A Private Terror Passed Down:
A Textual Analysis of the Memoirs of Second Generation Holocaust Survivors

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Introduction

The Holocaust is one of the most tragic and horrific events in the world’s recent past. I first started learning, in great detail, about the Shoah during the class, “Reflections of the Holocaust,” an English course focusing on Holocaust literature and memoirs. Although coming to class day after day to discuss torture, hate, and death was very draining at times, what I learned during this course was that although we feel uncomfortable when we learn about it, it is rightly so (Morgan, 2001). We should be bothered and feel upset when we think about and learn about the Holocaust; it demands this much. When you read literature about emaciated figures, gas chambers, and the cruelty and starvation in the camps, it intrudes your mind forever (Morgan, 2001). This deep and unsettling reflection caused by my Holocaust studies has pushed me to look past my nauseating query of how humans could create such an existence of suffering and a plan of extermination for other living beings; I began to wonder about the impact that the Holocaust has had on the survivors and their families.

The memoirs we read in class helped me with this line of thinking; Holocaust survivors writing after the camps would often discuss the way that their lives were changed by the Holocaust, and how their lives in the present are impacted by their Holocaust past. We even read a few memoirs that showed how the Holocaust trauma walks down generations to invade the lives of survivors’ children, the second generation survivors. Morgan (2001) points out that there are certain diseases that will never leave the body and that the symptoms can flare up at any moment; the Holocaust is such a disease to the victims. Furthermore, these long-term, chronic
illnesses are the most contagious. Like, for example, a malaria outbreak, the Holocaust will also affect those around the suffering victims.

With my background in communication studies, I naturally wondered why and how these horrible memories in the parents’ minds affect the lives of their children; we have learned that it is the communication between the parent and the child that is most central in molding the child’s capacity to learn to communicate (Vangelisti, 1993). At the beginning of this past summer, I began to consult the research communication scholars have done about the alteration of communication in the lives of Holocaust survivors and their families. I discovered that only recently have communication scholars taken an interest in the effects of the Holocaust on the children of survivors.

Many researchers have conducted interviews with second generation survivors to learn how the Holocaust has crept into their lives through communication with their parents. Through elicited responses and observations, we understand many different emotional and behavioral effects that are resulting from the Holocaust. For example, second generation survivors report a higher level of interpersonal stress (Wiseman et. al., 2002). Children of Holocaust survivors also have trouble keeping intimacy and longevity in their relationships (Fossion, Rejas, Servais, Pelc, and Hirsch, 2003). In addition, second generation survivors testify to their difficulty in expressing their seemingly unexplainable anger, anxiety, and depression (Kellermann, 2001).

These interviews have provided a wealth of knowledge about the Holocaust-related problems in the lives of second generation survivors. An additional way we can learn about problems in the lives of the offspring of survivors is by looking at the many Holocaust memoirs written by these individuals. A memoir is a manuscript that is written for the purpose of transmitting one’s story to the public. Many of the memoirs written by the children of survivors
describe in depth the writer’s relationship with his or her parents; specifically, what they experienced and felt growing up with the Holocaust in their home. The vast number of memoirs written by children of Holocaust survivors about their connection to the Holocaust shows how deep the Holocaust spreads. Analyzing the detail in memoirs teaches us about specific emotional and behavioral problems resulting from parents’ transmission of Holocaust memories to their offspring. I have selected three memoirs for my analysis: *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, *Nightfather*, by Carl Friedman, and *After Long Silence*, by Helen Fremont. These authors write in great detail about their relationships with their parents, both as children and as adults. Through textual analyses of second generation survivors’ memoirs, I want to determine how Holocaust memories passed from the parent to the child have had an impact on children of survivors.

My textual analysis is guided by the major areas that emerged from a review of literature in family communication and the Holocaust. I used the themes raised in the literature as a generative guide for analyzing the memoirs. Through my analysis, I first look at what memories the parents pass down to the children, focusing especially on the parents’ communicative means to convey the memories to their children. After this initial investigation, I next look at the communicative ways the children receive and respond to the memories.

**Review of Literature**

The previous literature important to understand my research is categorized into two main subjects: family communication and the Holocaust. Family communication is central because it allows us to see the importance of family communication in the lives of children. This section also highlights conditions under which communication within the family is altered. The Holocaust presents itself as one of these conditions; the research helps us see that after the Holocaust, family communication is distorted.
Family Communication

Communication within family members has important characteristics and distinctions that are unparalleled in other facets of interpersonal communication (Whitchurch & Webb, 1995). The family is the paramount framework responsible for honing children’s communication strategies (Barbato, Graham, and Perse, 2003). Family communication molds how we act and react in nearly every area of our lives, and it is within the family context that most of us learn what communication is, both how to communicate and how to think about communication (Vangelisti, 1993). Another important distinction between family communication and other interpersonal communication is that in nearly every case, individuals do not have the ability to choose who their family members are (Vangelisti, 1993). Whitchurch and Webb (1995) explain that although family communication often studies the entire family unit; however, an extremely influential sub-unit of family communication is the parent-child dyad.

Parent and Child Communication

Because of the nature of parent and child relationships, parents are continuously confronted with opportunities to teach and emphasize communication skills (Barbarto et. al., 2003). In many cases, parents and children are so closely linked from birth that their relationship will affect the child’s transition into adulthood (Knoester, 2003). The bond is so strong that parents and children play significant functions in each other’s lives, even when they are no longer living together (Chaitin, 2002). The patterns and ways in which parents communicate with their children are accepted as a major influence on the ways in which children make sense of messages from out of the family circle (Ritchie, 1997). For example, the communication that children learn is dependent on the communication orientation norms used by the parent within the dyad. Parents practice either conformity orientation, where parents intend to coerce children
in ways that often defers autonomy to the parents, or conversation orientation where parents contain their power in order to encourage free expression of both thoughts and emotions (Ritchie, 1997). These differing communication styles within the family shape a child’s development; thus, it is clear to see that parent-child communication influences children’s lives beyond the parent-child dyad.

Parents’ Transmission of Family History

The importance of family communication and its patterns cannot be understood without examining information that actually passes from parents to children. One example of communicated information is a family’s history. Looking at the communication of family history is essential because maintaining historical continuation is extremely important for human development (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000). In fact, the psychological well-being of parents and their offspring can be dependent on shared life events (Knoester, 2003). These shared life events, as referred to by Knoester (2003), are usually events occurring in the lives of both generations, but they could also refer to a family historical event influential enough to impact further generations. That is, researchers refer to the “rights of heritage” that children possess within their families. These rights ensure that children do not feel like outsiders within the family (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000). In fact, some researchers believe that the inheritance parents owe their offspring includes a thorough family history (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000). Pettit and Lollis (1997) infer that in his or her development a child or adolescent must know the “historical factors” that preceded them but yet had a hand in their construction. Without this knowledge children struggle with forming an identity that they understand (Pettit & Lollis, 1997)

Family Secrets
There are aspects of a family that parents do not feel comfortable sharing with their children. Nearly all families have secrets (Vangelisti, 1994). In fact, in a study questioning 212 young adults, 203, or 95% of them, admitted to keeping secrets from their fellow family members (Vangelisti, 1994). Vangelisti (1994) comprised a list of four functions of secrets, or reasons why families keep them: to build and keep intimacy, to sustain cohesiveness, to safeguard the family structure, or to guard family members from social or public scorn. Often these secrets are not intended to be permanent and families wait until they want to, or feel the have to, expose the secret inside and, or outside the family (Vangelisti, Caughlin, and Timmerman, 2001). Researchers have outlined criteria that seem to be in place when families choose to reveal secrets: when the secret threatens well-being, if the predicted response is positive, if communication produces an opening to reveal, if the impact of discovery will be positive, or if the disclosure brings benefits (Vangelisti et. al., 2001). Although healthy development is fostered by informed transmission of history, revealing something alarming (like a sheltered secret) can have significant impact on an individual (Vangelisti et. al., 2001).

