as suffering from a debilitating “survivor syndrome” that never really left them and kept them from experiencing professional success and harmonious private lives. Authors of more recent works, by contrast, argue that the discipline’s overemphasis on disease and suffering has prevented many scholars to see the striking level of success and productive psychological transformation espe-

cially among child survivors.

Peter Suedfeld’s collection, *Light From the Ashes: Social Science Careers of Young Holocaust Refugees and Survivors*, adds to this growing body of literature and the new focus on healing and success. His book offers a window on the experiences and lives of yet another group of child survivors—those who chose to become scholars of the social and behavioral sciences in their adult life.

The book by the professor emeritus of psychology at the University of British Columbia originated in a session at the 1996 meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology. The panel brought together a number of scholars for autobiographical reflections on connections between trauma and their academic pursuits.

Suedfeld’s project is both breathtakingly broad and noticeably narrow in scope. On the one hand, he has invited the contributors to his volume to review and explore their experiences of the Nazi horror, postwar lives, and careers. On the other hand, he is concerned with one specific question, namely if and how the experience

of early trauma influenced the career choices and topics of scholarly research (p. 2).

The editor refutes the view that “sufferers represent the norm for survivors.” Instead he advances the hypothesis that “very many child survivors and refugees are psychologically well-adjusted, socially integrated, emotionally warm and healthy, professionally successful and, in general, productive and valuable citizens” (p. 8). This said, Suedfeld argues that the Holocaust experience interacted with inborn and social factors that left a series of traits specific to survivors. He particularly singles out the survivors’ drive to prove Nazi propaganda images of “parasitic” enemies of society wrong. This drive led many survivors to a level of productivity rarely found among other members of their age cohort (pp. 432-433). Suedfeld also proposes that the survivors’ near-death experience prompted them to “leav[e] posthumous traces of their existence” (p. 434). They did so by turning to scientific, social, and political projects that aimed at improving the lives of many people. Moreover, the survivors’ loss of close family members not only translated into a “need for love,” but also for “status” that they hoped to find in prestigious academic positions (p. 435).

Suedfeld bases his hypotheses on narratives by the volume’s contributors. His collection brings together seventeen accounts by accomplished and widely published scientists—mostly psychologists—at the end of their careers at predominantly North American universities. In their majority, these scholars identify themselves as Jewish, including the editor. As the offspring of an assimilated Jewish family in Budapest, Peter Suedfeld survived the war with falsified Christian papers hidden in a Red Cross orphanage. When the Soviet army liberated the Hungarian capital, he was not even ten (pp. 159-162).

Two of the contributors, however, Karl W. Butzer and Siegfried Steufert, were born to non-Jewish families in Germany that suffered at the hands of the Nazis due to their political activities. Four of the authors are women. Two of them, Hadassa Black-Gutman and Gerda Lederer, did not embark on their academic careers until much later in life. This low number of female contributors is a sign of the postwar expectations and views of motherhood as well as the traditional male dominance in this and other academic fields.

The book’s main organization reflects Suedfeld’s differentiation between three groups of contributors. The narratives of seven “survivors,” i.e., those who had to live through the Holocaust, precede the accounts by eight “refugees,” i.e., those who managed to escape after a pe-

riod of persecution. The two authors who had been “targets of political persecution” conclude the survivor texts. The volume also offers two summarizing pieces by Paul Marcus, a younger psychoanalyst, and Peter Suedfeld himself. Neither Marcus’s nor Suedfeld’s concluding observations make an attempt to distinguish between the experiences and practices by members of these three groups. In a more controversial move, the editor in fact emphasizes that all of them were “survivors of the Holocaust,” calling the debates over what constitutes true survivor status “unproductive and demeaning” (p. 10).

The individual authors exhibit a striking level of diversity in their contributions. Some chapters follow the format of scholarly papers and reveal attempts to strive for personal detachment and objectivity. Jacob Lomranz, for example, combines a brief “biographical synopsis” in the form of a “personal narrative” with an orientation of “science as scientists” (pp. 291-292). In this second part, the psychologist relates the earlier biographical segment to his scientific work to determine key characteristics not just of his own biography, but of a “group culture.” Lomranz makes use of the image of the “wandering Jew,” seeking to appropriate it as a positive analytical concept that captures the attitudes of survivors. According to the author, “risk taking,” a craving for “curiosity,” and even humor as a “defense mechanism” are key personality characteristics of members of this group culture (pp. 311-313).

