

*An essay on a survivor,  
the children of survivors,  
and the generation after,  
by Harris Bauer.*

# After

# A Generation



When I was twelve I told a Holocaust joke. I was working on a class project and in response to the open conversation about whether something *like the Holocaust* could ever happen again I said something along the lines of *if it ever actually happened in the first place*. It was a joke my father had made before in our house, a ridiculous parody of the "Holocaust denier" as a character. But this time, no one laughed. I was twelve, I hadn't learned how to read an audience yet. I backtracked and explained that my grandmother was in Auschwitz, of course the Holocaust had happened. I'm Jewish. I'm kidding.

My father's mother is 90 years old. She doesn't throw anything away. She wears clothes made in the '50s that hold up better than most things made in the last ten years—*look at this stitching, she'll say, people don't do this anymore*. And she makes jokes, too. Sometimes about herself. Sometimes, she laughs at the Holocaust.

Morning darling, so lazy  
Stretching my body, drinking  
instant coffee,  
and wondering if we should  
keep our plan?  
How you feel?  
Is awful if I want to linger in bed  
more?

But if you want  
Waffles around  
here, I'll get up

Are we having " Last Supper"?  
Hope we do, 🙏 inside these 2  
days, it was ok, but you'll leave,  
so from tomorrow back to old  
routines.... still is 🤔 my BD  
week 🥰💕🥰

She reads the paper. She reads several papers, actually. Just two years ago she finally retired from her position as secretary for an immigration law firm. She still speaks at museums. She also speaks in schools, and colleges, and is a beloved walking monument for the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, where she has lectured children, teenagers, and adults for the last twenty-something years. She still drives. She still writes, reads and speaks four languages.

My grandmother rarely speaks of fear. She rarely speaks of being afraid.

I speak of fear, feel it and carry it often.

Just some interesting news--- not family--- the woman who arranged that event you were when I spoke, had another with other survivors, she got harassed, Articles in papers and Facebook now, ( I got no Facebook, hence just got news)

Tonight we dinner for mom, lets do FaceTime then...

The Hungarian people are a chauvinistic group. When my grandmother talks about Budapest, it is mostly with fondness, but detail comes in flashes, colored by Pre- or Post- War memory. Bobby and I visited Budapest last October. We spoke to no one about my background. This was a rule we both decided on without prior consultation. Part of this was driven by my own embarrassment for not being able to speak the language. But mostly, it was a trepidation we carried to shield from follow-up questions—any combination of which seemed as though it would lead to questions of the Holocaust, or my identity as a Jewish Hungarian woman.

The courtyards in Hungary were entered into through narrow, unlit hallways made from stone and concrete. They seemed ancient, mythic—pagan. They matched the Hungarian language. Bullet holes riddled the doorways and arches of every entrance, opening up into outdoor rooms overgrown with moss. I pictured these spaces filled with blood and the sounds of gun shots in the middle of the night. I call my grandmother on the phone when we return from Hungary the next week: *yes, there are bullet holes everywhere, she says to me as I illustrate where we stayed, amazing isn't it? All from the Hungarian Revolution. You didn't think it was from the Second World War did you?*

Of course, everything in Budapest was from the Second World War through my eyes, though. All the damage and ruin I saw was tied to a narrative featuring SS Soldiers, all of which were apparently false. Every abandoned home turned bar was part of a story that ended in Auschwitz, every antique store—haunted by a relative. Every bullet hole—I had paused the country's entire history after 1946. My timeline was at a stand still for the seventy years that passed since the war was over. *My darling, I've told you before—the Hungarians greeted the Germans with flowers. No guns were necessary when we were taken, my grandmother tells me. But this country had only ever existed by means of this one event, the notion that there was not only continuation, but its own national history was jarring. I had such conviction about my understanding of this place, and yet had never read about it, never visited until this moment.*

My grandmother's nametag can always be found in her bag when not on her person, regardless of her speaking schedule. The tag says: *Mary Bauer, Holocaust Survivor*. There is no indication of where she was actually born.