Transmitting Difficult Information

Families may have other sources of difficulty regarding both the act of revealing and the decision to reveal information beyond what is found in family secrets: a history of family trauma. If an individual experiences intense trauma, for example in war, the survivor will experience mental disorders later in life such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (van IJzendoorn, Bekermans-Kranenburg, and Sagi-Schwartz, 2003). The American Psychiatric Association (1994) explains that in these types of disorders a survivor will consistently re-experience an event causing irritability, and that PTSD is chronic. Because such a condition remains active in a parent’s life, researchers have studied the effects of trauma on the family’s next generation (van
The sample in this study was the children of Vietnam war veterans, and the results were conclusive that stress disorders in the parent do appear in the child: twice as many of the children with serious behavior and emotional problems were children of the parents who endured violent atrocities in Vietnam as opposed to the children whose parent did not experience direct violence. Therefore, even if the family may see it helpful to the child to keep a traumatic past secret, the child will still have a very good chance of being exposed to trauma.

Survivors may believe transmitting difficult family history will harm or trouble the children. A study was done looking at Bosnian refugees who escaped to the USA to start and raise a family (Weine et. al., 2004). One man mentioned his preference of keeping his past secret saying, “Sometimes I wish to isolate myself, to find my peace, and not burden my family” (Weine et. al., 2004, p. 154). However, silence is often as a result of intense emotional anguish and it might also be maintained by the survivor to prevent himself from re-experiencing the trauma (Levine, 2001). Therefore, it may not be maintained for the benefit of the offspring, but rather for the benefit of the survivor. Regardless of the intent for harboring the family secret, it is doing a disservice to the offspring’s identity formation. Another refugee supports the importance of open discussion of memories as she remarked, “If you do not share your problems with your family the family cannot progress. It is very important to talk about problems openly with family members” (Weine et. al., 2004, p. 154).

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is often thought of as the classic example of a traumatic event in recent past (Andrews, 2003). The Holocaust was a major tragedy that occurred in Eastern Europe during World War II (Kellermann, 2001). It began when Hitler came to power in Germany six years before WWII, and many suffering victims endured the Holocaust until the United States
and Russia liberated the concentration camps in 1945 (Maitles & Cowan, 1999). During that
time, 11,000,000-12,000,000 people were massacred (Maitles & Cowan, 1999). The Holocaust
was the first time one of the world powers was involved in a racial obliteration, taking the rest of
the world by shock and disbelief (Maitles & Cowan, 1999). The many perpetrators of the
Holocaust caused an existence of misery for the innocent victims, and the explosive situation
warranted immediate resolution. However, the victims were powerless and petrified to take
action. The prisoners were forced to endure trauma until American and Russian troops arrived to
set the victims free. However, liberation from the camps did not mean freedom for these
individuals; the Holocaust made it impossible to go back to the lives victims had been forced to
leave behind (Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2003). After the emotional and physical losses survivors
underwent in the camps, they were forced to find ways to cope; the harrowing experiences
survivors endured in the camps unavoidably affected their post-Holocaust communication (Lev-
Wiesel & Amir, 2003). Because of the Holocaust’s recent existence, 1933-1945, many families
still are dealing with trauma which appears in the third, second, and occasionally first generation
survivors. Kellermann (2001) compares the Holocaust to an atom bomb: radioactive particles
are diffused all over, and its effects are still present many years later, affecting anyone who was
directly or indirectly exposed.

Post-Holocaust Consequences for Survivors and their Families

An estimated 400,000 Holocaust survivors are presently living in the United States
(Levine, 2001). They live in a world filled with emotional and physical problems that stem from
their time in the camps. In addition, many survivors began families, and within these family
units we can see a continuation of the wounds (Levine, 2001).

Problems in the Lives of Survivors
After the Holocaust, the survivors, like those of other traumatic incidents, were at an elevated risk for psychological distress (Silverman et. al., 1999). Post-liberation, survivors often began suffering from depression, phobias, and altered self-images (Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2003). After the war many survivors were left with no family or home which to return (Bender, 2004). Many Holocaust survivors saw procreation as their most important task after the near genocide in order to try and continue their families and faith (Fossion, et. al., 2003). However, once the family was created they often endured communication difficulties as parents (Fossion et. al., 2003). Communicating a family’s history is a central part of family communication (Vangelisti, 1993), and after the Holocaust communication for survivors became difficult. Society and survivors’ children in particular, did not have a vocabulary to explain such atrocities (Kellermann, 2001). Survivors often have a bridge in their lives separating their existence into the “pre-world,” and the “post-world” (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000). The pre-world includes their lives before and during the Holocaust, while the post-world is their lives after the Holocaust (the lives they share with their children). The bridge between them is often impassible, thus communicating in the post-world about the pre-world is problematic (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000).

Alteration Communication Problems

The Holocaust brought different experiences to all of its concentration camp victims. Certainly the list of communicative patterns highlighted in this paper is not exhaustive. It does not include all the possibilities for altered communication after the Holocaust. However, these patterns of silence and cycles of remembering and forgetting were thematically threaded through much of my research. Survivors are not a uniform group of homogenous individuals who suffered the same experiences, nor do they express their trauma in the same manner (Levine,
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2001). However, this research shows us some common communicative strategies that survivors may use when attempting to manage their Holocaust memories.

Silence

One way that many survivors deal with the Holocaust is through silence; they simply do not communicate their experiences to their family and friends (Fossion et. al., 2003). Danieli (1998) who frequently writes about the silence of Holocaust survivors explains one reason, namely, the “conspiracy of silence” (as cited in Wiseman et al., 2002). Chaitin (2002) references this coined term as well, as she refers to the silent communication patterns survivors use; she explains it as a societal norm that often encouraged survivors not to talk about their crises experiences. Although this societal tendency faded through time, Chaitin (2002) makes it clear through her study that discussion of the Holocaust is still considered taboo to discuss in many survivors’ families. Thus, traces of the “conspiracy of silence” norm remain operative.

The other principle reason that survivors use silence as a communication pattern is because they are often incapable of putting their traumatic experience into words (Montalbano-Phelps, 2003). Even if a survivor wants to tell his or her experience to a family or friends, he or she cannot. Recent researchers are noting silence as extremely prevalent because of the survivors who they have access to. Since the Holocaust occurred sixty years ago, most of the survivors who are still alive were children at the time of the disaster. According to Durst (2003), children are the people who are the most influenced by war and tragedy; they are the most wounded, and become the most silent. One such survivor, agreeing to tell her story for the first time just months before her death, revealed that her own family knew nothing of her life before and while she suffered the Holocaust (Roseman, 1999). Her pattern of silence was so complete that she could not even talk about the artifacts she managed to save. Instead, she waited until her
death for them to be exposed (Roseman, 1999). So, one common strategy prevalent among many Holocaust survivors is simply silence. They do not discuss their experiences in any direct manner, not even with family.

