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HOLOCAUST THEOLOGY: THE SURVIVORS' STATEMENT—PART I

The only theology of catastrophe which, in the long run, is significant and influential, is theology which accords with the reality of catastrophe. Consequently, a theology of the Holocaust most appropriately begins not with speculation, argument, or reflection, but with the reality of the Holocaust. A Holocaust theology which will illuminate the past and nurture the future must place that reality at its center. Thirty-six years after the first concentration camp inmates were liberated, the Holocaust is best apprehended—so to speak—through its survivors. The living remnants of the disaster must be the first sentences of a theology of that disaster. The World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors—the largest gathering of its kind since liberation—provided an unprecendented (and largely noncommercialized) glimpse at the Holocaust in June 1981 in Jerusalem. A description of the gathering (sections I and II of this essay) paves the way for the formation of a post-Holocaust theology (section III).

I

The World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors is not a seminar, not a meeting, not a conference. It is a one-time happening. It has never taken place before. It will never take place again. It has grown beyond anything we had anticipated. We still don't know how it will end. It is not an organization. It is not backed by anyone. A group of volunteers felt that the time had come—double *hai*—36 years—to get together before time ran out. We had expected 50 people, then 500 to 1000, and now we're dealing with 4000 to 5000 survivors from 23 countries. These are the ones we know of. We are in awe of the logistical problems. We don't know the exact number. We have had only one paid professional. This is a one-man operation. For us this Gathering is the realization of a dream we had in the camps and ghettoes. Ben Meed, my assistant, is a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, I of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

Tradition, 20(2), Summer 1982
0041-0608/82/1400-0141$02.75

On it goes, the introductory remarks at the pre-World Gathering press conference by its chairman, Ernest W. Michel. After a while the incongruity of his remarks becomes clear: his delivery is smooth, calm, no stuttering, no crying. Auschwitz. Survivors. Warsaw Ghetto. All the words that twist the gut and shatter the mind. But here he was, talking smoothly, calmly. Not because he was holding back, or was callous, but because he had been there—and had overcome. Here was an announcement of something new: through the years, individual survivors had found something of inner peace, something of dignity, of acceptance—self-acceptance. Now they would find it collectively.

> Something had to be done. It had to be done by the survivors themselves. Not a fund-raising event. Not to make statements. But four days of meeting individuals who want to make a statement by themselves and to themselves and to anyone who wants to listen. Every single individual has his own story and wants to tell it. I hope we have your understanding. For my people, coming here is a very emotional experience. Please keep this in mind. We don't want to destroy the dignity of this event. Some survivors are in their eighties, one is 92. Everyone is paying for his own trip. No one gets paid. On Friday we're going home. Closing down. This is not another new organization. This is not a memorial service. This is an expression of joy and gratitude, and a desire to tell the world: don't let it happen again—to Jews or non-Jews. One Holocaust is enough.

No theories or grand explanations, no finger pointing. No publicity hunting, no pandering to the media. Something very direct and poignant. Something—one hesitates to say it—positive about the Holocaust. A few minutes after the press conference, Mr. Michel presides over the ceremonial opening of the "Survivors Village" (the collection of computer consoles for locating lost survivors). Michel begins: "Before I say anything, I want to call on my friend, Hirsh Altusky." Altusky—by now one is getting used to the fact that every participant is a survivor of the death camps—appears, utters 11 words, slowly, deliberately, with his eyes closed, and then sits down. In Hebrew, he says: *"Blessed are You, Lord of the universe, who has kept us alive, and sustained us, and brought us to this day."*

Monday

As I draw near to the official opening ceremony of the World Gathering at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, I hear the announcement of delegations. "The delegation from Norway . . . the delegation from Germany . . . Auschwitz Survivors Organization. . . ." Survivors flow toward the ceremony, blanketing the hills and paths which lead through the small forest on the way to Yad Vashem. Thousands already fill the plaza. Two embrace right in front of me. "Who is this?" I ask one.

