

Interview with My Grandmother: An Account of a Holocaust Survivor

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Loss and Trauma

While the tragic events of September 11, 2001 are fresh in the public memory, there are many other stories that have long since been forgotten. That same morning my grandmother, Miriam Indich Tauber, was sharing her story about the Second World War--her fears, losses, and tragedies-- to be preserved by the Shoah foundation. The Shoah foundation records interviews of Holocaust survivors as a way to, "overcome prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry and the suffering they cause through the educational use of the Institute's visual history testimonies." As one of eight grandchildren, we strongly encouraged my grandmother to do this tape for several years so that future generations in our family would be able to understand where we came from and what she had to endure. Accepting our challenge to make this video, however, did not come easy for her. To unlock the past was not something she was willing to do unreservedly. After much encouragement my grandmother found inner strength, and committed to sitting down and recounting an incredible story. It is this same inner strength that allowed her to survive the war, the tragedy and the loss and go on to become a wife, mother, a grandmother -a true matriarch of our family. While my grandmother did this interview eight years ago, I had never seen the tape until we were given this assignment. In asking several of my family members if they had seen the tapes, they also had not watched. I knew immediately that I wanted to use this opportunity to watch the video and speak to my grandmother about what she went through. Not only was I able to learn the story as she tells it, but also understand her resilience further. I now understand why she is called a "survivor."

Growing up in a small town in Poland, Minka as she was called in Polish, describes her childhood as a young red headed girl as warm, supportive and happy. Living with her father, mother, and older brother - Minka has only some memories of this time. She vividly was able to recall the smells in her home, her mother Lola always cooking. She also remembers visiting her religious grandparents in a neighboring town, as well as her meaningful relationship with her father - him being the more lenient of her two parents. Living comfortably, her father a tanner and her mother a brassier seamstress, Minka attended school, had several friends and a close relationship with her brother - a typical family life. Minka's father wanted their family to immigrate to America. He and his brother

traveled to America numerous times and were studying to become Rabbis since this was the predominant way that men were able to get papers for their families. Anticipating the move, Minka and her brother studied English - a skill that would serve her well in the future. While her uncle's papers were processed just before the start of the war, moving his family to New York, their papers got stuck in the consulate and never got processed once the war began. The normalcy of Minka's life was quickly taken away from her. By age thirteen, the Second World War had begun and for the next nine years would define her life and as a result force her to grow up very quickly.

Upon hearing word of an impending war, they packed up their belongings in a horse drawn wagon and along with several other Jews in their town began the trip to nearby Stanislavov. Under the communist Russian regime at this time, Minka and her brother attended Russian school while their father worked for a tannery. Acquiring a new language and culture, Minka remembers being forced to show loyalty to Stalin and communism ideals. During this time, her father developed a mutually beneficial relationship with the Russians because of his skills as a tanner. As the Russians began to retreat and the Germans take over, he was asked to move with his family to Russia to work for them. Minka remembers with much frustration her father saying that they were four strong healthy people and therefore did not need to move. Perhaps had they left Poland at this time, the four of them would have survived the war together-a regret that my grandmother continues to carry with her today. Not long after, the Germans invaded Poland and the brutal realities of the war caught up with the Jews in Stanislavov.

After some time under the German occupation, Minka was sent to her maternal grandmother's home on the outskirts of Stanislavov while her family remained in town. It was here that one could say she experienced her first traumatic event. As she tells it, the German Gestapo knocked on her grandmother's door and demanded that they all get out. Her grandmother had fallen ill several days before and was unable to get out of bed at the German command. Since she could not get out of bed, and in front of a thirteen-year-old Minka and some other family members, her grandmother was shot on the spot. This part of the movie was very difficult for me to watch. As my own grandmother described

this event about her own grandmother without any emotion, like she was reading off a script, I realized that no matter how vivid her description I do not have the ability to imagine what this must have been like. As she continues to retell the events of that day, she and her remaining family were brought to a huge fence and lined up in a row along it. As the Germans began to shoot the Jews that they had gathered up and lined on this fence, my grandmother - by the grace of god - was thrown over the fence. To this day she cannot recollect specifics from that moment as to who or how she was thrown but she found herself on the other side of the fence, turned and ran through forest to her parents and brother in Stanislavov. When I asked her what emotion she remembers feeling at the moment she described it as bewilderment, but could not evoke any further memories or emotions about that fateful day.