**Patterns of Remembering and Forgetting**

The other general category I have noted for communication consequences deals with the automatic permeation of memories about the survivors’ past traumas. Remembering and forgetting are natural occurrences in everyone’s life, and we often have little control over what we will remember and what we will forget (Kellermann, 2001). Survivors, then, are forced to deal with this cycle of remembering and forgetting as they flow between re-experiencing the trauma and systematically trying to block it out (Kellermann, 2001). Some researchers believe that these patterns are unconscious and uncontrollable. For example, after the Holocaust crisis, any little thing could be a possible trigger that spins survivors from their attempts to forget into sudden and painful remembrance (Kellerman, 2001). In her book, *Accidents of Influence*, Norma Rosen (1992) writes about these sensory memories. She says,

> for a mind engraved with the Holocaust, gas is always that gas. Shower means their shower. Ovens are those ovens. A train is a freight car crammed with suffocating children: it arrives at the suburban station in a burst of power and noise, there is a moment of hideous hallucination that is really only remembering. (As cited in Eaglestone, 2003, p. 52).

The moment of sensory recall can also come to survivors through communication, for example, in a question from his or her child. For example, Kellermann (2001) explains an instance in which a survivor had a memory recall when her daughter asked why she always had so much food in the refrigerator, even when it was rotten. The survivor exclaimed, “There and then, we
had nothing to eat! How can you throw out food?” (p. 201). Many times survivors will have memory recall when talking about the present because the survivor lives simultaneously in both the pre-Holocaust world and the post-Holocaust world (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000). Therefore, the survivor is often denied the ability keep Holocaust memories out of post-Holocaust conversations.

Survivors may use this memory recall to educate their child about the past; instead of forgetting, they will express the emotion with the intent to teach their children. That is, parents strive to prepare their children for the same world in which they have encountered (Ritchie, 1997). Parents’ conclusions about conditions in their children’s lives are derived from their own experiences (Ritchie, 1997). This tendency is clearly problematic for Holocaust families. For example, one man speaks about his dad forcing him to learn how to swim at six in case they had to sail and the Germans would sink them (Chaitin & Bar-On, 2002). Although this parent seems misguided and irrational, he is doing something that most parents do with their children: teaching them what they learned or wished they had learned. As one survivor who realized his emotional handicaps put it, “I think we are not normal because we are so normal” (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000, p. 287).

Resulting Problems in the Lives of Survivors’ Offspring

Despite the fact that in the altered patterns (except for silence) parents are speaking about their experiences and about the Holocaust, these communication patterns prevent healthy family communication; it is not the quantity of utterances, but rather the quality that are conducive to understanding on the part of the child (Wiseman, et.al., 2002). Therefore, children of survivors have an increased risk for psychiatric irregularities (Silverman et. al., 1999). Second generation survivors often over-identify with their parents (Fossion et. al., 2003) in attempts to understand
and empathize with them. Yet they often feel incapable of coping with their parents’ feelings and instead simply feel responsible (Fossion et. al., 2003). Children of survivors regularly feel as though their own feelings, anxieties, and problems are insignificant in comparison to what their parents went through and are going through (Fossion et. al., 2003). More times than not, they focus on becoming a “good” child, but end up feeling they are failures (Fossion et. al., 2003). Children, in trying to please their parents and to contribute to the relationship, frequently become parents to their parents (Fossion et. al., 2003). They see the pain and trauma in their parents’ lives and submit to a role reversal that is oftentimes necessary. This problem is shown in the following except from the transcript of an interview with a second-generation survivor in which she explains her relationship with her mother:

Mother was always different from other mothers, more hysterical, more irritable, more impatient. You can’t blame her… today I try to do as much as I can for them. They eat here at least once a week and if I tell you how many times a day I talk to her on the phone you won’t believe it. At 7:30, when I get to work at 9, 11:30, at 4 and at 8 in the evening. If I am 10 minutes late, she goes crazy. Once…we got a hysterical phone call that something must have happened because I forgot to call…and that was after I explained to her that we were at the sea and there really wasn’t a phone in the area. It’s lucky today there are mobile phones. (Chaitin, 2003, p. 312)

Through this quote we can see the obligations and responsibilities that children of survivors often have in their lives in regards to their parents. Another problem many children of survivors have is a permeation of silence in their lives; they have trouble communicating in their interpersonal relationships outside of the family circle (Kellermann, 2001). In particular, offspring of
survivors often cannot find a way to express their seemingly unexplainable anger, anxiety, and depression (Kellermann, 2001)

Coping Mechanisms

Kaja Silverman attempts to further explain why the second and third generation of Holocaust survivors experience intense trauma; “If to remember is to provide the disembodied ‘wound’ with a psychic residence, than to remember other people’s memories is to be wounded by their wounds” (Omer-Sherman, 2004). Chaitin (2003) references the concept of “working through” and its importance for the victims of the Holocaust and their families for two additional generations. Working through, or “living with” the Holocaust is a very long process where the individual learns how to deal with internal unrest, including the conflict they feel from trying to confront historical traumatic experiences (Chaitin, 2003). The individuals tend to adopt coping strategies to make meaning of their pasts and effectively integrate their trauma into their life stages (Chaitin, 2003). For individuals from all three generations, the predominant tendency when trying to work through the Holocaust trauma is to take the role of the victim (Chaitin, 2003). They often lament the differences between their own family and other families, their own lives and pasts and others lives and pasts (Chaitin, 2003).

Writing the past

It is the expression of these trauma-related emotions that is so critical to the therapy of an individual (Smyth & Helm, 2003). One possible method for expressing powerful emotions is through writing (Smyth & Helm, 2003). We know some things about Holocaust survivors writing about the Holocaust. Much of Holocaust writing is to remember the victims and mourn the losses by writing about the horror of Holocaust experiences (Jablon, 2004). Survivors have also written as a way to contribute to their healing process (Jablon, 2004). Jablon (2004)
provides the Hebrew term “mekomot nekhamah,” which refers to searching for catharsis through writing, and talks about survivors who write attempting to achieve this, such as Elie Wiesel in his memoir *Night*, or Primo Levi in his memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*. Writing is a way to connect with the conscious while drawing out the subconscious (Smyth & Helm, 2003), and it is a comfortable form of expression for most individuals (Jablon, 2004).

Until the late 1980’s Holocaust researchers focused their efforts on the emotional problems associated with being a Holocaust survivor, but in the 1990’s people started asking how the families, in particular the children, of Holocaust survivors are impacted (Chaitin, 2003). I have established that children of Holocaust survivors are influenced by the trauma their parents endured, and that many of their problems stem from the altered communication between the parent and the child. I also know that writing is an effective therapeutic coping mechanism and that many survivors have written their Holocaust stories. Andrews (2003) writes about how the second generation survivors have started representing the Holocaust. For example, Andrews (2003) highlights an anthology by Epstein and Lefkovitz (2001) which is an accumulation of work done by daughters of survivors. The objective in this compilation is to challenge the fixed masculine categories of Jewish memory.

Thus, we know that it is potentially beneficial to use the writing done by the children of survivors to understand more about aspects of the Holocaust and its injuring effects. Because these authors of Holocaust memoirs are not direct witnesses to the Holocaust, the stories we get from them are largely as a result of the meaning they have made out of their parents’ experience, and the way in which the parents have intentionally or unintentionally shared aspects of the Holocaust trauma with their offspring. Therefore, we can look at the writing of the second generation survivors to learn more about the Holocaust-related communication within the parent-
child dyad. What follows is a close examination of these memoirs of second generation survivors for the purpose of understanding more clearly how the Holocaust memories have had an impact on survivors’ children.

Description of Artifacts

In order to effectively understand the analyses of the texts, and to interpret meaning from the analyses, it is necessary to provide an explanation about each of the memoirs that I am using for the analysis.

Nightfather

Nightfather, written by a woman named Carl Friedman, was published in 1991. Carl’s father, who remains unnamed to us, survived the camps and moved to the United States to start a family and live his life. However, as we see through Carl’s story, leaving Europe and starting a family does not stop the Holocaust from continuing to permeate into his life, which in turn, causes it to flood into the life of all of the family members. Carl not only writes her story, her interactions with her father, and her emotions and behaviors resulting from life with him, but she also writes on behalf of her two brothers, Max and Simon. Nightfather shows us examples of the father passing his memories down to his family, and also what the children do with these memories.