"She is the one who scratched the camp commander's face as he took away her parents." The other lady, small and old, grimaces at being described as a heroine and quickly departs. It is an hour before the ceremony is to begin. Thousands mill about, each one a story, a witness, a link to the awful past and now a transformer of that past. It is a privilege to be among them; they will not live forever. "In 10 or 20 years you people will have to search for us with candlelights," one survivor tells me. Right here, right now, is the first and the last opportunity for collective testimony.

I wander into the Hall of Remembrance. The dark stone floor, inscribed with the names of the concentration camps, is covered with roses. There is complete silence, save the quiet chirping of birds and popping of flash bulbs. Survivors peer at the names: Mauthausen, Tereizenstadt, Maidenek, Treblinka. They peer. Silence. A certain distancing. It is not the sadness I have always felt here before.

I walk out, then in again. An interviewer is holding a microphone and tape recorder. Another woman, with a British accent, is reciting crisply, calmly, into the tape recorder:

> At the beginning even the best of the Lithuanians wouldn't help. We used to pray: Please let the bombs come down on the ghetto. Let it be a quick ending. But, on the other hand, the struggle helped us to survive. I, for example, contracted tuberculosis and was in bed for a year. That made my mother struggle to get me food whenever she could. It gave strength for the trials to come. In 1943 she managed to get me into a work camp; I was made older than I was. They took all the other remaining children to Auschwitz. That is where my childhood friends ended up. There are no survivors of the ghetto from my age. . . . When it came time to finish us off, it was a Sunday. I overheard that something was moving—a German soldier who was in love with a Jewish girl came to tell her. There was no place to escape. Almost impossible to get out. Electric wire. There was an ammunition factory whose guard was allowed to live in the forest. Right then and there my mother took my hand. Even the Germans at the gate did not know that they were going to round us up. We crawled under the train, asked the gatekeeper to help us. He refused to save us. But later on he saw me—a little girl—then let us in a cellar. . . .

A lone woman. One among thousands. She had just begun her story. There were thousands of stories, right here, in one place. It was like the pictures of the event itself: numbing. But it was different. The scene: survivors.

Finally, the ceremony opens. President Yitzhak Navon:

> What is the answer to the Holocaust? I don't think that there is an answer to the Holocaust. The Holocaust confronts us with so many questions. But if there is an answer to that unique tragedy, it should not be found on the individual level, but on the collective level. Many survivors have reconstructed their lives and reached high positions in economy, politics, society, high fields. But that too is not an

answer because the Nazis were not looking for Jews as individuals. The only answer—if there is one—is the State of the Jewish people. Because it is only here that Jews can express their national will. All survivors should do what the Six Million would do if they could: Come to Israel, build it, collectively, economically.

Eichmann prosecutor Gideon Hausner:

The Holocaust has branded shame on our time as indelible as the Auschwitz numbers tatooed on our arms. The 20th century started in anarchism, drifted into Nazism, and is going out in terrorism. Yes, it is true, we have an Auschwitz complex. And in the future, we will have to decide what is vital for our nation. We all say: Never again. But only a state can insure that. The lesson of history: No dictator can ever be trusted. Therefore, let no dictator be given an atom bomb in Baghdad or elsewhere.

Ernest Michel, Chairman of the World Gathering:

My name is Ernest Michel, Auschwitz number one zero four nine nine five. Like many of you I had a dream, that one day—if we live—we could come and stand together. I remember vividly my arrival in Auschwitz—like many of you—on a grey winter evening in 1943, after endless days in a cattle car. The SS in their long leather coats, elegant, tall, clean shaven. I remember jumping out of the car—hungry—frightened—whips lashing down. Then the line moving slowly until we came face to face with Dr. Mengele, the Angel of Death. And his thumb went up, and it went down. Up, you live, Down, you die. I was a young boy then. I did not know what was happening. How can any human being imagine that he would be forced into a stark chamber, naked, and that he would breathe gas—in agony—until he was dead? How could you imagine that? What had I done? And so, we dreamt. Would we live? Would the day of freedom ever come? That day did come and today we are here, the largest number of survivors ever assembled in one place since our liberation 36 years ago. All of us are united by an indivisible bond, a bond forged in the death camps of Nazi Germany, the ghettos of Poland, the forests where we fought, and the places where a few caring non-Jews kept us in hiding and saved our lives. This is a reunion of a special group of people for which there is no parallel anywhere. We want to stand together once more before time runs out, united in freedom as we were in slavery. We want to see in each other's eyes and in the eyes of our children the proof of our survival and the joy that comes from being alive and free. But there is more than that. We survivors want to tell those who try to rewrite the history and deny that the Holocaust ever happened. Our eyes have seen. Our ears have heard. Our nostrils were filled with the acrid fumes from the gas chambers drifting over our camp. Day after day. Week after week. Year after year. These hands [Michel holds his hands up in the air] have carried more corpses than I care to remember. So don't tell us it never happened. We were there.

