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Fighting at Papaya King

Hot Dogs, the Holocaust, and Intergenerational Trauma

ABSTRACT Intergenerational trauma was described more than fifty years ago and refers to a phenomenon in which a person who has experienced traumatic events displays adverse emotional and behavioral reactions long after the incidents, and in turn communicates and passes down feelings of worry, anxiety, fear, and hypervigilance to next-generation family members. In the following narrative, I describe childhood memories of growing up with Holocaust survivors in 1980s New York City. More specifically, I delve into the complex nature of my interactions with my grandmother, a Polish survivor of the Kraków ghetto, and how her parental feeding style affected my emotional development. KEYWORDS intergenerational trauma, Holocaust studies, food and behavior

New York City is a very big place. When I was growing up there in the 1970s and '80s, it had a population of about seven million people. But if you lived in a certain section of Manhattan's Upper East Side as I did, it felt more like a small town. A village really. Even smaller if you were a Jewish girl like me who was the daughter of Holocaust survivors and warned repeatedly, in no uncertain terms, never to walk anywhere alone—not even within a ten-block radius on the streets of one of NYC's more affluent and safest neighborhoods.

When I was a pre-adolescent, my grandmother, a woman born in Kraków, Poland, in 1908 and in 1942 narrowly escaped deportation to a Nazi death camp with her nearly three-year-old daughter (my mother) by her side, used to pick me up from the Jewish day school I attended. It was only three blocks from our apartment building but far too "dangerous" a walk for a ten- or eleven-year-old to do on her own on those bustling, shop-filled streets. I remember at dismissal time the many late afternoons of running down the steps inside the multistoried school building, desperate to escape the emotionally suffocating environment of a both secular and religious institution. I also needed immediate relief from the nasty taunts of my classmates, who I just could not connect with and unable to figure out why. Too tall, maybe. Too awkward. Too oily. Too much acne that had long since made a home on my face at the age of nine.

When I finally reached the lobby, and feeling eager to just get home, there she would be. My grandmother. Sitting on a cushioned bench in the marbled lobby in this expensive private school. There was no mistaking her for somebody else. Especially during the winter, she would be sitting in a long, thick, black coat made from God knows what type of fur, wearing a delicately knitted off-white wool hat tightly affixed on her head, as well as sensible, black, calf-high leather boots. No hint of make-up to cover the stern and determined expression on her life-worn and wrinkled face. Her coat was almost always firmly buttoned from top to bottom on her 5' 2" plump figure no matter what the temperature was like indoors, as if

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a freezing, bone-crushing blast of air traveling all the way from the Russian gulag was about to strike. As I stood in front of her, she would immediately put my down-filled winter coat on for me, insisting that it be quickly zipped up, reinforced with a scarf, hat, and gloves to arm myself against the brutal cold (whether real or imagined). She would then proceed to do what she always did: reach deep into a pocket of her fur to retrieve a piece of something dreadful—sponge cake.

Before exiting the building, I needed protection from possible starvation en route to our apartment building, so my grandmother was sure to shove this vital piece of sustenance directly into my mouth. As the syrupy taste of this unwelcomed confection infiltrated my senses, I often looked around nervously to see who among my mean peers would catch a glimpse of this embarrassing feeding ritual. Now that I was properly prepared, we could head home. As we exited the confines of my school and walked two blocks to the corner of 86th Street and Third Avenue, my stomach would turn and my head would hurt with the emergence of the scariest question of the day: will she make me stop at Papaya King?

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In 1932, a Greek immigrant opened a small shop in Brooklyn where he sold beverages made from fresh tropical fruits, and a few years later expanded his menu to include hot dogs. Eventually, he moved his business in the late 1940s to a Manhattan neighborhood known as Yorkville, which had an enormous immigrant population from Germany—an ideal customer base for selling hot dogs—creating a New York institution known as Papaya King.[1] It had occupied the same diminutive, single-story building for decades. The entire place consisted of one counter, perhaps twenty-five feet long, behind which was a collection of high-powered blenders to make its famous Papaya juice along with an enormous grill that had a nonstop supply of hot dogs laid out and cooking next to toasting buns near a metal vat of sauerkraut. There was no place to sit, but across from the main counter were two corner spaces in front of large glass windows looking out onto the street with narrow ledges to support gallon-sized dispensers of ketchup and mustard. On a typical afternoon coming home from school, Papaya King was a busy place with people lining up at one end of the counter to order "one with!" (meaning with sauerkraut) or "one plain!" (without sauerkraut) and a papaya juice. It was here that my grandmother and I had some of our worst fights.