After Long Silence

Published in 1999, Helen Fremont writes about her journey to discover the truth about her family’s past in After Long Silence. Although Helen, growing up, knew that her parents were Holocaust survivors, and that they both endured trauma in concentration camps, she did not fully understand what her parents’ role in the camps was. When she was in her late 20’s, she and her sister Lara began to research their family’s past and discovered that her parents were Jewish.
They had been pretending to be Catholic since the 1940’s, and therefore, Helen and Lara both had a Jewish heritage without realizing it. Throughout the text, we see Helen trying to piece together the fragments of history she gets from her parents. Also, through present-day interactions with her sister, her parents, and her Holocaust surviving Aunt Zosia, we see further ways the Holocaust has intruded the lives of these sisters.

*Maus I & II*

*Maus* is a two volume memoir written by Art Spiegelman and published in 1992. A 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner, *Maus* is accredited by the New York Times as “one of the most powerful and original memoirs to come along” (Spiegelman, 1992). What makes *Maus* so unique is that, although the content of the memoir parallels the content of other second generation survivors’ memoirs, this text is in the format of a comic book. The volumes, entitled “My Father Bleeds History,” and “And Here My Troubles Begin,” respectively, both deal with Vladek, Art’s father, and his Holocaust story. Throughout the text, at various moments, Art will take a break from the history and pull us into the present interactions with his father. These moments that he chooses to show us generally depict troubled interactions that take place in the dyad, presumably as a result of the Holocaust-altered communication patterns between the two. He will also tell us, through present-day conversations with his wife and therapist, about the troubles he has in his life as a result of his father’s Holocaust experience.

Analysis

In my analysis of *Maus I&II, Nightfather*, and *After Long Silence*, I have discovered some important thematic connections that allow us to understand two main concepts in the parent-child dyad of a Holocaust survivor and his or her child. Namely, by reading the memoirs of the second generation survivors we can investigate two important categories of
communication. First, we can analyze the messages parents pass down and the ways in which they pass them down. Second, we can gain an understanding about the ways in which the second generation survivors receive and respond to the messages.

Before delving into the analysis it is important to emphasize a point about the communicative patterns used by the survivors and the offspring: they do not comprise an exhaustive list of communicative techniques. Researchers acknowledge that survivors display an extensive list of communicative strategies (Levine, 2001). These patterns do, however, help us understand some possible ways people communicate after the Holocaust.

*Messages Passed Down: How the Parents Communicate*

**Outbursts**

One way in which parents seem to pass their Holocaust memories down is through outbursts. An “outburst” can be defined as an instance when the survivor seems to be confronted with a memory and he or she takes the emotion out on the child in an irrational and unprompted manner. These “outbursts” may or may not be directly related to an experience in the Holocaust. However, they do occur in conjunction with a Holocaust-related conversation. They seem to be confronted with a memory and take their emotion out on the child in an irrational and unprompted manner. It is difficult to determine what brings out this communicative explosion; such is the nature of the outburst: they, to us and presumably to the child, are totally random and out of context. For example, after a conversation with his son about the Holocaust and its relation to his past, Vladek knocks over a jar of pills. He screams at his son, “Look now what you made me do!” Artie seems very confused and just responds, “Me?” (p. 30). Clearly there is something cognitively going on in Vladek’s brain, and he is leaving Artie in the dark, making him feel as though something so small as his own hand spilling the pills is Artie’s fault.
In another example from the same text, Artie comes over to visit his father. He goes down into the basement where his father is counting nails. He says, “Um, do you need any help with those nails or anything?” Vladek responds, “Such jobs I can do easy by myself.” When Artie picks up on Vladek’s tone he cautiously says, “Um, is everything okay?” And Vladek turns and responds, “Nu? With my life right now, you know it can’t be everything okay! You go upstairs. I’ll finish here my job and in a few minutes I’ll come up” (p. 98). Again, we have an emotion that Vladek is clearly feeling, and he is expressing it to Artie only through an unexplained outburst that leaves Artie feeling confused; Vladek tells him to go away without an apology or a clarification about why he is depressed about his present life.

In *After Long Silence*, Helen and Zosia finally try to have a conversation about why Helen and Lara worked to discover the truth about their family’s past after being left in the dark for their entire childhood and young adulthood. Zosia listens calmly, and leaves their conversation giving Helen the impression that she understood her need to understand their past. It is not until days later that she approaches Helen calmly and with a smile asks, “Why have you come here? You’ve come to spy on me!” (p. 332). Within seconds, without much response from Helen, other than “bewilderment,” she screams at her, “You’re a Nazi! You’re worse than Hitler! Hitler at least had a noble purpose – or thought he did […] But you—you’re doing it for no other reason than sheer cruelty! You’re a beast!” (p. 333). This passage is similar to the previous two because it is evidence of independent thinking on the part of the survivor and the lack of healthy and coherent expression of that emotion to the offspring. She appears fine with Helen’s explanation of her historical digging, and then days later becomes very angry for seemingly no reason and lashes out, calling her the worst and most degrading possible name.
In all of these examples of an outburst on the part of the survivor, the most important piece is the silence that occurs afterwards. There are no apologies from the survivor; there are no explanations of why they yelled at the offspring. It is dropped and seemingly forgotten about by the survivor. However, because it shows up in the memoir of the second-generation survivor, it is clear that the encounter is not forgotten by them. Furthermore, in none of the examples do the children attempt to explain to us why it happened or what Vladek or Zosia meant by the outburst; the most likely reason for this void in the memoir is because they themselves do not understand.

**Lecturing**

The next method of how survivors seem to pass down their memories is through a lecturing format. “Lecturing” can be defined as the transmission of the past with an intent to prepare their children for something they can perceive happening in their future. All children are familiar with this basic style of communication from their parents. Most children can relate to sentences that start with the phrase, “when I was your age…” and end with a bit about their childhood. Parents seem to tell children things from their own lives that have intent to educate us about choices in our own life, or to shape our understanding of our family. However, with Holocaust families, this “lecturing” takes a different form because it is either “preparing” the children for another Holocaust, which is irrational, or trying to shape their identity with something that is hard for the children to relate to and understand.

For example, in Nightfather, the father (who remains unnamed) tells a story about making a knife in the camps. He talks about the importance of making it on the sly and hiding it someplace where they cannot find it; he suggests to the kids the best place is the armpit. As he is explaining the necessity of a knife and the practicality about making and keeping it, he “jumps to his feet and then stands completely still, arms high in the air, as if an invisible SS-man were
frisking him” (p. 19). In this example, he seems to be educating his children about something that was so important to his own survival; however, it is different than the lecturing and educating in the average family, because, although most of us can learn from and relate to our parent’s “learning experiences,” in this case, this is of little or no importance to the children’s lives.

The next day, we see the children in the yard. They have borrowed the knife their father made in the camps, and they are practicing holding it under their armpit. We hear the oldest son encouraging the younger children. He says, “You have to keep saying to yourself: it must not fall out! You have to think: if it falls out they’re going to shoot me or gas me” (p. 20). Thus, proving that the educational “lecture” has a response similar to the lectures of average parents about average things: we learn from what they say and apply it to our lives. However, the children learning how to hide a knife from the SS teaches them something they, most likely, will not need to know in their lives, and it attempts to shape their identity based on their father’s past in which they cannot truly grasp.