My fellow survivors. Touched by the madness of our nightmare, we have tried to live normal lives. Scarred by the acid of barbarous hatred, we have tried to give love to our children. Forgotten by a silent world, we have tried to avoid cynicism and despair. Despite all we have seen, we affirm life. When the final *shofar* of the closing ceremony ends, we shall return home and most of us will never meet

> again. But we will leave with gratitude in our hearts for the miracle of our survival, for that of the Jewish people, and for the rebirth of the Jewish land. Go, my friends—go—knowing that history will tell our story. Forever.

There is a great surge to applaud, but others hush it, recalling an earlier announcement that there is to be no applauding throughout the ceremony. A sound and light show begins. It is an open-air show, broadcast on the stone base of a Holocaust memorial, and on wire screens placed above the memorial just for this occasion. Wall and wire are 300 feet wide. Three simultaneous moving pictures appear: one of life in prewar Jewish hamlets, one of Hitler, Germans, SS, and Nazi rallies, and one of concentration camps, beatings, and lesser tortures. Yiddish songs, Nazi music, and the sounds of screeching fighter bombers intermix. The pictures and the music change ever few seconds. Now there are new juxtapositions: little Jewish boys with *payot,* tanks, round-ups of Jews, pictures of Auschwitz, trains, whistles blowing, hordes of Jews marching out of cities with bundles thrown over their backs, Nazis, barracks. . . . And here we all are, viewing it in Jerusalem, in Israel, in peace, in a pleasant, cool, Jerusalem summer breeze. We are here. Those on the screens did not make it. Michel's words echo and re-echo: Our eyes have seen; our ears have heard; our nostrils were filled.

The pictures change: the ship Exodus, feet walking in the sea onto the shore of Israel, "Hagana Ship—We Are Not Afraid." Suddenly it all stops. Six tall poles are astride the screen. Six children appear in front of them. It is announced that they are all grandchildren of survivors; they each light one of the poles, which bursts into flame: six of them. The audience has been transformed. Transfixed, mesmerized. Many child survivors had never seen the pictures before. Many stand: woman in front, her husband in back of her gripping her with a bear hug, his head on her shoulders, both with eyes wet, utterly motionless. Flashed suddenly across the three screens: "From destruction . . . Remember! . . . to Rebirth." No eye is dry, but few cry, few sob. Survivors have made their adjustments. Out of nowhere comes a voice.

> My name is Yisrael Lau. The youngest child survivor of Buchenwald. Eight Years old. Now, Chief Rabbi of Netanya. I arrived in Israel, *Tisha B'av* 1945. From destruction to redemption. There are only two conclusions. Chapter 60, Isaiah: "Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? These are the gathering of the exiles." And: forget not your *tefillin,* your *kashrut. Fir a yiddishe shtib.* Conduct your home Jewishly.

The spotlight swings to a choir: "*Ani Ma'amin.* I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah." More pictures on the screens: Israel rebuilt, Israel today. Then it is all over. The organizers embrace and kiss,

as at a wedding. The crowd walks back to the buses, almost festive, smiling, happy. An evening out, 36 years after Auschwitz.

