

Leah Pearlstein

Professor Rossman

Senior Capstone

May 13, 2021

PODCAST:

<https://anchor.fm/leah-pearlstein/episodes/THE-STORY-OF-MY-GRANDMOTHER-A-CHILD-HOLOCAUST-SURVIVOR-e10os5i>

When the COVID pandemic began, and the daunting possibility of a very different reality became clear, I grew fearful, as did many. Initially, it wasn't the virus that scared me most, but the idea of having to stay indoors for an undetermined length of time. I noticed my mind working out the intricacies of my worries and fears, trying to determine how I would cope. I thought about my Polish grandmother who hid from the Nazis for two years in a hole underground at the age of 12. I thought about her ability to adapt and cope with the changes, uncertainties, and hardships she faced. My grandmother's trauma response of strength and courage was not unique. Although children were most psychically, psychologically, and socially vulnerable during the Holocaust, many children exhibited outstanding resilience through survival attributes such as meaning making, the compulsion to live, and the ability to arrange the psyche.

In the realm of construction and engineering, resilience can be understood as the ability for a material to return to its original shape or recoil after being bent, stretched, or compressed. (Valent 517) Similarly, "Psychosocial resilience implies a similar springing back after having been subject to severe stressors." (Valent 517) We often think about resilience as something

inherent within human beings; however, this may not be the case: “The process of “resiling,” or activating resilience, can be viewed as beginning when someone perceives a challenge or a threat that motivates him or her to set and carry out new goals. In this sense, the person does not have ongoing resilience, but resilience is triggered by demanding situations...” (Greene and Graham S76) According to Greene and Graham, in order to understand how resilience functions, one must consider the risk factors, protective factors, and vulnerabilities. (S78) Risk factors can be understood as influences that may increase the probability of a negative outcome following an adverse event. Therefore, resilience cannot take place without risk: “To be resilient, one must be exposed to risk and then respond successfully. Resilience is a successful adaptational response to high risk. By definition a person who is not exposed to risk cannot be said to be resilient. By definition resilience is measured by an individual adaptational response.” (Fraser et al. 137) Similar to risk factors, protective factors can affect future outcomes. They can also “interrupt, prevent, or cushion against risk.” (Greene and Graham S79) Vulnerability, however, refers to factors that have the potential to increase the negative experience of someone who is already at risk. (Greene and Graham S79) In the context of the Holocaust, resilience was everpresent and could be found in many actions, responses, and behaviors used to cope and survive.

During the Holocaust, one way children displayed resilience was by meaning making, or as Armour refers to it, “meaning making grounded in action.” (525) Meaning making grounded in action can be organized into three categories: declarations of truth, fighting for what’s right, and living in ways that give purpose to a loved one's death. One way declarations of truth are conveyed is by expressions of self determination. In other words, “Homicide survivors take positions that are grounded in moral precepts and the meanings they assign to particular situations. The beliefs that undergird their declarations provide a source of energy and

motivation. A sense of having reduced choices drives them to act on their own behalf.” (Armour 528) Similar to making declarations of truth by expressing self determination, fighting for what's right can be conveyed by advocating for what belongs to oneself. My grandmother, Celia Jaget-Pearlstein, exhibited these aspects of meaning making as a child while living through the Holocaust. One time, while seeking shelter at a friend's house after a pogrom, Celia was told that her home was being robbed: “I decided on the spot that I must get to our house immediately to rescue whatever I could and to stop the intruders from taking belongings out of the house.” (Pearlstein) This incredibly brave and dangerous choice clearly exhibits my grandmother expressing self determination and advocating for that which belonged to her. The third category of meaning making — living in ways that give purpose to a loved one's death — can be conveyed by “living life deliberately in an effort to give positive value to the homicide.” (Armour 526) As a little girl, my grandma had a very dear friend named Lucia. When my grandma found out that Lucia and her family were murdered by the Nazis, she wrote a poem for Lucia, making sense of her love and sadness for her. She ends the poem saying, “As long as this heart beats within me, your voice, your eyes will live... And though I'll never clasp you to my heart, our faithful friendship will endure forever.” (Jaget-Pearlstein, “You Are No Longer With Us”) In these words, Celia makes a declaration to keep Lucia and their friendship alive inside of her. With each form of meaning making mentioned, children showed immense resilience in response to the challenges they faced during the Holocaust.