Other scholars use the format of a more conventional intellectual autobiography with pronounced segments of personal introspection. The clinical psychologist Henry P. David, for instance, has organized his account in strictly chronological fashion. The early passages trace his family history through several generations and list achievements of family members in the German lands. His narrative strategy resembles that of the “assimilationist” Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith and the “contribution” history of early liberal accounts of German-Jewish history. It comes as no surprise that his father was indeed a member of this influential prewar German-Jewish organization (pp. 172-173). In later segments, David explicitly links the turn to family and population research in his professional career to the struggles to legalize abortion in the United States in the 1960s. David portrays “hostility ... to sexuality education, contraception, and abortion” as inherently linked to Nazi Germany and actively turns against these practices and policies in North America (pp. 185-186). The research institute he founded in the early 1970s soon opened offices in a number of Asian, Central American,

and Eastern European countries, increasing his work's impact and giving it also a distinctly international character.

Despite the contributions' diversity, it is possible to find ample support for Suedfeld's hypotheses in every text. Jacob Lomranz did not only set out to prove the Nazis wrong, he also took on a key propaganda construct and set out to transform it into a tool of analysis. Henry P. David's political and scientific work improves the lives of many women with previously limited access to birth control and abortion facilities. Gerda Lederer, a political psychologist, brings the children of Holocaust survivors in the United States together with descendants of perpetrators from Austria. In the "virtual classrooms" of her internet classes at the New School, she seeks to "help them ... understand the past" and "prevent genocide in the future" (pp. 289-290). In addition, all seventeen contributors have reached the level of professional success around which Suedfeld's hypothesis evolves.

A striking characteristic of this group of contributors meanwhile is their self-selecting nature. The seventeen authors emerged from a field of brilliant researchers. They also explicitly decided to participate. Others who had been invited to write a chapter declined (p. 432). There is also no room for those who might have chosen an academic career in the past but did not succeed. As Suedfeld repeatedly points out, his volume represents an "opportunity sample." The book's results are "speculative" and not based on a broad quantitative study (pp. 2, 431, 435). Suedfeld himself has conducted this kind of work elsewhere.[4] He specifically applied quantitative content analytical methods to oral history interviews with survivors of various social and age groups. His findings support the hypotheses of this volume but still cannot fully solve the conundrum at hand. After all, oral history sources pose problems of their own, ranging from the selection of the interviewees to the specific methods applied to the interviews.

In this respect, it would have been illuminating to include the standard letter or questions Suedfeld sent to his contributors. As literary scholars have shown, the nature, content, and premises of the questions partially confined and even prescribed the answers themselves. The volume's contributions indeed reveal the use of narrative strategies by scholars trained prior to the postmodernist turn in the social sciences of the 1980s that problema-

tized authorial intent and the notion of the author itself. Drawing on Michel Foucault's work, Paul Marcus interprets the volume's writings as a "spiritual exercise" and a "form of resistance to normative modes of subjectification" (p. 425). Holocaust scholars working in fields of literary criticism and theoretically guided oral history will find ample material of how accomplished scholars reorganize and reassert their lives to construct a meaningful biography.[3]

Finally, Suedfeld's hypotheses are sometimes so broad that it is not entirely clear whether he maintains that these coping mechanisms, traits, and successes are unique to Holocaust survivors or can be also seen among survivors of other genocides as well. This concern ties in with Suedfeld's call for more research (p. 12). On the question of child survivors of the Holocaust, their postwar coping strategies and career choices, this volume represents an informative secondary as well as primary source. Suedfeld's book will undoubtedly prompt further research and will find scholars who turn to its richly textured accounts in their own work on survivor narratives.

Notes

[1]. For examples of the growing U.S. literature, see Judith S. Kestenberg and Charlotte Kahn, eds. *Children Surviving Persecution: An International Study of Trauma and Healing* (Westport: Praeger, 1998); Aaron Hass, *The Aftermath. Living with the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Alan L. Berger, *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[2]. Cf. Judith Hemmendinger, *The Children of Buchenwald: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Their Post-War Lives* (Jerusalem: Gefen House, 2000). For an example of an individual autobiographical account by a historian and child survivor, see Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory. The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996).

[3]. Pierre Bourdieu, "Die biographische Illusion," *Bios* 3 (1990): pp. 75-81.

[4]. See Peter Suedfeld, "Homo Invictus. The Indomitable Species," *Canadian Psychology* 38 (1998): pp. 164-173; and idem, et al., "Structural Aspects of Survivors' Thinking about the Holocaust," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 11 (1998): pp. 323-336.

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