Tuesday

Survivors visit academies of Torah study named after communities decimated by the Nazis. Buses pull up to Yeshivat Or Someach. There are speeches: about the man who wrote *Or Someach;* the importance of the city, Dvinsk, in which he lived; an address in Yiddish; a memorial prayer; a talk on the renewal of Jewish learning. The unveiling of a plaque in memory of the destroyed Torah centers. The conclusion of the ceremony: the singing of *Ani Ma'amin.* Suddenly the yeshivah students link arms, begin swaying back and forth. The buildings of the yeshivah surround the students, the students surround the survivors. It is a great circle, the survivors sitting in the middle, in a plaza. Silent wind. An isolated spot. Nothing but the sounds of *Ani Ma'amin,* sung now, not at the entrance to gas chambers, but in the presence of those who said it—or lived it—in the camps. The words echo back and forth between the buildings surrounding the plaza. Survivors are stunned. Who is inspiring whom? Survivors whose existence testifies to the power of faith, or fortitude; or students whose declaration of faith testifies to the future existence of the Jewish people? Tears. More singing. Another round. Echoes: ". . .even though he tarry"—how the Messiah tarried in those years, for these people, standing right here—"I believe with perfect faith that any day he will come." Still another round.

Hardly is it over when the survivors are standing in another yeshivah named after a decimated Torah center, Kaminetz. They are facing another group of singers, this time children with *payot* singing merrily with their teacher, their *rebbe,* singing in Yiddish in the antiquated Kaminetz Yeshiva building in Jerusalem. It is a scene straight out of pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe—the heavy Yiddish intonation, the sparkle in their eyes. The survivors: not particularly impressed, or unimpressed. It is a natural scene. Many have seen it before. They see it again.

I try to engage a survivor in discussion. A simple woman. She will not talk. "Is the conference a good idea?" I ask. "Very good," she says, and shakes her head for emphasis. Why is it good? Because it breaks down loneliness? Facilitates communication? Makes it easier to be silent? Easier to remember? Harder to remember? Why, I wonder, is it good? She does not want to talk. I do not press. "I am from Poland," she tells me, "and now I live in Brooklyn." A simple declarative sentence. It speaks eternities and hides eternities about which she would prefer not to talk. But, yes, the conference is a very good idea. Another survivor approaches me, wanting to talk about why survivors should not talk about

the Holocaust. She is in her forties. She was just seven years old in 1945, survived five years in Rumanian ghettoes, slave labor camps, and concentration camps. She begins:

> I do not think much of this new evolution—of talking about the Holocaust. People spend time talking to non-Jews about the Holocaust. I have a gut feeling: I do not want to be a part of that. I do not want to keep opening up my wounds. I do not want to keep telling them of the pain that they inflicted upon me in order to elicit their repentance.
>
> This I do not mind telling them: There was one peasant woman. I do not know her name. I do not know her face. But she helped my mother save two children. There was the camp. And the wire fence. On that day my mother could not bribe. On that day she had no choice. She could not bribe. If she left us in the barracks, they would take us away. And she had to go to work. No choice. She handed her children through the fence to one peasant woman. . . . My sister and I are here. That means that the peasant lady kept us for whatever length of time and then returned us to our mother.
>
> That story may be constructive. That does not degrade us. It holds up a model of someone who had the courage to be human when the world condoned inhumanity. And if this is a beginning for a gentile child to say, "This is what I want to emulate," then maybe that will be a beginning of a search to learn what happened. But they must search themselves. The search is the genuine attempt at expiation.
>
> Anti-Semitism is the gentiles' problem. They will have to get out of it their own way. If they want to repent, they will have to work for it. We should tell *that* it happened, but not *what* happened. I will not speak even before respectful non-Jews, even before their children. They plead, "Stand up and tell us all"—I was beaten, I was starved, I was groveling in the mire—I do not want to tell them that. To tell about our experiences profanes our pride.
>
> This is a minority point of view. On the plane I met two ladies from Philadelphia who spend their time talking to groups. In a way, for them to talk is a catharsis. In talking they can identify many things. But to talk about the Holocaust has become a belief system. It is an equation: "If we tell, then we will prevent it from happening again." And I don't buy into that equation.

