

A Survivors Life- Looking Back, Looking Forward, Lessons Learned Aliza Levy-Erber

‘I was not an introspective teenager. So consumed was I about my own angst and insecurities and filled with an overwhelming desire to fit in with the Israeli ‘Sabras’, I closed my eyes and built a fence around myself.

The Sabras - those born in Israel – lived in homes unlike mine. They spoke with their parents, and their mothers hugged their children, something [I] we never did. My parents were not talkers and my instinctual child’s reaction was to ignore their pain. Overhearing adult conversations, I knew that Jews were targeted during the war in Europe, including my Dutch family. My grandparents, uncles, aunts and a multitude of cousins. Many of my neighbors in Holon carried a ‘mark of shame’ in the form of blue numbers tattooed on their forearms, as did my Opa Salomon, my father Bert’s father. This was my normal. It was a mystery for me to see other families with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. I had none. I was told that members of my family were taken away and died in Europe. But taken away by whom? Where to? Why did they not return? Return from where?

The community of Holocaust survivors was different from the rest of the Israeli community. The *Sabras*, a nickname, born in Israel and named after the prickly pear fruit that grew abundantly in the fields. The outside shell of the prickly pear is hard and filled with thousands of very tiny thorns which are almost impossible to remove. However, once you removed the shell the fruit inside was tender and sweet. My father Bert, fit in with this group despite the fact that he was born in Vienna, Austria, and thus not a real Sabra. He was a hard-core Zionist from a young age, and even before the Anschluss, the German take-over of Austria in 1938, knew that he would go to Palestine one day to build the land of Israel. A land where every Jew was welcome. A land where antisemitism did not exist.[sic]. He was a soldier and, in my child’s eyes, a hero. He was proud to be living in the land of Israel without that shameful number on his forearm. He was proud to be a pioneer builder of this ancient land. He was proud to be the protector of King David and King Solomon’s land.

The Survivors could not find a foothold of normalcy after the years of toxic hate and abuse.

My mother was different from the Sabra community. I always saw her as a beautiful and fragile woman severely traumatized by her war years. She had those nightmares which woke me up nightly and subconsciously transmitted her fears into me. She laughed rarely and usually only with her friends and in later years with her grandchildren, whom she adored. I felt very protective of my mother. I knew she was in pain and tried to be a very obedient and good child. At home, I was a quiet child and a loner. When I tried to comfort my mother and hug her, she stiffened and turned into a statue of stone. Maybe a statue of marble or a pillar of salt would be a

better description. She would not put her arms around me to hug back. She just stood there until, deflated, I withdrew my arms and stepped back.

Looking back, I have come to realize that I represented a time of terror for her. A time when, all alone, she was forced to run from place to place to hide from the Nazis. A time when she was forced to sleep outdoors, as she said, 'wet ditches' and had to forage for food losing more than half of her body weight. A time when I, her infant daughter was removed from her to be hidden away. She had no knowledge of my whereabouts or whether I was alive or dead. I was taken away by the Dutch underground fighters and put into a hole, underneath the ground with other Jewish babies. I was eight months old. That underground bunker was dug deep into the ground in the Dutch woods. It had no windows or doors or heat or sufficient air. It was perpetually damp, and we lived in complete darkness. All I ever saw was the whites of the eyes of the other infants. There was no one to care for us. Once a day, food, consisting of boiled mashed tulip bulbs, was brought into the bunker. The rest of the time our mouths were taped shut. For those two years, buried below the forest, we had no love or laughter, nor any nurturing. The woods were heavily patrolled, and sound carried above. That was my home and my infant reality. No sunshine, no sky, no sound or spoken words. No human bonding. Above all we were starving. At the age of two-and-a-half at war's end I could not stand. I had no language. It was the hellish time when my mother's entire family disappeared most to be murdered at concentration camps. Including my biological father, Richard Levy. They are the ones who did not return. When the war ended and Holland was liberated, my mother did not know where any of her family were. It took months, and for some, years of discovery to sort out who lived and who was murdered.

Mine was a "Holocaust Silent" family. Not a word was ever mentioned about labor camps, concentration camps or gas chambers. Never a word about Nazi brutality, or the mass starvation that befell the population of Holland and the rest of Europe. Known as "The Winter of Hunger", people dropped in the streets and there they stayed. I asked no questions, as like the youngest of the four children on Passover I did not know enough to ask. Unlike today, with courses on the history of the Holocaust and discussions in schools, nothing was ever mentioned, anytime, anywhere. My world was filled with bombs exploding near our tiny house threatening it to crumble, as I lay at the age of five underneath a cot with an army helmet on my head trembling uncontrollably, biting my fingers, drawing blood. I constantly worried about whether my father would come home from the war, not knowing that I once had a different father, murdered before I was born. And my mother's nightly terror screams kept me awake at night. For eight-year-old me, my angst was all consuming. Unlike so many who were murdered, these memories survive today.

Many years later at the age of 17, living in the U.S, as my mother and I watched the Eichman Trials when they were televised from Tel Aviv, she started to scream. She backed up against a wall, flung her arms up to shield her face and sobbed, shouting that she had lived through "*this*" and did not want to go through it again.

Today, I am still riddled with questions and guilt. How is it that I am still here? Why am I still here? Why me, even as I try to justify my existence. My university degrees, my medical degree, rabbinic degree, and many appearances as an invited speaker; as a writer and artist don't seem enough. I feel guilty for bringing my three innocent children into a hostile world, though I am also so grateful for them. I keep trying to do good, as if trying to say to the world: "See, there is a reason I survived." Yet, do I fully believe this myself? It took almost 80 years for me to finally understand and yes, to accept my existence. To make sense of my confused and scrambled mind. Often, throughout my life, when I experience anxiety, my mind goes blank, and I just sit quietly, staring straight ahead, wondering why my brain had shut down. Why I feel anxiety, why my daughter barely speaks with me and won't forgive me as I mothered my children poorly in my younger years. Mine are vivid nightmares in full color and with blaring sound. I feel guilty much of the time for surviving the Holocaust and that my survival added such a burden to my mother. I feel guilty for not being able to nurture my mother as a child, and for not being able to nurture my children better as a young adult. I feel guilty for my marriage falling apart, my young American husband being ill equipped to understand my emotional instability. These are the consequences and burdens of a hate that decreed my death the day I was born.

October 7th reopened the gates of toxic hate again spilling around the globe and today, the corpses of two-year-old Kfir Bibas, his five-year-old brother Ariel and their mother Shiri, kidnapped into Gaza sixteen months ago, then murdered were returned to Israel. Unimaginable barbarism. New generations of children from, Gaza, Ukraine, Russia, and of course from Israel, children who for many years survived as they trembled under the onslaught of missile attacks raining down on them, aiming for their annihilation *from the river to the sea*. For the rest of their lives these children will suffer from fears, anxiety and nightmares. Only the lucky ones will be able to triumph over this toxic hate to survive. As a fellow survivor, I feel for them all.