In After Long Silence, we see another example of a communication encounter in which the father is trying to educate and prepare the children. He goes out into the yard and builds a tree fort for the children; the purpose of the fort is so the children, at ages seven and ten, could protect themselves from their enemies. Throughout the encounter, both the father and the children were shocked to learn that “[they] could not think of a single one” (p. 227). The father tries to protect and prepare his children against enemies that they have, but this gesture is irrational in the lives of his children. At seven or ten years old, any known enemy a child has is, in most cases, not dangerous enough to warrant the building of a tree house for protection. However, in the father’s life, at age seven he did have life-threatening enemies. Helen offers her
emotions after her father offers this idea about their enemies; “It seemed impossible that I should have no enemies. It seemed, at that moment, life-threatening not to have enemies. Or at least it would jeopardized the quality of my life not to have any” (p. 227). Again, we have an instance where the father follows his parenting instincts to lecture and prepare his children for experiences in their life that are like the experiences he had in his. He had enemies growing up: the people who hated Jewish children. He tries to protect his children against enemies they may have, but at seven and ten years old, this seems unreasonable. When the children attempt to apply what their father is telling them, as the average child does, it is cause for confusion; the average seven year old is not thinking about enemies and is certainly not building a tree house to guard against them. Thus, we have another instance in which the child absorbs a “lecture” from the parent in which the information she receives is useless and confusing when applied to her life.

Another experience from After Long Silence explicitly clarifies the second-generations’ response to this communicative format of lecturing or preparing a child. Helen tells us that her mother insisted on raising the children Catholic, and was so scared of Judaism that the children did not even know of their Jewish heritage until their twenties. First we see her realization, as an adult, of what her mother was trying to do: Helen says, “What I didn’t understand was that my mother was equipping me with the means of survival: proof of my Catholicism to anyone in a dozen countries” (p. 11-12). Although the family was living in America during the 1980’s and 1990’s, and being Jewish was not generally considered dangerous, Helen’s mother was protecting Helen from the evils she experienced in her own life; she knew from experience that Catholicism was the key to survival and she was teaching her child by example that Catholicism is safe and Judaism is life-threatening. Helen also gives us insight into how this made her feel as a child; she says, “Childhood was a strange place to find oneself after so much history” (p. 12).
That is, Helen acknowledges that a parent’s tendency to prepare his or her child for the experiences in his or her own life is natural, but that when a parent who has experienced the Holocaust attempts to do as such, the result is irrational, leaving the child in a “strange” place.

The content of the lectures is food and money. Presumably, the lack of food and the loss of all money during the Holocaust were two experiences that most survivors relate to, and therefore seem to pass down to their children. For example, in *Maus I*, Vladek sees a new tape recorder that Artie bought and insists on knowing how much Artie paid for it. Artie says, “Only 75 bucks, it was on sale!,” and Vladek responds, “You could find it for –maximum- 35 dollars” (p. 73). The concern Vladek pays Artie about spending money is threaded throughout the memoir. This tendency is irrational because Artie is not, as we see it, loose with money. Furthermore, he is a successful author living in New York City, so he does not need to feel nervous about spending less than 100 dollars on a tape recorder, but Vladek continually lectures him about spending money because money was a huge issue in his own life.

In *Nightfather*, the father frequently speaks about his hunger during the camps. He speaks of the bread rations he received during the Holocaust. He uses the bread on the dinner table to physically show how much bread he would receive in a day; the amount was very small, and it was usually all of the food he received. He also explains that the SS officers made the bread with a recipe of flour and sawdust. This example demonstrates a “lecturing style” because it is a story the parent shares with his son to demonstrate a lesson. The lesson is also irrelevant to the child’s life because he will most likely never have a fraction of a piece of bread for his day’s ration of food, and it will assuredly not be made with sawdust.

*Venting*
Another theme in the way parents pass down their own memories is through venting. When they are venting, they are taking their own past out on the child. The way in which the parents seem to do this is by winding their own memory into the present, into the lives of their children and their daily interactions together. During this period of venting, the parent will respond to something in his or her child’s life with their own Holocaust memory; this tendency seems to pull the child away from that which is important to him or her, and into this other confusing experience.

For example, in Maus I, Artie starts the book with a memory; “It was summer, I remember. I was ten or eleven. I was roller skating with Howie and Steve until my skate came loose” (p. 5). Artie screams to his friends, “Hey, wait up fellas!” but they leave without him, call him a “rotten egg” and laugh at him. When he walks home, his father was in his workshop fixing something, he asks, “Why do you cry, Artie?” When Artie tells him about his friends and the roller skating incident, his father stops what he is doing and says, “Friends? Your Friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week, then you could see what it is, Friends!” (p. 6). This encounter shows how Artie tries to talk to his father about something going on in his life, and the father responds with a link to the Holocaust. He seems to vent about the trouble in his past, winding that past into his son’s present.

In Nightfather, a different encounter occurs between the father and his son Simon, but the father winds his past into the child’s present in a similar way. The family is outside on a summer night around a bonfire, and Simon asks their father to “tell [them] a story” (p. 31). The father, without hesitation, jumps directly into a Holocaust memory that lasts two pages of text; it is a gruesome tale about his past. At the end, Simon grumbles, “That isn’t a story. That really happened!” (p. 33). The father seems annoyed and says, “Do you want a story then? Okay, have
Little Red Riding Hood is walking with her basket through the woods. Suddenly a vicious dog jumps out of the Hundezwinger. ‘Hello Little Red Riding Hood, where are you going?’ ‘I’m going to see my Grandmother, she’s in the hospital block with typhus’” (p. 33-34).

Much like in the first experience of venting, the father winds a memory of his into the children’s lives when they look to him for fatherly attention. In *Maus I*, Artie is looking for consolation, and in *Nightfather*, Simon is looking to him for a campfire story.

In *After Long Silence*, Helen provides more than just a story. She also offers commentary that helps us understand how the children, as children and also later as adults, construe these venting encounters. Helen narrates,

> The Gulag stays in a person. It pops out at unexpected moments, at the dinner table, or sitting around the Christmas tree [...]. Sometimes the Gulag intruded when we had company. One weekend I’d brought my college roommate home with me for a Fourth of July barbecue. [...] We layered our buns with tomatoes and onions, when I noticed my father had fallen into one of his sudden silences. He says, ‘I remember one time, we were on a forced march across the tundra. And we were starving, you know, we hadn’t eaten anything to speak of in years. And suddenly, it was like a miracle – there appeared in the middle of that frozen tundra a bit of rotten tomato. [...] And then the fellow in front of me [...] reached down and scooped it up in his hand and bit into it. And just like that, point-blank, without warning, the guard shot him in the head. (p. 223-224)

This experience is another example of a Holocaust survivor taking an event from his past and winding it into the present in the form of venting. They are reminded of an experience, through a teary story from his child, or a request to tell a “real” story, or a tomato at a backyard barbeque, and they feel compelled to express their past emotion at the present time.
After the Transmission: How the Children Receive and Respond to the Memory

The other piece of important information we can learn from the memoirs of Holocaust survivors’ offspring is how they receive and respond to the messages, both behaviorally and emotionally. We are able to see how the recipients wind the memories together into their lives, and the meaning they make of the communication encounters. Throughout the analysis there were two main habits that the children of Holocaust survivors tended to adopt as a result of the transmission of their parents’ Holocaust experiences and memories: mimicking their parents’ past, and adopting a belief or a fear their parents legitimately had in their own lives as a concern in their own lives.