Yes, this is a minority point of view. If anything, this is a gathering of talkers. One survivor put it this way:

> Once we die, the real authenticity will be gone. I cannot afford the luxury of dying without leaving anything of my experience behind. I am not going to leave it up to *them* to tell this history. But I understand those who cannot speak. My sister is one. Once I was on television talking about the Holocaust, and she said: "I'll turn on the television to watch you, but I'll turn off the sound."

And so, most survivors talk. Thirty-six years after liberation many say it all for the first time; one calls me and asks me to record her story. One survivor discovers another survivor who, as a child, was cared for in the same orphanage as she was. Their mutual discovery unleashes a flood of recollections. Her husband listens raptly—he is hearing it all for the

first time (''the only facts I knew before this were what I learned from her nightmares''). Even the talkers know that the impact of their testimony, authentic as it may be, will be diluted once they die; and even the nontalkers know that the story must somehow be transmitted. So both support the idea of a ''Second Generation,'' a bringing together of the children of the survivors for the sake of perpetuating the remembrance of the Holocaust. About 1000 children of survivors attend the Gathering in order to discuss their mutual strengths, problems, and responsibilities.

Wednesday

At the ''Second Generation'' workshops, Israeli and non-Israeli survivors trade ideas about the proper way to remember the Holocaust, indeed, about whether remembrance is their primary responsibility. An Israeli woman says: ''I don't have any time to think about the Holocaust because I am so busy building a new Jewish life here.'' The plea for *aliyah* (emigration to Israel) is straight, the tone passionate, sometimes shrill:

> Do you want to make in so-and-so years such a gathering for *our* children? What are you going to say to yourselves if, God forbid, something should happen to us? The Jewish state is still in great danger, fragile, surrounded by Arabs who not less than the Nazis want to destroy us. Israel is like actors on a stage and you are the audience. We are very tired actors. We need you. Where are you, Jewish youth?

The plea is met with a standing ovation. But applause, if less unrestrained, greets other second generation survivors who envision quite a different program: preservation of Jewish life in all of its prewar shadings—Orthodox, socialist, Yiddishist—in the diaspora as well as in Israel; bearing witness to the stories heard from parents; subsuming the Second Generation under a Judaism of which the Second Generation is actually the 200th generation; prevention of another Holocaust through fighting racism and prejudice wherever it may appear. Notwithstanding the ideological and philosophical tone of the Second Generation meetings, the mere recognition of a ''Second Generation'' generates a great release in the children of survivors, no less than the Gathering does for most of the survivors themselves. One child of survivors, for example, rose in tears, recounted before a Second Generation workshop how he had been raised in California, had never known other children of survivors, had never been able to articulate all of the tensions and anguish bottled up inside him, never thought that anyone would or could listen to him. The convocation of the Second Generation, the open acknowledgement of its special strengths, problems, and interests, imposed the beginning of form and meaning on the special character of their childhood and youth. Just as the survivors

themselves had to pass through several stages of post-Holocaust development before they could talk about their experiences or gather together and recall them silently, so, too, the children of the survivors had to reach a certain stage before being able to view themselves as bearing a special responsibility.

One second generation survivor, born in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, described the impact of a recent visit to Germany.

> I was representing the Israel booth at the International Book Fair in Frankfurt. I wore a *yarmulke*, as I always do. There were two types of security, German and Israeli. The Israeli security agent came over to me and said: "Keep a low profile." In other words: remove my *yarmulke*. I told him, in Hebrew, "I am not a hero, but I am going to keep it on. I am a child of survivors. I came back to show the Germans that they didn't get all of us. I am the second generation. We are still around and we are going to be around." The Israeli replied, "*Tsadakta*—you are right." Whenever I met with older Germans, over 55 or 60, I was not ashamed to ask them: What did you during the war? Some got hot under the collar. Others offered the usual answers, but I didn't care. Their facial expressions were enough.

There is, then, a militancy in the Second Generation. They will foster the future and keep the memory of the past alive, as did their parents. "In the summer of 1945," said one child of survivors, "there was a rash of marriages in the DP camps. Nine months later these camps had the highest birthrate of any known human population. That's us."