After being reunited with her family in Stanislavov, the Germans began building a ghetto in the town. Shortly after, the family were placed into the ghetto and remained there for some time. A memory that she vividly describes from this time in the ghetto were the tarp covered trucks that would come into the ghetto in the morning, fill up with Jews and then come back later that evening empty. She learned later on that the trucks were taking people to dig huge gravesites where they would bury already dead Jews and then become their own graves. Body upon body was piled into these graves, some people even buried alive. My grandmother conveys this time in the ghetto as period of intense humiliation and degradation. Furthermore, there were physical repercussions as a result of the immense hunger they faced. Her teeth began to rot and as a developing adolescent, her puberty was stunted. In the tape she says, "I had to live in faith and trust in whatever purpose God had for me. I quickly learned that you couldn't ask why." Going in as an adolescent and coming out closer to being an adult, the time the ghetto robbed my grandmother of her childhood. Living in every day in fear, she articulates her time in the ghetto as particularly difficult to get through and come out of as a whole person.

During their time in the ghetto my great-grandmother Lola had befriended the wife of a Nazi soldier. Not only did she provide them with a little extra food, she was able to secure false papers for the four of them. They escaped the ghetto under these false identities - my grandmother and great-grandmother to Warsaw and the boys to Krakow. With this new identity came many challenges. Jews

were being recognized by their speech and even certain ways they spoke the language. Thanks to my grandmother's fair skin, blonde hair and myriad of languages that she was able to speak there was less concern for her since she was able to more convincingly pass for an Aryan. In Warsaw Minka, now known as Katiya, worked for a German family as a housekeeper. Her mother worked for another family, the man of the household Mr. Fink a member of the SS. They were only allowed to meet in secret. In order to maintain her identity, my grandmother had to go to church regularly, hung a cross in her room and wore one around her neck. She did not go out much, saying "the less people you came in contact with at this time the better it was" and fasted up to three times a week as a symbol of hope and prayer. One day, the Gestapo came to her home looking for her. She had been out of the house at the time, and the lady of the house told them that she would return later that evening. Upon getting this news, my grandmother packed up her belongings, left the house never to return. She learned that the Gestapo was looking for her because her brother had been caught. In Krakow he had been processing false papers with a classmate for other Jews. The Gestapo got word that the friend was doing this and went to arrest him, as timing had it her brother also went to visit friend at this same hour. Assuming that he was also involved in the production of these false documentations, they subsequently arrested him as well. He had been carrying around a picture of my grandmother at this time with the address of where she was working in Warsaw. This is how the Gestapo ended up knocking on her door that day in Warsaw. Although she still does not know what happened to her brother, this was the last time she ever heard anything about him.

Armed with the information about her brother's capture, my grandmother sat on a park bench in front of my great-grandmother's home until they were able to speak. When I asked her about what emotion she must have felt at this time, she describes it as "having no time to cry or morn," and that the "problem at hand was more important." Surviving from day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute was only life that they had experienced for the past several years. When telling this story on the video I noticed that her voice became taut, she spoke faster and louder. She also made a nervous joke when talking about waiting for her mother on a park bench. At the time in Warsaw, there was an underground

Jewish community where my grandmother found refuge until they devised a plan. My great-grandmother, with the courage that defined her character, confessed to her family the Finks that she was Jewish and that her daughter was in trouble. They respected her hard work and dedication to their family, and miraculously agreed to help. Getting new false papers from a dead woman in the nearby hospital, my grandmother was then sent to Dresden to work as a housekeeper for another SS family, friends of the Finks. When asked what her name was when living in Dresden, my grandmother cannot recall. "I blocked those details out, and I would ask my mother but she is not here." It is here that she spent most of the remaining wartime. Anxious to rejoin with her mother, she soon after walked out on the family and went to the train station to reunite with her mother. At the train station she heard someone screaming her name, presumably the woman of the house, and hid in a toilet stall until she could safely get on the next train. The two days on the train my grandmother described as chaotic, but was followed by a reunion of mother and daughter and the near ending of the war.

In April of 1945 an American soldier and dentist named Dr. Bernie Metrick liberated both her and her mother. In an article for the 78th Armored Medical Battalion, Dr. Metrick recounted his story of meeting my grandmother. He describes meeting my grandmother. "A young, blondish, Aryan looking girl of about 17 accosts me and says, "I heard you were looking for me, I am a Jew." The surprise was unbelievable." Mirka, as he called her, served as his dental assistant, getting food and supplies from him for her and her mother. While Metrick's division continued west since combat was continuing, he said to Mirka, "You can stay and take over the clinic. She asked me if I had a photograph of myself to remember me by, because, she said, I was the first person that was ever kind to her and wanted to remember me." After Dr. Metrick left, Mirka describes this time as hard to believe but the time she was able to come to grips with the larger picture of what had happened. They were free, but it was hard to realize given the grief that they had suffered. At the same time living in Germany at the end of the war was rehabilitating. They actually felt liberated, unlike how she says those people who survived in the camps felt. My grandmother talks of this moment in Germany as a "time of finding each other, recounting stories since no one person's was the same, and wondering why and how they all survived."