The Holocaust can be seen as a mass traumatic experience. It is shared by a large and relatively consistent group of people, and is therefore an experience relatively accessible to being studied psychologically. Having a control group so large allows for insight into the mind of survivors, and perhaps more importantly into the minds of their children and grandchildren.

The lineage of the Holocaust is one that can be virtually mapped. Research looking into how this historical trauma has been transferred inter-generationally is openly available. The hypotheses and theories calculated are often broad, and lack many straightforward answers to the question of "what's wrong with us". Our symptoms range between disillusionment, frustration, fear in communication, lack of trust, and extreme anxiety caused by guilt. How we deal with Postmemory<sup>1</sup> seems to line up, though. Survivors of survivors use strikingly similar descriptions.

*When we got to America, my grandmother tells me during a phone call prior to a trip to Germany, no one thought we need psychiatric help. This is the only time I have ever heard her speak about help, psychiatry or mental illness.*

Around the kitchen table some weeks ago, we spoke about my grandmother's tattoo. I've seen Holocaust tattoos that scrawl across the arm, messier, uneven, and bumpy. But hers is a neat block of letters on her inner left forearm: A10860—*by the time they got me, they were good at it*, she tells a class of primarily Chinese-American children visiting from Arcadia.

As my grandmother grows older, I try to properly hold onto every word she says, while I notice myself simultaneously tuning her out when we're on the phone. Some times I'll let a week and a half go by before I answer her three-paragraph text message.

Busy with photos, papers,  
those r never ending jobs for  
me.

Am exited about your trip, so  
good this time you go with  
Bobby, ( I want to  
know more about him, Nanny  
said he is very nice, wish I  
could cook for for him too, but  
mom, nan, and you are the  
BEST cooks.

In Berlin, Bobby and I are brought to a Modern-German restaurant by our new friends Jenny and Kurt. Kurt was born in East Berlin before the wall had officially come down. We spoke mostly about beer, wine, and food for the first hour, but then, upon approaching the conversation of Gulyás, we got into my family. I explain that my father is Hungarian, but he was born in Los Angeles, his mother is from Budapest. Bobby and I carefully navigate this conversation, slowly inching closer into the red-alert territory of my grandmother. We feel out what kind of ice we're on before getting into when she left and why, fearing less that this person would be judgmental or anti-Semitic but more so with an awareness towards the kind of family he may come from and whether we might bring an unwanted guilt upon his head in the middle of dinner.

Kurt had never met any children of Survivors before. He is from an Aryan family, meaning he isn't in the least Jewish, but he is fervently liberal. He doesn't mention history, his family, or what

---

<sup>1</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. The concept of Postmemory is one that "describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.

he has heard or been taught about the Holocaust. Instead, he launches into expressing the anger he feels by the slight presence of a Nationalist party, which has slowly come out from the shadows in the most recent German election. *Thirteen percent*, he says white-knuckling his glass, *how can this be in Germany of all places?* He looks at me specifically as he says this, as though I might have more insight into such political tensions.

The presence of nationalist parties has been rising throughout most of Eastern Europe. Hungary, a historically nationalist country, has long held a muffled anti-Semitic tone to its elections.

*To be a Hungarian Jew*, my grandmother explains to me, *is to be very different than a Hungarian*. This is something that she learned in 1944, and never before then—*my first heartbreak*, she says excitedly, *was to that country*.

My grandmother lives alone in a two-floor walk-up in the heart of West Hollywood. For as long as I can remember, she has been “going through papers”. Upon entering this apartment, you are confronted by piles of folders, photocopies, books, and photo albums. Most of this is related, in some way or another, to the Holocaust. There are clippings from newspapers dating back close to sixty years old, anything mentioning family members or friends has been saved. The rest of the pile is general moments of interest: old copies of the *Jewish Journal*. *A Cook's Illustrated* that featured Jewish food for a whole issue, etc.