Thursday

Elie Wiesel, speaking at a press conference:

> One must realize, when it comes to the Holocaust, silence is more important than words. What is important, mainly, is the human aspect of the Gathering. Men and women meeting, reuniting. Suddenly there has been a release in the survivors. Until now he walked in his own shadow. Survivors will walk differently now. We are not able to talk about the Holocaust. That is a dilemma all of us face. The Holocaust defies language, transcends memory. But on the other hand, we have to tell our children. I am sorry if I sound arrogant. Only memory of the Holocaust can save the world, can save the world from destruction. Only this can save the world. But how to do it? We don't talk about it. At this Gathering you have 4000 novels, 4000 poems, never to be written. Job can never be compared to every soul of every person here. This is not a club. Club of VIPs. Club of Survivors. It is an act of generosity: if we talk, it is for you. It is too late for us. I rarely speak about it myself. I have written 20 books. Only four deal with the subject. That's all. Survivors speak their own language. Maybe someday somebody will decode it. This Gathering is the opening up. In front of strangers. The fact that nothing is irrevocably lost—you see people, friends, still alive. It gives you courage. We need every bit of joy we can get. My reunion story: I was in the hotel lobby. A man came up to me, said that he saw me on television. "I always wondered whether it was you who was in my barracks. Do you remember a boy who wore

tefillin every day? But he didn't have *tefillin,* so he used a string." "Of course I remember him," I said. What I didn't tell him what that it was me. You meet someone you have not seen since the war; you see him, embrace him, smile at him. That is enough.

I would not be too harsh on the Israelis for not participating. The Israeli public is taken up by the Israeli election campaign. Maybe they did not pay enough attention. In Israel it is a different approach. They say: Why do we need it? We live with it 365 days a year. Israel has a genocidal threat. I forgive. . . . I don't have to forgive. Who am I to forgive an Israeli? Is Israel the answer to the Holocaust? There is no answer to the Holocaust. Even with Israel, with the sovereign majesty that it is to me, there is a mystery that will remain seven times sealed for all time to come. The Second Generation is the most meaningful aspect of our work. Their role in a way is even more difficult than ours. They are responsible for a world they didn't create. They who did not go through the experience must transmit it. I visited Warsaw two years ago. The only place I felt at home was in the Warsaw cemetery. When I went home to Rumania, I felt the same way. What a terrible statement for a Jew today to make. But this is the 20th century, my friends. Will the Holocaust happen again? As it was, with gas chambers, the Holocaust couldn't happen again. We wouldn't let it happen! I would never use the words, "chance of Israel disappearing." I would never use the words.

After the press conference, another author, also a survivor of Auschwitz, tells me:

I personally feel that I defeated Hitler. I stood in front of the crematoria all night. The next morning they changed the orders. I survived. Hitler is dead. And I brought forth two children. That is my vengeance on Hitler. I brought forth two human beings who are full of humanity, decency, who will carry on after I am gone. I cannot think of a greater way of getting even with Hitler than that.

Thursday evening. The closing ceremony at the Western Wall. 6000 memorial candles. 1000 people per candle. Six Million. The ceremony is opened by the "rabbi of the Wall," Yehudah Meir Getz, a sephardi, from Morocco, who says: "I identify with you." There is music—trumpets, choirs, an orchestra. Ten thousand people fill the plaza, sit on the surrounding hills, pack the stairway entrances to the plaza. By the Wall itself, Israelis pray as usual. Unlike at the ceremonies and meetings of the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors throughout the week, the big names are present now: the Prime Minister, the Mayor, Elie Wiesel. But the week is over, the Gathering almost finished. The survivors made it themselves. "Thank you for coming," said Mayor Kollek. It did not seem like the formulaic humility of a politician. The semi-discotheque music was inappropriate, but there had been no silent, black, unmitigated solemnity all week; there was to be none now. This was the evening of the future: the transmission of the "legacy." In six languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, English, French, Ladino, and Russian), a survivor read the

legacy and the son or grandson of a survivor received it. For 45 minutes, 10,000 people sat in perfect silence as an Israeli, an Australian, a New Yorker, a Parisian, and another Israeli survivor read in each of the six languages:

> We take this oath! We take it in the shadow of flames whose tongues scar the soul of our people. We vow in the name of dead parents and children; we vow, with our sadness hidden, our faith renewed; we vow, we shall never let the sacred memory of our perished Six Million be scorned or erased.
>
> We saw them hungry, in fear, we saw them rush to battle, we saw them in the loneliness of night—true to their faith. At the threshhold of death, we saw them. We received their silence in silence, merged their tears with ours.
>
> Deportations, executions, mass graves, death camps; mute prayers, cries of revolt, desperation, torn scrolls; cities and towns, villages and hamlets; the young, the old, the rich, the poor, ghetto fighters and partisans, scholars and messianic dreamers, ravaged faces, fists raised. Like clouds of fire, all have vanished.
>
> We take this oath! Vision becomes *word* . . . to be handed down from father to son, from mother to daughter, from generation to generation.
>
> Remember what the German killers and their accomplices did to our people.
>
> Remember them with rage and contempt.
>
> Remember what an indifferent world did to us and to itself.
>
> Remember the victims with pride and with sorrow.
>
> Remember also the deeds of the Righteous Gentiles.
>
> We shall also remember the miracle of the Jewish rebirth in the land of our ancestors, in the independent State of Israel. Here pioneers and fighters restored to our people the dignity and majesty of nationhood. From the ruin of their lives, orphans and widows built homes and old-new fortresses on our redeemed land.
>
> To the end of our days we shall remember all those who realized and raised their dream, our dream, of redemption, to the loftiest heights. We take this oath here in Jerusalem, our eternal spiritual sanctuary.
>
> Let our legacy endure as a stone of the Temple Wall.
>
> For her prayers and memories burn.
>
> They burn and burn and burn and will not be consumed.

Six survivor's children receive the legacy and recite a response, again in six languages. "We are your children," they conclude, "we are here." Another speaker concludes: "We are here!" Wiesel concludes:

"If Auschwitz marks the end of man's hope, Jerusalem symbolizes its eternal beginning." Menahem Begin: "Never again, downfall with heroism. Rather: heroism with victory. So help us God!" "Most of you will probably agree," says Ernest Michel,

> that this gathering could not have taken place 10 or 20 years ago. It took time for wounds to heal enough for us to meet. This is why this event took almost 40 years to come into being, and that is why we shall never meet as one group again. It has become fashionable to invoke the memory of the Holocaust—so much has been written, so much has been dramatized. It is *we* who have lived it, *we* who have survived it, *we* of whom they write, *we* of whom they speak. So, today, it is our turn. Today, *we* speak. Despite the memories of the past, we have built new lives. Many of us have second families—so many of the first were exterminated. We have children, grandchildren. We have sanctified the names of those we lost—we have contributed to Jewish tomorrows. A number of people have asked: Why are you doing this? Why do you want to meet? Why recall a past such as you've had? Why not leave it alone? Our response, straight and simple: we survived for a purpose. Already something constructive has emerged from this gathering. Represented here were almost 1000 members of the Second Generation. I am pleased to announce that they have formed here in Jerusalem a Second Generation International Network whose major purpose will be to carry on the memory of the Holocaust. Like you, I will never forget this week, the seeking, the finding, then that first look of recognition: Aren't you? Weren't you? Block 14? Kommando 35? From the ghetto? The embrace—the touch—God, how good it felt to see each other, to be together—the tears, the smiles, the memories, the stories: It will take a while to climb down from the mountain of this emotional high of this unforgettable and unrepeatable week. As long as I live the faces of these four days will be indelibly etched in my memory, when our tears turned to laughter and our sadness to joy.

In Jerusalem, June 14 to 18, 1981, the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors: when our tears turned to laughter and our sadness to joy. Ernest Michel. Auschwitz: 104995.