There was no rhyme or reason as to why she would decide on any given day to stop at Papaya King while walking me home from school. The impulse would just hit her as she was determined that at this moment I must have a hot dog and a freshly squeezed papaya juice. Meanwhile, I could not figure out which of these items disgusted me more. All I knew is that I had to fight to the death to convince her not to make me eat this atrocious meal. The scene would often be of a pale, skinny girl clad in an oversized down coat screaming at the top of her lungs at an older lady in a fur coat on the corner of 86th Street and Third Avenue in front of a hot dog place. Very often people would stop for a second and stare. Sometimes I would be admonished by total strangers as to how I could possibly "speak to my mother that way." One time I wailed at an older gentleman, "She isn't my mother! She's my grandmother!" To which he calmly replied, "even worse."

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My grandmother lived with us, was my main caretaker while my parents worked, and I sometimes referred to her as my "second mother." She would often tell me that I would never meet anyone in my life who loved me as much as she did. Looking back now to events that occurred more than forty years ago, I believe it. After all, she had a granddaughter in what was a new and completely different life. World War II destroyed everything she had. Her entire family was murdered in the Holocaust with the exception of her brother-in-law and a few distant cousins. All that was left was her one child (my mother) and my grandmother's almost unworldly will to survive. She escaped hunger and looming deportation when Catholic friends outside the ghetto secured a position for her as a seamstress in a cloister located in the outskirts of the city. She gathered what few belongings she could and walked with my mother to the entrance of the ghetto gate. The guard there was someone she knew from the same bank that her husband had worked in years before. She implored him to let her leave for just a few minutes so she could get milk for her daughter. He agreed. She walked out and never came back. After arriving at the cloister, my grandmother converted to Catholicism and changed her name and that of my mother. Born Regina Gross in 1908, my grandmother became, for the rest of her life, Janina Maria Zuradzka, born in 1916.

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According to sociology professor Arlene Stein in her work *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness*, a conservative estimate of roughly 150,000 Holocaust survivors settled in the United States between 1945 and 1951.[2] Most were between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five and had experienced disease, starvation, and near death in ghettos and concentration camps, hid in forests, or passed themselves off as Gentiles. In many instances, they were the only survivors in their family.[3] With respect to the emotional ramifications of growing up in these families and the messaging that is conveyed, she observed that "while children of survivors were not directly traumatized, they 'know' trauma." Descendants described a kind of ever-present sense of over-caution in their lives tinged with a vague belief that the world is not safe—feelings that significantly influenced their anxiety-driven perception of life experiences. Even before they learned how to be verbal themselves, these children received both verbal and nonverbal messaging from their parents that communicated "worry."[4]

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The fights between my grandmother and I outside of Papaya King would often go something like this (phonetics added):

GRANDMA: *Lizky* (my nickname), *listen to me. You are hungree. Vee now go to get a frahnk-foo-ter.*
ME: *I'm not hungry. Let's go home.*
GRANDMA: *Aach! You are so skinny. First you eat.*
ME: *No! I don't want to eat. I hate frankfurters.*
GRANDMA: *You are hungree. You hef to eat now.*
ME: *I'm not hungry!!*
GRANDMA: *Dis is a lie! Don't tell me stories!*
ME: *Stop it! I want to go home!*

GRANDMA: *Come! I don't poison you!*
ME: *No!*
GRANDMA: *First you eat! Eat sometink. A frahnk-foo-ter. Just von! Vit ketchup! You need dat after de whole day nothing to eat!*
ME: *Stop telling me when to eat!! Stop it! I'm not hungry* (screaming at this point).
GRANDMA: *How dare you are to speak to gramma dis vay and on de street! Are you not ashame for dat?* (grabbing me by the arm and dragging me inside)
ME: *I'm not hungry. I'm NEVER hungry!!*
GRANDMA: *Go now and eat! One frank! First you eat. Den, vee go home!*

She just could not and would not hear me. My hunger or lack of it could never be mine. It was hers to direct. I was not a separate individual with a voice of my own. She was the master of persistence. This argument could go on and on. She almost always wore me down. I almost always ended up standing by the counter at Papaya King having to eat one painful bite after painful bite of a far-too-spicy, sickeningly aromatic hot dog doused with ketchup and drinking a revolting cup of papaya juice, while she carefully watched me consume every morsel as if my life depended on it. My screams for autonomy, even to just decide if I was cold or hungry were disregarded. Where were my parents? Working very hard, I was told again and again. To pay for the Jewish private school in which they had no interest in understanding what I was learning or doing. I just had to be there. They were not interfering. It was just grandma and me.