In Vienna, we tell no one about my background. We say we are from New York. When people look at me and ask where I'm from (because you can't hide Eastern European Judaism from Eastern European eyes, it seems) I say California, and they hear this as exotic enough to suffice. Our last night there, a bartender makes fun of the new uproars over immigration in America. He does a “Mexican” accent. Bobby and I look at one another and take in the whiteness of the room. Later, a man comes over and begins to speak to us. He works in advertising for McDonald's. I am drunk and positive that he hates tourists, and begin to mentally

pray that he leaves us alone. He lives in the Austrian hills, east of the city. He says it is the most beautiful place in the world. He says Vienna is the most beautiful city in the world. He says it is the best, the cleanest, and it is better than Paris and London—*less black people, less noise*. I realize he doesn't hate tourists, per se, he is just vehemently xenophobic. He speaks to us as though we must share his feelings on the matter.

As the man begins to speak to us about Budapest: *it's a dull version of Vienna, it wishes it was Vienna*, I work on figuring out how to gracefully end the conversation. We don't tell him that my grandfather was Viennese for fear of further questions, although we are sure it would excite him greatly. Instead we let him believe that we're both Italian, afraid that if we were to leave the conversation abruptly it might reveal or incite. We continue to let him speak at us, figuring for some reason that if we slowly answered less and less we might blend into our surroundings, and he would become bored with us. *I was hoping you wouldn't say anything about my Grandma*, I say after we've left. *Oh god no*, Bobby says, *can you imagine if he knew you were Jewish?* We laugh to ourselves, and avoid eye contact with a beautiful, terrifying church in the center of the block.

The other word "Erzelmek" but that's also feelings--- no wonder why is such difficult language

We have many words to your one.  
Like for love we have at least 3-4 words, similar root but each specific

Before we left for our trip, my grandmother wrote out long lists for every city. What we could not miss in Prague, in Vienna, and then in her Budapest. *Vienna is beautiful, but they are snobs. Your grandfather was too—the Viennese always thought they were better than the Hungarians—but, darling, the Viennese women are all cows.*

Being Jewish carries a density. It's difficult for me to wrap my arms around what this means. In response to the question *what are you?* I can't just say Jewish because it says so little about the type of Jewish that I am. It is a word wrapped in religion, giving perhaps little to no description at all. It isn't out of embarrassment, or fear that I have trouble saying cleanly that I am Jewish, but rather it is for the particularity in the sort of Judaism I understand and identify as. I am completely colored by the Holocaust, and this sort of Jewish identity is wrapped tightly around my existence as a Survivor's child's daughter, or a child of the "Generation After". Expressing what I "am" means telling an anecdote, or following up with extra sentences to explain that I am Jewish, not religiously but through blood lines. I carry an identity as Jewish without a strong chord to the prayer or belief behind the term, but rather because the title itself is formatively significant in describing a trauma recorded into my personal history. I am not defined, per se, by the amount of times I have heard my grandmother speak about the years prior, during, and after the camps, but it seems to have informed an inherent psychological makeup I can't, and don't desire to, rid.

The problem with my memory is that I remember everything. In a way, this means I remember nothing—as it all slowly shifts and combines into one and the same current tense. To understand the "present" is to at once combine the last two-plus decades. My memories of moments I had defined as "good" or "bad" in the past, become neutral just a few years down the line. Labeling trauma becomes too complex. I describe my grandmother as both "amazing" and "mental". She would say the same: *Darling, listen to your crazy grandmother for a moment. She knows what she's talking about.* I, on the other hand, am pretty unsure what

I'm talking about. She is the one person most difficult to describe to others, an energy that someone must visit to understand.