It was only after getting to America that she learned what happened to her father. At the end of the war the survivors were forced by the German's to march from the camps. Without food or water, and already in skeletal shape they were forced on these long marches through the countryside. It is here that my great-grandfather died. He was so close to the end, but unfortunately did not make it. In the video she predicts a similar phenomenon after 9/11. Thought the attacks were going on at the time of the interview, she speculated that people will all remember unique accounts of how they escaped, where they were at the time and other vivid imagery from the day's events. Today, this parallel is astounding.

On May 20th 1946 - my grandmothers 21st birthday - she and her mother, along with several of their friends, took the first ship the Marine Flasher, to the New York Harbor. In Germany she had begun to work for UNRRA (United States Rehabilitation and Relief Organization). Here she met an officer who recognized her last name, it matching someone he knew in Cleveland. This was her Uncle. In great haste she wrote to him asking to vouch for her mother and herself to come. "We will not ask you for any other help," she wrote. "When we get to America we will be on our own." The uncle must have had influence because he was able to get them to come with the first wave of refugees. Entering the New York harbor with the name Miriam on her ticket, my grandmother felt all her dreams were coming true - a voyage of hope and expectations culminated in this arrival. She recalls a beautiful reception at the harbor and equates good memories to this birthday. The following years in New York, my grandmother had to restore all that was taken from her. She called this process "mental reestablishment." I asked my grandmother what the first thing that she did in New York was. She told me about buying a mattress. After having slept on used mattresses for the majority of her childhood she was finally able to sleep on something for the first time that was hers. The mattress has become symbolic for her as the start of something new, untouched and her own.

In American she began working for the United Nations - given her experience with UNRRA and her ability to speak many languages - she became a translator. It was here that she was introduced to Herman Tauber. The cousin of a friend of hers from the United Nations, Herman had left Poland with

his brother prior to the war never to see his family again. He fell in love with Miriam at first sight - and welcomed her and her mother into his life. This life however was in the Dutch island of Curacao. Promising protection and security, and that all their children be born in America, my grandmother married my grandfather and moved, along with my great-grandmother, to Curacao where they still reside for half the year. Describing her relationship -now in sixty plus years of marriage my grandmother forms tears in her eyes. "Herman was the beginning and the end of my life."

However sweet it was to be liberated and in America, the cost of what she experienced, witnessed and felt changed her dramatically. My great-grandmother talked of the war, her husband and son very often. My grandmother on the other hand closed the door when she left Europe. With the exception of religious songs, my grandmother has never been able to sing. She also remembers the only time crying since coming to America was at her mother's funeral in 1995 - over 49 years later. Having cried every night for several years in Europe, she describes herself as having no more tears to cry. In asking her if she believes she suffered a "trauma," she says she did suffer but has kept busy in order to suppress that which happened. Furthermore, my grandfather not being a direct survivor himself allowed her to go on with life without having to repeat her difficult memories every day. He did not want to talk about it either, having lost his parents and brother and sister as well, so they put focus into work and family, assured that if other things were going on it would be easier to cope. Certain times however bring up certain things for her - proving that the memories are not dead. For example covered trucks and the sight of a policeman evoke paranoia and negative emotions. Also, she experiences having occasional nightmares of being lost and can't finding her way home. Besides these enduring symptoms, the biggest consequence that my grandmother describes is her lack of education. The war started when she was thirteen and by the time she arrived in America at age 21, my grandmother went straight to work. This lack of educational opportunity has continued to haunt my grandmother till this day. The event certainly changed both my grandmother and great-grandmother. But they both believed strongly in that if you stay in the past you cannot move into the present. While she knows that deep down things do not go away, the biggest achievement in her life was not surviving, but instead her

family. She had to keep looking forward as a mother, and continues to take this approach in her eighties.

This exercise was very meaningful for me. Having never watched this video or heard my grandmother sharing any of these stories with myself or my other six cousins, I feel privileged to have been able to watch, talk, listen and try to make sense of her stories. As a eleventh grader at the time the video was made, I was aware of the significance of capturing oral history before it disappears. However, given my undergraduate and now graduate education I was much better equipped to watch and make sense of her story now. For a long time I believed that moving forward, 'forgetting' what happened is not the right way to cope with trauma. After this course and watching my grandmother retell her story I realize that this form of resilience was the only way that she became the strong, fiercely independent woman that she is today. As someone pursuing a career in clinical psychology, I was also awakened to the reality that I will not always be able to understand what my patient is recounting to me. As hard as I try, I am truly unable to fully grasp what my grandmother saw and experienced as she survived the war. This does not mean that I am unable to be a sympathetic ear, a sounding board and someone to dispense advice. Listening to her, watching body language change as she recounted different stories, and then speaking to her first hand provided me with amazing, first-hand clinical material and I am so grateful for having the opportunity to process it with my grandma.