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Indeed, as one could imagine, rituals such as this resulted in my developing some problems as an adult. Quite a few actually. Particularly involving food. In Nirit Gradwohl Pisano's interviews with ten women who were the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, *Granddaughters of the Holocaust: Never Forgetting What They Didn't Experience*, Rebecca, one of the participants recalled that when visiting her grandparents, "There was a ridiculous amount of food around all the time and if we didn't absolutely stuff ourselves and then eat again four hours later and do the same thing we were just ridiculed." She was "'required to eat' whenever her grandparents played mealtime; however, the experience was anything but a game. She found herself forced to "absolutely stuff herself." Her grandmother was a survivor of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, a woman convinced that "her granddaughter's thinness relates to 'being abused' and not 'being fed.'"[5]

Earlier in her book, Pisano mentions the work of Judith Kestenberg who in 1972 introduced the term "transposition" referring to a process through which the unconscious transmission of massive trauma occurs from one generation to the next. Here the parent's prior experiences intrude on their child's current life in the sense that there is a reversal of time between them, leaving each in opposite chronological positions. The child embodies a component of their parent's past, and therefore, "the parent's history takes over the child's daily existence, forcing the child to abandon her right to live as an individual" in the present.[6]

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It did not occur to me to consider whether the Papaya King hot dogs were kosher. To this day, I'm really not sure. Apparently, they were always made with beef (Jewish dietary law

prohibits the consumption of pork). Though I attended a Jewish day school, my family was not religiously observant. My father came from a middle-class Jewish family that lived in a small but commercially important Polish town in the northeast part of the country known as Suwalki. His entire family was murdered, including his parents, younger brother, and little sister, and he survived four concentration camps throughout the war. He spoke five languages fluently: Polish, Yiddish, German, Russian, and English. In many ways, my father considered himself to be more culturally German than Polish. His father and maternal grandfather were businessmen (the former in lumber and the latter in procuring fish), and both men conducted their affairs in Germany before the war.

After my father was liberated by the Russians and spent some time in a displaced person's camp, he went to dental school in Germany, realized he had no talent for fixing teeth (he had lost most of his from malnutrition), and then switched to medicine. At the time, the German government funded the schooling of postwar Jewish refugees, and since my father knew the language and the culture, he acclimated well to life as a medical school student in Munich. He often said that these were special years for him, as he and many of his Jewish classmates were orphaned by the Holocaust and they became for one another a surrogate family of sorts. These were people he maintained friendships with throughout his life, especially back in New York where most of them moved to work as doctors and engineers.

My father loved everything German. As brutal and cold-blooded as the Nazis were, they existed only for a very brief moment in history in the context of the centuries-long presence of thriving Jewish life in Germany. For my father, his years in Munich were very happy ones as he rebuilt his life and developed close ties with Jews and Gentiles alike. It is therefore not surprising that once he immigrated to the United States and settled in New York City, he lived and operated his medical practice in Yorkville with all its German shops and immigrant history.

Despite all he had lost, my father still deeply appreciated the German language, music, beer, people, and most of all—the food. Somehow he did not see a paradox between sending me (and my older brother) to a Jewish school where kosher dietary laws were expected to be adhered to at all times—whether one was on the school premises or not—while simultaneously maintaining a refrigerator full of typical German, non-kosher, cured meats: bratwurst, knackwurst, bologna, and krakauer. All these items were purchased weekly by my grandmother at New York City's most famous charcuterie, Schaller & Weber. The store was founded in 1937 and located directly across the street from our apartment building and remains so to this day. Some of my earliest childhood memories were of her taking me there and selecting my father's favorite foods while chatting away in German with the workers behind the counter (my grandmother was fluent in both Polish and German). They almost always sliced a few circular pieces of bologna and pridefully handed them to me. I did not mind and really liked the taste and shape of this plain, salty, and seemingly benign food (unlike the horrible hot dogs at Papaya King).