Mimicking

A pattern that seems present in the stories of Holocaust survivors’ offspring is the children’s tendency to take what they hear of their parents’ actions and experiences during the Holocaust, and try their best to copy them. For example, in Nightfather, the oldest son Max decides to go into the kitchen and sit with his feet in the refrigerator. He says to his sister, “I want to be one of them. And you can only be one of them if you’ve had typhus. Being gassed a bit helps, too. Anyway, you have to have suffered damage in some way. Seventeen minutes, and they’re still not stiff!” When his sister observes, “They haven’t fallen off, they’re just wet. Maybe you’ll catch pneumonia,” Max responds, “Pneumonia isn’t enough, but it’s a start. I’d be glad for anything” (p. 115). In this example, Max has taken the stories his father has told him about physical suffering in the camps, and he wants desperately to also feel what his father felt. He cannot mimic his father’s actions directly, so he tries to do everything he can to be able to produce the same suffering he endured.
In *After Long Silence*, the girls decide to take the opportunity of a blizzard during their ski get-a-way to Michigan and go on a hike that could resemble the marches their father endured in the Siberian concentration camp. Helen and Lara took this simulation very seriously. Helen writes,

> We continued, breathing hard, not speaking. [...] I imagined that we were in the Gulag, two sisters making their nighttime escape across the frozen wasteland, whipped by blizzards and gale-force winds, driven by a single thought: to press on, to move forward, to survive. [...] We walked for another hour, maybe more. We moved slowly, laboriously. The thrill of escaping the Gulag had worn off. It was bitter cold, and I was tired and hungry and whipped. Siberia was not much fun. And the worst part was, we weren’t even close to Siberia. We hadn’t gone more than a few miles in northern Michigan. (p. 188-189)

Again, we see a situation here where the children take what they have heard about their father’s concentration camp experience and try to repeat it in the best possible way. Once again, they are not equipped with the tools to repeat the experience, so they mimic the experience as effectively as they can. And, like Max, they recognize that their attempt to re-live their father’s experience is unsuccessful.

A way that this mimicking behavior often manifests itself in the actions of the offspring is through the children’s fantasizing. For example, in *Maus II*, Artie says to his wife, “Sometimes I’d fantasize Zyklon B coming out of our shower instead of water” (p. 16). These fantasies come when the children are playing; while some children pretend to be a teacher teaching a class, or a Doctor healing patients, children of Holocaust survivors will play pretending that they are in the Holocaust, or preparing for the Holocaust. In *Nightfather*, the
children are playing and planning for when the war starts. They say, “we [will] hide in the cellar and eat grass. Before we go into hiding we have to pick a sackful of grass. When the grass is gone we will slaughter Pinky. [...] We are lucky to have a cat” (p. 54). The children pack a sack of grass, and role play the beginning of the Holocaust. Later in Nightfather, Carl decides to bury her toys for when the SS come, and she does so in all seriousness, to protect her toys when they arrive. Then, she says, “Now that my toys are gone, the house seems empty and strange, as if I myself had left as well. I haven’t buried Teddy, though, He’ll just have to be gassed along with me, even though it isn’t healthy. To get him used to the idea, I cuff his ears every now and then. ‘Sauhund!’ I shout as I do it. ‘Dirty dog!’” (p. 107). In this fantasy, she is playing concentration camp with her stuffed animal, playing the role of the SS-man to prepare the teddy bear for the torture and eventual gas chamber in the camps.

Thus, as a result of the Holocaust memory passed from parent to child, the children will try to imitate or mimic their parent’s experience. Because they are not equipped with the experiences of the Holocaust, they use what they have around them, a refrigerator, or a blizzard in Michigan, to try to experience their suffering. Other times, they simply incorporate their parents’ experiences into their own playtime and imaginative fantasies. This habit is another way they attempt to be like their parents; much like an average child will try to be like a Doctor, or a teacher, a child of a Holocaust prisoner may try to be like a Holocaust prisoner.

Adopting Fear

The other habit that seems to invade the lives of many children of survivors is to hear the fears their parents harbored during the Holocaust, and adopt them as their own, as unwarranted as they may be in their lives. Artie’s “fascination” of gas coming out of the shower, and Carl and her siblings’ preparation for the war blurry the lines between fantasizing about their parents’
experience, and actually possessing the fear of those fantasies becoming a reality. It is tough for us, and probably for the children as well, to determine if these scenes are strictly fantasy, or if there is a real fear behind them. However, in Nightfather, there are a few more examples that certainly provide evidence that children may have concrete fears in their own lives as a result of the transmission of their parents’ memories.

For example, Carl compares her fears to those of her friend Nellie; “Whenever Nellie goes to the toilet, she looks down between her legs. She’s sure there’s a crocodile lurking in the water just waiting to bite her. I’m not scared of crocodiles. I’m scared of vermin. What I’m most scared of is Willi Hammer” (p. 44). Willi Hammer is an SS officer that her father feared the most in the camps. Carl absorbs the stories that her father tells her about Willi and allows them to impact her so much that she adopts this fear as the biggest in her life. Later in the book, we see this fear again in Carl’s life, this time at school. The teacher asks the class, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Carl responds, “Invisible, so the SS won’t catch me” (p. 93). Of all of the normal and healthy responses a child can have to this question, what Carl wants most is to be free from the SS by becoming invisible.

**Resulting Emotions Expressed Communicatively**

Directly after Carl says what she wants to be when she grows up, she tells us, “It’s the wrong answer” (p. 93). Mimicking their parent’s Holocaust experiences and adopting the fears of the Holocaust as their own is not something done without emotions that accompany it. This example, where Carl feels as though she knows she did something wrong is an example of the emotional attachment that accompanies their Holocaust-related lives in the post-Holocaust society. The chain begins with the Holocaust. The Holocaust left its survivors with horrible memories and experiences that alter their communicative patterns and pervade into the lives of
their families. The children’s emotions and actions are affected as a result and often lead them to try to mimic their parents’ experiences, or to adopt their parents’ fears. The children, as a result of these responses to their parents behavior, often feel and respond with confusion, much like Carl felt in the preceding example, guilt, or the desire to lash out.

Feeling Confusion

The issues with confusion are twofold: on one hand, the individuals feel confusion in their relationships with their parents or other people in their lives. This type is confusion about the role they play in relationships after having an instance like the Holocaust shaping who they are without them experiencing it firsthand. Essentially, this type of confusion is their ambiguity with how to allow the Holocaust to function in their relationships with others. The Holocaust is part of their identity; it pours into their lives through their interactions with the surviving parent or parents. The children are left with the daunting task of making sense out of the relationship with their parents, which occurs in conjunction with Holocaust memories, and also in their relationships with others where the Holocaust seeps into their interactions.

For example, in Maus II, Artie talks to his wife about his problems and confusion; “I mean, I can’t even make any sense out of my relationship with my father… How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz… of the Holocaust?” (p. 14). This response insinuates that children have confusion about the relationships with their surviving parent because their task is greater than just making sense out of the relationship, in order to do so they must also make sense out of the Holocaust; that understanding one comes in conjunction to understanding the other.

The other confusion children often feel as a result of not fully understanding the Holocaust and their parents’ connection to it, and how that in turn influences them, is their
uncertainty about their place in society. The memories passed down result in habits and responses by the children; like we saw with Carl in the earlier example, children feel as though they are different and in turn alienated from others in society. Carl says this even more simply when she says, “Maybe [father] got [camp] because he’s different from most of the people I know. Because he’s different, my mother is different, too. And because the two of them are different, Max, Simon, and I are different from ordinary children. At home you don’t notice it, but at school you do” (p. 5). When she is at school, she also draws pictures of prisoners being hanged, of executions, and of people with mustaches like Hitler’s. She doesn’t know and understand why the teacher sees this as such a problem; she is drawing what she feels in her life, it just happens to be different from other children. She actually compares how she acts and feels in school to a mentally retarded child. The young boy, Hans, in their town, has troubles staying “civilized” in church; he crawls around and sings when everyone is praying. She references a quote from Nellie’s father; “Do you know that he grabbed onto my feet? What’s that boy doing in church? Children like that should be institutionalized” (p. 94). Carl narrates, directly after that statement, “Hans doesn’t belong in church and I don’t belong in school.” Clearly, Carl feels out of place without really understanding the deeper meaning of why she is different, but just that she is because of the Holocaust.