II

It was not the impassioned oratory, sound-and-light shows, emotional workshops, tours, and memorial services which held center stage at the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. It was, rather, quiet huddling around four computers in "Survivors Village," a barren cement room in Israel's largest convention center. Here was the heart of the Gathering: 4000 to 5000 survivors feeding information to computer operators, hoping to summon a name as if from the grave, hoping to reconnect to the past, to reestablish a link with a friend, a relative, or even someone from the same city, ghetto, camp, barracks. The names of every registered participant at the Gathering was preprogrammed into the computers. Any participant—or anyone else in Jerusalem at the

time—could ask the computer to furnish a list of World Gathering participants by name, city, concentration camp, and so forth. Would the list turn up names of friends or relatives not previously known to have survived? Most of the time, of course, the computer search failed. But the survivors felt that it was worth one last try. That is why they had come, and so, besides computers, they devised other methods of tracking each other down. They glanced at the numbers tattooed on the arms of other survivors. They read with care the name tag of everyone they saw. They wore t-shirts with large block letters spelling their name, the name of their home town, and the name of their concentration camp. They gathered under the large signs hung in Survivors Village: Rumania, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, and all the other countries of Europe. (Poland always had the thickest crowd.) They simply eyed each other, or asked point blank: "Are you from Hungary? Where? Which city? Where did you spend the war?" And they posted messages on the walls. On the first day of the Gathering a small bulletin board with a tiny placard labeled "messages" had been erected. By the last day, the entire hall was covered with notices and pictures—heartrending epigrams of Jewish History in the 20th century:

> Perhaps do you remember my brother, Pavel Kun, from Bytca, Czechoslovakia, was 18 years old in Auschwitz, November-December 1944 or later. Please write me!! Elena Levy, Karen Hayesod 62/41, Kiriat Bialik, Israel.

And so the messages went: "Looking for lost cousin. . . ." "Survivors from camp. . . ." "Last seen at. . . ." "Asking information about my mother. . . ." "In Auschwitz Oct. 19, 1944. . . ." The searching spilled out of Survivors Village into all parts of the Gathering and even into the streets of Jerusalem, where survivors kept their name tags pinned conspicuously to their shirts or blouses. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and, for some, it worked.

Two women, one from Berlin and the other from New York—both from Vilna—eyed each other, exchanged glances. Forty years peeled away. As teenagers they had been forcibly separated in the Vilna ghetto.

The third night of the Gathering was a cultural evening—entertainment, dance troupes, survivors enjoying good performances. The last was a Fiddler-on-the-Roof routine by a violinist who, it had been announced, had lived in Lodz, Poland, before the war. A survivor in the audience bent over and whispered to a journalist: "He is still alive? I knew him before the war in Lodz."

A young girl, daughter of a survivor—one of 10,000 people at the closing ceremony of the Gathering—made a small sign, "Frankfurt am Main," and held it aloft. "There were two million people in Frankfurt,"

she thought, "but who knows?" A lady sitting a few rows back saw the sign, came forward, introduced herself, and asked the girls' father, "What is your name?" "Hirsch." "Was your father the dentist?" "Yes!" The story unravelled. As a child Benjamin Hirsch had been taken to France after Kristallnacht; his father had already been deported to a camp. Hirsch had heard that his father later returned to Frankfurt but was then deported. Hirsch died three months later. The lady informed him that, in fact, his father had remained in Frankfurt for three years and had housed eight hunted Jewish girls! She was one of them. She then told him of his parents' last years. As the discussion wore on Benjamin Hirsch asked the lady where she lived. It turned out that her home—for over 20 years now—was right next to that of Benjamin Hirsch's brother. He did not know that his next door neighbor had been saved by his own father because, though he was friendly with his neighbor, they had never spoken of their experiences in the Holocaust.

In an oral history workshop, a woman recounted her stay in Auschwitz. Once, she recalled, a German soldier simply began shooting at random. The inmates, of course, were emaciated, starved, unarmed. But one woman jumped the soldier and began to struggle with him. A rush of guards surrounded her, rescued their comrade, and carried her away, never to be seen again. The woman finished her oral history, rose, walked out of the room. *There, standing outside the door, was the woman who had jumped the guard.*

(To be continued
Winter, 1982)