While my grandmother accounted her memories in the video, Dr. Metrick accounts the story differently. He describes her story by saying, "she told of experiences where they were lined up to be shot with a crowd of others and fell fast enough, played dead, waited until it was quiet then got up and escaped. I remember her telling me at one time they were lined up, told to undress before being shot, and the German officer in charge told her to run away because she couldn't be Jewish with her blond hair and blue eyes." My mother also remembers hearing different stories than both Dr. Metrick's as well as the one my grandmother tells on video. As the work done on predictors of PTSD show, remembering past emotional trauma is influenced by current emotional state. Furthermore, memory has been proven to be context and state dependent, which may explain why each time the story has been told, it

changes from its original state. Perhaps my grandmother's retelling of the story as different from Dr. Metrick's is motivated by their differing states not at the time of the event, but since then. It is important to understand that implicated in a personal account of a traumatic event, is that no one will never know truly what happened. From this example with my grandmother's story, it is clear that the nature of memories is volatile and must be treated as such. This is important when looking at diagnoses - especially of PTSD.

This applied perspective added greatly to the class and readings we have covered throughout the semester. The DSM-IV describes posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as meeting both the witnessing or experiencing an event that involves death and threat and displays of hopelessness, horror, helplessness, fear at the time. This definition, while used clinically, relies on a person's memory for the intense event. Given the literature on PTSD and its predictors, however, I believe that my grandmother does not suffer from PTSD but instead was resilient to what she experienced. According to a study done by Brewin et. al (2000), predictors of PTSD include life stress, lack of or negative - social support, gender, intelligence, previous adversities and perhaps neurological effects. Given that my grandmother was at a young age during the time of the traumas, and that she had a strong social network during the time of the war, I believe that she was able to stay resilient throughout. This finding of her resilience ties in with work done by Bonanno (2007), which shows that despite all these individual factors, metaanalysis proves that the majority of individuals are resilient to trauma.

In their article "Role of Resilience Among Nazi Holocaust Survivors: A Strength-based Paradigm for Understanding Survivorship" (2009), Roberta Greene and Sandra Graham found that the development of resilience among Holocaust survivors is highly correlated with positive early family environments, good or very good economic conditions and adaptive behaviors that were engaged in during the war like survival in family groups. Greene and Graham in their article also suggest that holocaust survivorship is due in part to finding meaning in the event in the form of spirituality. I think that spirituality also has a large part in my grandmother's survival. While her grandparents were much more religious than her immediate family, she was raised in an orthodox environment. In speaking with her

about her experiences she told me that "people who believed that miracles were possible survived." She continues to be religious in her later life, but in a private and personal way. I have memories of seeing her reading psalms in her room in the quiet. I believe that it is these moments of connecting to a higher power that allowed her to prove resilient to what she witnessed. Resilience is clearly not a homogeneous category. Many factors came into play in my grandmother's story, and I believe the combination of them all are true testaments to her ability to survive and show her resilience.

Upon her arrival to New York, my grandmother noted that she was welcomed with deeds and not with questions. This was an important distinction that she made while speaking to me. As Mayou et al (2000) found in their study, psychological debriefing does not work and actually is potentially harmful. Mayou (2000) proves that debriefing is harmful because it can interfere with natural recovery. My grandmother's unknowing recognition that she did not want any debriefing upon her arrival shows that she may have done better due to this. Research has shown that there is no clear way to be resilient (Bonanno, 2007). In my grandmother's case, the body of assumptions about resilience in the face of trauma can be confirmed. But, everyone experiences things in their own unique way and what my grandmother experienced is certainly not without consequences.

My grandmother's resilience allowed her to continue to lead her life, but it did not erase that which she witnessed and the losses that she has suffered. I believe her experiences have impacted my mother and her siblings, and in turn have had residual effect on my cousins and I. While this story is only one of many, it demonstrates that it is possible - despite all odds - to be resilient in the face of horrific adversity. When asking her why she survived, she does not attribute it to resilience, fate or religion though. Instead she says that it is because of her mother's energy. I was privileged to spend the first 10 years of my life knowing my great-grandmother, and I wholeheartedly believe that it was her energy, passion and disposition that kept them alive. My grandmother poignantly ends her interview by saying that she recounted the story so as not to allow any of us to forget. Her memories, while they were difficult for her to relive and probably easier for her to forget, are essential for us so we do not fail to remember what she went through.

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