During the Holocaust, children did not receive any special treatment; they were forced to face the same horrors that adults did. Knowing this, it is hard to not be in awe of the resilience that children exhibited in response. One way children showed resilience was by their compulsion to live. The natural desire to survive constantly outweighed the fear, terror, and discomfort

children were experiencing. This need to live led children to take actions that helped them cope with the terrible situations they faced and to save their lives and the lives of others. (Valent 520)

When my grandmother and her family were hidden in a hole underground for two years, they not only experienced the fear of being discovered and murdered every day by the Nazis, but they also had to live in a cramped and dark hole among cockroaches and lice, relieve themselves in buckets, and consume miniscule portions of bread and water. Despite this horrific form of existence, my grandmother's resilience and compulsion to live prevailed:

Our will to live was
 Stronger than the largest oaks
 Stronger than the tallest mountains
 Stronger than the wildest oceans
 Stronger than all the armies in the world
 Our will to live conquered the impossible
 Triumphed over famine, hunger, disease
 Scarcity of air and light
 Our will to live brought us from
 The world of the long forgotten and abandoned
 Into sunlight again (Jaget-Pearlstein, "Our Will To Live")

Many children who suffered during the Holocaust did what many people do during and after traumatic situations: arrange their psyches. (Valent 521) According to Valent, arranging the psyche included the ability to freeze, numb, and interpret emotions and their contexts as unreal: "Children beyond the age of four were able to split their minds and live in two worlds (Kestenberg, 1988; Laub, 1989a). That is, they arranged their psyches to the current world, while they kept alive the world of union with their good parents in a good world." (Valent 521) An example of a response like this could include someone experiencing the combination of the will

to survive, the ability to numb, and having an object that holds comforting memories. My grandmother wrote poems that acknowledged the trauma of her life underground, as well as her dream of life in a free world. The ability to arrange their psyches is just one of many ways children exhibited resilience as a response to trauma during the Holocaust.

The resilience that children exhibited during the Holocaust through meaning making, the compulsion to live, and the ability to arrange the psyche is a testament to the great strength and courage that children possess. Understanding resilience in children is unique in that we tend to think that children don't have the intellectual or emotional maturity to deal with trauma. However, the spirit of children may be significant to their capacity for what we often think of as adult-like maturity and resilience: "With regard to awe of children's resilience, perhaps above all it pertains to the surge of life they manifested, a kind of sacred connection with a wider life force. One must respect their developmental drives, creativity and curiosity, maintained against all odds." (Valent 523) Although there are many children who lived through the Holocaust and made it out alive, there are many who did not, and while a great number of the stories of courageous and resilient children come from those who survived the Holocaust, we must remember the children who did not survive to tell their stories of resilience.

Works Cited

Armour, Marilyn. "Meaning Making In The Aftermath Of Homicide." *Death Studies* 27 (2003): 519-40. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 01 Apr. 2021.

Fraser, Mark W., Maeda J. Galinsky, and Jack M. Richman. "Risk, Protection, and Resilience: Toward a Conceptual Framework for Social Work Practice." *Social Work Research* 23.3 (1999). *Gale Academic OneFile*. Web. 1 Apr. 2021.

Greene, Roberta R. PhD; Graham, Sandra A. PhD Role of Resilience Among Nazi Holocaust Survivors, *Family & Community Health*: January 2009 - Volume 32 - Issue 1 - p S75-S82 doi: 10.1097/01.FCH.0000342842.51348.83

Jaget-Pearlstein, Celia. "Memoir Of Cecilia Pearlstein." Unpublished Manuscript.

Jaget-Pearlstein, Celia. "Our Will To Live." March 1983. Unpublished Poetry.

Jaget-Pearlstein, Celia. "You Are No Longer With Us." Unpublished Poetry.

Valent, Paul. "Resilience in Child Survivors of the Holocaust: Toward the Concept of Resilience." *Psychoanalytic Review* 85.4 (1998): 517-35. *ProQuest*. Web. 01 Apr. 2021.

