

## LIVELY OPINION

## Second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors: What is the root of our issues?

BY STEVE BERGER

*Special to the Intermountain Jewish News*

**A** lot of what one initially hears from the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, known as second generation and third generation, doesn't sound particularly devastating or extraordinary.

Like Leslie Illes stating that he feels he is more conservative financially than many of his peers because he is the son of survivors.

Or Hildie Newman saying that as a child she wouldn't tell her survivor parents when she did something adventurous.

Jessica Newman notes that her grandmother hopes she will find a nice Jewish boy.

Carol Kornreich wonders if she measures up to her parents.

Karli Illes was raised to believe that you shouldn't trust anyone except family. Jeffrey Hecht has feelings of isolation. And Jenny Illes feels a duty to pass on her heritage to her children.

At first blush, these "problems" are not unique to the progeny of Holocaust survivors. Carol Kornreich, a psychiatrist and a child of parents who escaped while many members of their families perished, says, "Some people feel they were screwed up by it, but there are a lot of factors."

On the other hand, Jeffrey Hecht says, "These problems aren't nec-

essarily Holocaust-related, but they are Holocaust exacerbated. They can change healthy skepticism into paranoia."

Even as the child of parents who fled Europe before the Holocaust, I was taught: It can happen again. It can happen here. But there also seems to be an undercurrent of fear from members of the second and third generation that they won't measure up to their recent ancestors.

Fortunately, whatever these people may express in private, among their friends and family, and when pressed by an interviewer, all of them seem to function well day-to-day with people of all races and religions. Though a comment might trigger the eternal question, "I wonder what they meant by that?" several find that their Holocaust heritage has led them into surprisingly divergent directions instead of focusing on their role as a survivor, or even as a Jew.

While Hildie Newman wants to ensure that the Holocaust is never forgotten, and that its importance is instilled in her children, she also feels that it has led her to support more liberal, secular causes. "It is more important to judge people for who they are," she says, "not for what they are."

Sarah Levine, a third generation,

concur, "If anything, I look at what happened in the Holocaust and it makes me want to judge individuals for who they are and not for their race or religion.

"My grandfather suffered horribly for his religion, which makes me want to *not* judge people the same way.

"Sometimes I feel Holocaust survivors can be very judgmental. I know that I will teach my kids about their great grandparents' incredible survival stories. I want them to have a sense of what oppression is and how they should treat others, but as far as religion goes, that will be up to them."

**W**hile Levine's desire to treat everyone with respect and fairness regardless of race and religion is widely accepted among second and third generations, there seems to be more distrust among survivors and the second generation than among the third generation.

Leslie Illes expresses a strong sense of loss because his parents lost everything in the old country, including many relatives.

He believes he fears the possibility of losing those dear to him more than others do. He is also concerned about the decline of Judaism as expressed by Levine and as reflected in the refrain of many

survivors, "For *this* I survived!"

But his daughter Jenny Illes brings hope. She reminds us of *l'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation.

"The stories of my grandparents' survival were passed down to my father, then to me and I'm sure it will be passed on to my children," she says. "I feel I owe it to my grandparents as a personal responsibility to make sure people don't forget."

It isn't always as simple as that, not even for Jenny.

"It messes with your head. It's not simple stuff. It's very serious," she says. "I feel that being the child of survivors made my father more resilient, because my grandparents had to be resilient to survive. They were strong, which made my father stronger and more resolute. Traits I feel have been passed on to my sister and me.

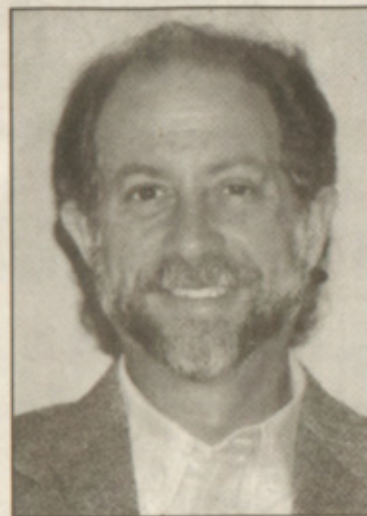
"A lot of things weren't discussed as my father was growing up. That may have contributed to his being closed off, which sometimes makes me mad, but then I remember he is second generation and can't help it.

"A lot of his toughness and strong beliefs come from that. I don't feel the personal paranoia he does, though there is a definite 'we have to look out for each other mentality' that is ingrained."

Newman quotes psychologist and author Harriet Lerner who says, "It takes three generations to heal."

Indeed, it appears we are seeing that process in third generation survivors. Without forgetting the Holocaust and its survivors, some third-generation survivors appear to be embracing a universality of what the Holocaust means that goes beyond Judaism. Karli Illes equates "ethnic cleansing" with the Holocaust.

"It's the rulers who need a scapegoat to establish their power that perpetrates something as bad as the Holocaust."



Steve Berger

As for what influence being the granddaughter of a survivor and the daughter of a second generation has on her life, she reflects that it is hard to pinpoint whether the self-esteem issues, the desire to keep a low profile, save money and always to make sure there is more than enough good quality food are traits that are learned or instinctual. Were they taught her by her parents? Are they the result of other factors? Could they possibly have even been imprinted onto a gene passed to her parents and then passed on to her?

**T**hese are questions whose answers can take up volumes. The fact they are being asked is proof that the scars born of madness in the early 20th century are still very apparent in the 21st century. The fact that questions of humanity brought up by the Holocaust are expanding into other realms should be seen as a good thing. The biggest question of all is, can we prevent such horrible things from ever happening again to anyone?

*Steve Berger is the son of Hungarian and German parents. A freelance writer and photographer, he lives outside Denver and has also been published in the Denver Post, Rocky Mountain News, Colorado Homes & Lifestyles and others.*