We see Helen and Lara feeling confusion about their place in society as well in *After Long Silence*. The family enrolled in family therapy when she was eight years old. She says, “We all knew there was something very wrong, but none of us knew exactly what it was. I spent as much time as I could out of the house, pretending I belonged to another family – almost any other family” (p. 157-158). Here the family is acknowledging that there is something wrong, and they go to therapy to try to determine what it is; Helen seems to know that it is something in her
family that is not in other families, something that makes them different and in turn makes her
different. As a result, she pretends she was part of a different family, one who perhaps is not
altered by the Holocaust. That is, one in which the family members do not feel like they are
alienated from other families in society.

 Feeling Guilt

The children of survivors often feel guilt in their lives; the guilt seems to stem from not
being able to match up or effectively mimic their parents’ experience. The mimicking that is
done is often as guilt-related responses. For example, Lara and Helen’s hike through “Siberia,”
and Max’s feet in the refrigerator are attempts to try to reduce that guilt by trying to find a way to
compare. Essentially, nothing that the children of survivors experience in their own lives can
come close to matching up with what their parents experienced. And as a result, they feel guilt.

For example, in Maus I, Artie shares these feelings of guilt with his wife, he says, “I
know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could
really know what they lived through. I guess its some kind of guilt about having had an easier
life than they did. I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my
darkest dreams” (p. 16). After he absorbs the memories and experiences of his father,
particularly in light of the way his father passes them down, he feels as though he can never
measure up.

Helen examines this issue of guilt as well, she thinks, “Maybe it was simply my birthright
to guilt” (p. 175). She also wonders, “Could [she] have survived what they had been through?”
She thinks, “Nothing I could ever do would be enough. My admiration soared while my spirits
sank and my sense of self-worth could have been rubbed away under the heel of one shoe” (p.
129). Again, Helen is expressing her emotions of sorrow for “having it easier.”
Carl shows us evidence of her guilt as well in Nightfather. She often referred to her father’s experience as a sickness, that he “has camp.” “Camp is not so much a place as a condition” (p. 1). She goes on to express guilt about not having camp; “We’ve had chicken pox and German measles. And after Simon fell out of a tree he got a concussion and had to stay in bed for weeks. But we’ve never had camp” (p. 1-2). This discussion shows the cognition children use to try to see if their experiences can rival those of their parents, and they ultimately decide that it is impossible, leaving them with guilt.

**Lashing Out**

A very different response that children of Holocaust survivors may have is to lash out at their parents for giving them this altered existence. Like survivors, it is impossible to categorize or tag a second generation survivor into one emotion as a result of the memory transmission. In other words, a child of a survivor will not exclusively mimic resulting in guilt, or solely adopt fears resulting in confusion, and he or she will not only lash out. Thus, it is possible for the same children, who have been exhibiting confusion and guilt to have experiences where they lash out against their parent.

Max, just pages after trying, unsuccessfully, to emulate his father’s physical suffering, lashes out at his father. He says, “Suit yourself! Just don’t keep coming to me with stories about that stupid camp of yours. It served you right” (p. 83). When his father says that he does not like Max’s tone, Max responds, “Oh no? And what are you going to do about it? Why don’t you hit me then? Just like the SS! Kick me to death, why don’t you! Why don’t you gas me?” (p. 83). Max and his father are not in an argument at the time of Max’s eruption; it just seems to come.
Lara lashes out too. When she does it is to her sister, but the emotions she suddenly pours out are much like those of Max’s, and, also like Max, the content is related to the anger the children feel about the transmission of the Holocaust into their lives. She yells at Helen, “It’s not just about them! It’s about us! About who we are! They’ve left us out of a whole world! Don’t you feel ripped off?” Helen describes Lara’s tone; “The anger in her voice alarmed [Helen]. During their childhood fights she used to chase [her] around the house shouting ‘I’ll Kill You’ in much the same tone” (p. 159). This follow up to Lara’s lashing out helps us to understand how emotional and furious she was as a result of their parent’s actions. Thus, although in this instance she is not lashing out at her parents, the emotions she feels and the reason she lashes out is because of them and the ways in which they communicate with Lara and Helen.

**Conclusion: Making Meaning**

My analyses of the memoirs, *Nightfather*, *After Long Silence*, and *Maus* have revealed some helpful insight about family communication after the Holocaust. First, the texts show us that the Holocaust surviving parents will communicate their memories to their children through a variety of different styles, including outbursts, lecturing, and venting. The texts demonstrate that the children receive and respond to these memories with patterns as well, by attempting to mimic their parents’ experience and by adopting their parents’ fears into their own lives. Because these responses cause difficulty in the lives of a second generation survivor, they will experience resulting emotions that they express communicatively: they feel confusion, they feel guilt, and they have tendencies to lash out.

When analyzing the children’s reception of memory, we can notice something extremely important: the children are attempting to make meaning of their parents and their parents’ experiences. However, when we look at the examples of their attempts to make meaning, we see
that the meaning they construct about the Holocaust is incomplete and inaccurate. There are two main ways the children try to make meaning. The first way we see this process is the way the adults writing the memoir write about their internal, cognitive attempts at understanding that they went through as children. We see their knowledge and assumptions about their parent’s experiences as inaccurate, thus, telling us that their attempts to make meaning are not complete.

For example, Carl opens her memoir with a demonstration that what she thought about the Holocaust was only a piece of the puzzle, leaving her with an incomplete meaning about it. She writes, “[Father] never mentions it by name. It might have been Trebíbor or Majdawitz, Soblinka or Birkenhausen. He talks about “the camp” as if there had been just one” (p. 1). She tells us about a communication encounter she had with her father, where she leaves and tries to make meaning, but the meaning is incomplete; “‘After the war,’ he said, ‘I saw a film about the camp. With prisoners frying an egg for breakfast. An egg!’ So camp is somewhere where no one fries eggs” (p. 1). After this exclamation from her father about the camp she tells us what she thought about the camp; her understanding is incomplete. The meaning she constructs is simply that camp is a place where people do not ever fry eggs.

Helen, in *After Long Silence*, also shows us that the meaning she constructed about concentration camps as a child was partial. She remembers, “I knew that my parents had been in concentration camps. I misunderstood the meaning of concentration and assumed that in prison, the inmates were consumed by intensely focused mental activity. I believed that these camps were so deadly that they had sewn my parents into pockets of complete silence” (p. 7-8).

In both of these examples, the meaning that the children try to make is internal; they do not share their thoughts with their parents about the camps, but instead they simply absorb the memories and the messages they receive from their parents and use them to formulate a
conception of what the Holocaust was like and their parents’ experience in it. A large reason, then, that meaning is not accurately made is because the parent or parents simply do not provide enough information for the children to create a coherent understanding, thus, inadvertently leaving them unclear and in the dark about the truth.

There are also instances in which the parents explicitly prevent the children from making a complete and coherent meaning about the Holocaust experience. In these cases, we see the child verbalize their constructed meaning and perceived understanding to the parent. Then, the parent negates insisting that the child does not understand. The first way a parent may negate a child’s understanding is by shifting ideas so quickly and internally that the child cannot keep up.