I had no idea during those early years that what I was consuming was highly non-kosher. To me it was just a mystery meat, but in reality these foods were made from pork, or a combination of pork and beef. It was not until well into my adulthood that I realized what a compartmentalized and almost double-life I led, and how hard it was on me: one

as a Yeshiva girl in a Jewish day school and the other as a non-religious kid ensconced in a family that shirked almost all Jewish tradition in favor of a more Europeanized and secular way of living. So why did my parents send me to a religious Jewish school in the first place?

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A hallmark of growing up in a family of Holocaust survivors is that many contradictions sit on top of the proverbial invisible elephant that is always in the room. This is where intergenerational trauma lives and breathes. A lot of decisions are made due to unspoken survivor's guilt (like sending your children to a religious day school when you yourself do not value the traditions and learning being promulgated there). Moreover, there is often a fragmented, illogical, and highly sudden reaction to ordinary events in daily life that take on the quality of impending catastrophe that is somehow assuaged momentarily by something as mundane as a hot dog.

As a pre-teen I fought loud and hard with my grandmother. Mostly over food. My mother periodically intervened, but not enough. She was fed up herself with my grandmother's antics. Growing up with these experiences wielded a negative cumulative effect on my self-confidence and assertiveness . . . about anything. So, eventually, I became quite habituated to calming my grandmother's and other people's nerves, and doing what my mother and father told me to do so as not to add any misery and despair into their painful Holocaust history and hardworking lives. While I had a relatively mature and outgoing demeanor with an enthusiastic sense of humor, I developed into a rather passive teenager and young adult. Always at the ready to offer a shoulder to cry on, but rarely in touch with my own feelings, opinions, or needs—because to recognize or express them meant getting into yet another exhausting argument or risk disappointing those who had lost so much. I didn't want to add to anyone's headaches, which it turns out is a typical attitude found in children of survivors.[7]

In her scholarship on postmemory and Holocaust legacy, Marianne Hirsch states: "Loss of family, home, of a sense of belonging and safety in the world 'bleed' from one generation to the next."[8]

> To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however, indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.[9]

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Sociologist Janet Jacobs conducted interviews in the United States with sixty children and fifteen grandchildren of survivors in *The Holocaust Across Generations: Trauma and Its Inheritance among Descendants of Survivors* and explored the role of family narratives, belief structure, and social relations and the ways in which they "shape and inform the worldviews of descendants."[10] Reading her work validated my longstanding belief that those arguments with my grandmother outside of Papaya King were part of a narrative tapestry, which eventually shaped my way of being in the world that was punctuated with a lot of anxiety, lack of assertiveness, and difficulty coping with stress. However, from the perspective

of someone who has managed over the years to relocate her voice (the one I lost around my mid-teens) and has healed . . . a lot, I can understand my grandmother's position from the vantage point of compassion. How triggering it must have been for her to see an eatery each day that likely reminded her of the meats, sauerkraut, cabbage, and other foods she knew in her life before the war, and have a child by her side (like she did with my mother in the ghetto) for whom she must find a satisfactory way to feed. Being a mother myself (now of two grown children), I understand viscerally how terrifying it is, right down to one's core, at just the thought that somehow you may not be able to keep your child alive. Imagine what it must have been like to contemplate the possibility that your already malnourished little daughter might die in front of your eyes from disease, hunger, or both and you can do nothing. That was the frightful reality that Hitler's brutal war presented to my grandmother in the deteriorating conditions of the Kraków ghetto.

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In early 2024, I walked past Papaya King on my way to visit my mother. The lights were out and the doors were locked. I looked through one of the windows. The grill was gone. So were the juicers. No ketchup and mustard dispensers. Pieces of sheetrock and debris all over the floor. It was desolate and empty. Dead inside. Recently, I read in a local news article that the decades-old building will likely be demolished and replaced with a high-rise apartment building. My heart sank. I miss my grandmother. Even now I find it difficult to grasp that I will never see her again standing on that very corner in her fur coat. It's impossible to replace an original. A duplicate is a sad mirage of what previously existed. A sign outside read that Papaya King will be moving to a new location nearby. I didn't bother to walk around to see exactly where. What would be the point? ■

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NOTES

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