My ability to tell certain stories comes from my body committing them unconsciously to memory after hearing them retold so many times. But these moments and memories don't exist on a proper timeline—what comes just before or just after isn't graspable. I can't actually remember when I first learned about the gas chambers. I know I've heard the story about my grandmother saving her mother from the death line when they were taken off the train from Budapest. I'm sure I've heard her explain the moment when Mengele's leather swatch made contact with her left arm as she pulled her mother into the line that spared both of their lives, avoiding the death line that her mother had previously been pushed towards. But, in all honesty, I can't really hear it in my grandmother's voice. It's in my father's voice and my mother's voice, as they retell it to friends. Josef Mengele was the most attractive man my grandmother, then fourteen, had ever seen (an anecdote my mother loves to add). He stood on a pedestal, with two German Shepherds flanking him on both sides, and used a leather swatch to shoo prisoners, as they got off the trains, into one line for labor, and another that led straight to the gas chambers. Josef Mengele lived until 1979.

These few words so good. Cuts long time between contact, time at 90 counts differently---- hahaha

You're a young 90! B

Tue, Aug 22, 3:36 PM

Yes, but when peers "going" like don Rickles, Jerry Lewis, others who younger, Oy! can't help but thinking....how years count from here on....

Berlin today looks similar to what one might have seen before there had ever been a war. Many of the monuments have been rebuilt, swapping any nationalist bents with a focus on peace and equality. The streets have been repaved and apartment buildings put up with a sort of 1970s architectural flair.

Both of my parents were born by the time Mengele died. My grandmother lived in Los Angeles. Mengele lived in São Paulo, where he would later drown off the coast as he swam freely in the Atlantic Ocean.

Thanks I feel better knowing, you don't go tomorrow morning.

But I have my cleaning person here 8-1 tomorrow, but till Friday it's a chance talking eve or before you go..

So good mom takes off time, important to spend time with you, to do things together, it should be so...

I thought much this week with good feelings for you, of the women in my small family, which was built by my "planned" baby son with your mom..

Seeing your mom with her mom, you with yours, then you

I lost virginity, born 2 children without sharing those, normally like mom- daughter talk... Also during my whole adult life, missed and had no mom since 18, actually no one really thinks through that about me, that way -----

Auschwitz was a horrible time and experience, ----- but after, my life's years alone lasted much longer, with deeper effects...

till had real meaning and continuity for happiness with your arrival... love you sooo much ( this is all private talk).

The Berlin my grandmother was brought to after her liberation was something altogether different than the one I visited. It was a war zone, mostly rubble, and she slept in an apartment whose roof had been blown off—we slept under the stars, she had said. She's described her time in Berlin as peaceful and beautiful. While I am there she asks constantly for photos—she's never seen it alive. When another family member goes to visit Auschwitz, my grandmother asks her a similar question: *How big was it, actually?*

I struggle with memorials, perhaps because I am not sure how to memorialize something that is still alive. What do we do with a living artifact? What do we do with an event if the event is still alive, in your parent's living room three nights of the week? What if the memorial has all of its hair, a full set of teeth, and shares your blood?

I enjoy parts of the Jewish museum in Berlin as we walk through it. My sobriety in these spaces is what freaks me out—everyone cries and I take a photo, send it to her and wait for several paragraphs of texts to stream back to me in response. There's a voice in my head that keeps saying: *Darling, I haven't seen it in person, but they built that museum on my back, you know.* It's hard to digest—as I'm standing here with an intention to truly pay respects to a group of people, while I am promptly forgetting that they are my own.



Budapest, after returning from A& Berlin 1945-46----- was 18

The other old photo ( sent long ago) was from Wannsee in Berlin a few years later, 1948-9 while living there, after left Hungary.

This 6 months after "returned" home? to graduate high( after in hell) via Berlin1945 ( still skinnier--camp-- then in other bathing suit photo years later, are my stories confusing? (should be in a book written chronologically)

I stumble through a series of apologies to countless, faceless bodies. Then wonder, how many times I've said *I'm sorry* to my grandmother.