The clearest examples of this idea come to us through *Nightfather*. In the first example, Carl’s father is driving past a woods and mentions that it is a great woods to escape into, that “they’d never find [him] in there” (p. 26). Then, he proceeds to get out of his car and run into the woods. The youngest child asks Carl what their father is doing. Carl confidently answers, “The usual, just a little escaping. Escaping has to be done very quietly, otherwise it doesn’t work” (p. 26). Then, when the father got back into the car, Carl said, “Lucky they didn’t find you” (p. 27). And the father, “looks around in surprise” and asks, “Who?” (p. 27). In this example, Carl thinks she has figured out what her father is doing. She interprets, based on the messages she is receiving from her father, that her father is practicing escaping. She explains what he is doing to Simon and she thinks she understands. Then, when she tries to share her knowledge with her father, he seems to have shifted gears from his original idea of escaping into something else, and thus, negates her perceived understanding.

*Nightfather* provides us with another compelling example in which the parent will negate a child’s perceived understanding by changing emotions internally. The encounter happens
when Max and the other children are listening to one of their father’s stories from the camp. He speaks of a chaotic moment near liberation time when he had the chance to strangle and kill a horrible SS-man. He seems stricken with guilt and regret; “They did everything they could to turn me into an animal. And they succeeded. I became their image. I can no longer look in a mirror without coming face to face with a murderer. I would do anything to bring Willi back to life” (p. 119). Max, thinking he understands his father’s emotions, tries to comfort him and says, “Then you aren’t an animal, because animals can’t feel sorry for what they’ve done” (p. 119).

Max thinks he and his father have a shared meaning about his father’s emotions about this experience in his past, and he tries to show that to his father by consoling him. However, his father turns to Max at this instant and says, “Sorry? The only reason I want to bring him back to life is so I can murder him all over again. I did it much too quickly the first time. This time I’d take it nice and easy. I’d wring his neck at my leisure, little by little. […] The only thing I regret is that I didn’t make him suffer in mortal fear long enough” (p. 119).

The parents may negate a child’s perceived understanding much more explicitly. In Nightfather, the father speaks to his children about the bread rations that they got in the camps. He demonstrates using his fingers how small the ration was for the day, and he tells them that the bread was made with flour and sawdust. Here, Simon tries to communicate a perceived understanding when he says, “sawdust? Like Jonah’s?” (p. 11). Jonah, their hamster, has sawdust in his cage, and therefore Simon thinks he understands about the sawdust in the bread. But when he communicates this idea the father says, “You don’t understand” and leaves the table (p. 11). This example presents an explicit way in which a parent can negate the child’s perceived understanding.
There is an important link in these two different ways the children show us that the meaning they made of the Holocaust was incomplete; in both cases, the parents do not permit the child to make accurate meaning. In the first example, the parents simply do not equip the children with the necessary tools to understand their experiences and weave them into a complete meaning. In the second example, when the children do try to show that they understand the parents negate their perceived understanding by explicitly or implicitly insisting that the children do not understand.

To have shared meaning, it is essential for both parties allow it. We see in these encounters that the children are desperately trying to construct a coherent meaning that they can share with their parent. However, the parent does not allow their meaning to be complete. The parents do not appear to be intentionally callous to the child. Therefore, why do the parents reject a shared meaning? To brainstorm a few reasons, possibly the parents do not understand the Holocaust themselves, making it impossible to allow anyone else to understand it. Or, quite possibly the parents know about the Holocaust so well that they realize that no one who was not a direct witness could ever understand the experience.

Completing this analysis leads to research implications for the field of family communication and the Holocaust. First, it is important to re-cap what researchers say about transmission of family history. First of all, children have “Rights of Heritage,” which entitle them to learn about the family history that occurred before their birth (Peskin & Auerhahn, 2000). Pettit and Lollis (1997) extend this idea to point out that for a child to formulate an identity, the child’s understanding of the family history is central; without this transmission, the child will struggle with their self-construction.
It is also necessary to review the types of altered communication patterns researchers discuss in the lives of survivors. Kellermann (2001) discusses memory recall and mentions that survivors will be confronted with memories that result from every day objects stimulating their memory during their daily lives. This process of memory recall resonates with the patterns I noticed in my analysis; the outbursts, the lecturing, and the venting all seem to stem from a memory that intrudes the life of the survivor. Researchers will also discuss silence as a communicative strategy (Montalbano-Phelps, 2003 & Roseman, 1999). The researchers talk about the tendency for survivors to avoid talking about their experience with the family, thus, making silence their communication to the family.

When considering my analysis with these two categories of literature in mind, both the importance of transmitting family history and the communicative patterns of survivors, we can investigate a new possibility. Although the analysis is centered on the verbal patterns of communication parents use when passing memory to their children, what threads these communicative encounters together is the silence that occurs after the transmission of the memory. Although the survivors communicate the memory down through patterns, we still see silence. The silence after the event prevents understanding on the part of the children. The outbursts, lectures, and venting patterns are never put into context for the children or explained in any way, instead, leaving the children in silence. Therefore, it seems logical that verbalized patterns of communication can occur in conjunction with silence; communication transmits the memory, and silence follows the verbal communication.

It is interesting, then, to analyze what this finding says about the transmission of history. Throughout the memoirs, the parents share bits and pieces of their past, or history, with the children. This transmission is supposed to help the children with identity formation. However,
from the analysis it is clear to see that the children do not seem to have a confident and defined identity; in fact, they do not even have coherent and shared meanings about their parents’ experiences. Therefore, it seems important to note that it is not strictly the transmission of family history that is important to the identity formation of a second generation survivor; it has to be the coherent and complete transmission that is explained to and understood by the offspring. The analysis proves that a fragmented and partial transmission of history results ultimately in emotions of confusion, guilt, and the tendency to lash out. Thus, it seems clear that a Holocaust survivor’s incomplete and nonsensical transmission of family history does a disservice to the identity formation of his or her offspring.

The field of family communication and the Holocaust is important to communication scholars. Even though the Holocaust was stopped 60 years ago, communicatively the Holocaust is still alive and deadly. Communication after the Holocaust perpetuates the trauma that survivors endured in the camps. In addition, communication is the means through which this trauma “walks” down generations. The Holocaust is so recent in our past that researchers do not know how many generations the Holocaust will impact; at this point, researchers have seen the Holocaust alter second and third generation survivors, and the trauma may stretch farther.

I chose to conduct a textual analysis on the memoirs of the second generation to see what resulting behaviors and emotions escaped from their texts, as opposed to their self-reports. Many researchers have conducted interviews with second generation survivors, and their findings contribute meaningful information to the body of research. However, what is so unique about this textual analysis is that the memoirs allow us to see what the children deem most significant and influential in their lives. In interviews, the prompts and the interviewer naturally guides the conversation, even in qualitative, open interviews.
Because the memoirs the children create are the central form of communication in the public sphere, it is important and beneficial to look at the form of the memoir. I did not include this investigation in my study, but there is certainly plenty to be learned about the structure of the memoirs. The writers tend to write in a chaotic order with swirling and non-chronological narratives and events. They have “touch-and-go” moments that they would sometimes revisit later, and sometimes leave for rest. The reason for this structure is unknown to me, but the answer is in the texts. As we continue to learn about family communication after the Holocaust, an analysis of the form of the memoirs will certainly be an important area of study. As the time after the Holocaust continues to pass, we still see the Holocaust communicatively influencing survivors and their families. As communication scholars, it is essential for us to further our research in hopes to understand exactly how the Holocaust was such a deadly event that it can continue to cause harm years after its conclusion.
References


Weine et. al. ? or all the names?? (12!!)
