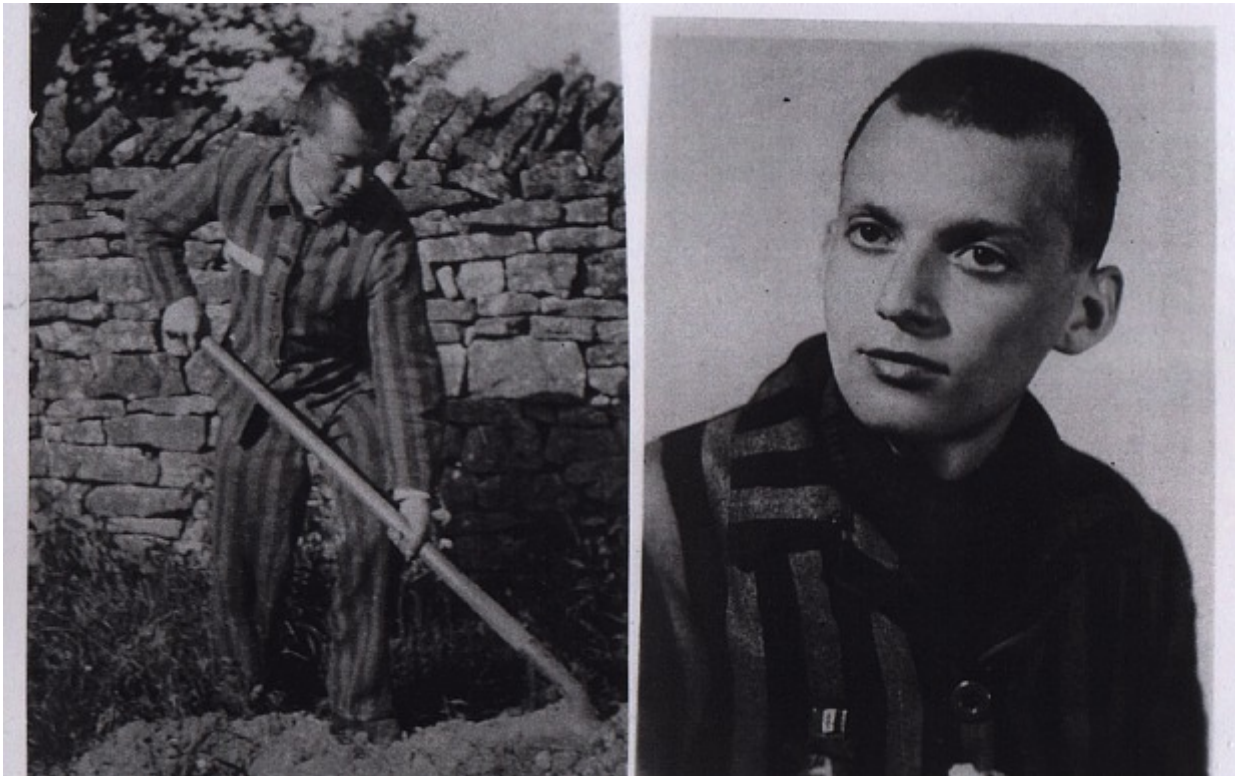


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Holocaust survivors' 70 years of trauma: 'I could cry nonstop, even now'

Ahead of Holocaust memorial day and the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, survivors speak of how they still live with the pain



Freddie Knoller, in the pyjamas he was forced to wear at Auschwitz, in photos taken after the camp was liberated

By Olivia Goldhill

6:29PM GMT 26 Jan 2015

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“Bergen-Belsen was the last camp we went to and it was the worst. There was one tap with water but we had no food. I remember digging around in the ground for roots to eat and people around me who collapsed and died with hunger. Cannibalism was rife. I would never do that but I saw it. I still remember the moment we were liberated, one month after we arrived. I was lying on my bunk and somebody shouted, ‘Look, there are Jeeps outside’. I went out and saw British soldiers coming into the camp. It was so wonderful.”

Freddie Knoller is now 93 years old and living in Totteridge, London, but during World War Two he survived the worst horrors of the Holocaust. The then 22-year-old Jewish Austrian spent more than a year in Auschwitz concentration camp before he was sent on the notorious Death March, to walk 20 miles through snow and ice to another camp in Gleiwitz. After his liberation in 1945, he refused to tell even a word of his story. For the next 35 years, the horrors he saw went unsaid, but were ever present in his life.

Knoller suffered from nightmares and often woke in the night with great fear and panic, believing he was back in Auschwitz. He tried to ignore the nightly horrors, until one night, his two daughters finally persuaded their father to speak about what happened. They stayed up until 4 o'clock in the morning, as he related every detail of his tragic youth. From that night on, the nightmares stopped.

Knoller's resolute stoicism after the brutality of the Holocaust is not uncommon. After the war, Jewish refugees were freed from concentration camps or places of hiding, and often found themselves in strange countries with half their family missing or murdered. Many coped by adopting a stiff upper lip approach, and those who were displaced worked hard to make a living and integrate into their new nations. Therapy was unheard of and few survivors had the time or inclination to reflect on the cruelty they'd suffered.

But ignored trauma does not disappear and Jamie Hacker Hughes, a psychologist and Anglia Ruskin University professor who specialises in traumatology, says that many Holocaust survivors suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which wasn't a recognised condition until 1980, but suppressed the symptoms.

"There wasn't the culture of openness and psychotherapy that we have now. They may have had nightmares and horrifying dreams but they didn't speak about it, which delays treatment and makes the trauma more resistant," says Hacker Hughes.

The Holocaust isn't simply an event from the past, however: its horrors have tapped away at survivors' subconsciouses for the past 70 years – leaking out when they started a family of their own, or when a terrorist attack in Paris sparks waves of crippling anxiety. Even in old age, survivors can't escape, as bad memories start to break past failed attempts to forget.

While Knoller coped by refusing to talk, others went a step further and managed to block out their experiences entirely. Hacker Hughes explains that, in times of extreme stress or horror, people dissociate and create a mental block to guard against reality. "Everything goes into a mental box that remains unopened," he says. "Of course you can't remember it, because the experiences never went through the circuits that normal memory would go through."

Eve Kugler was born in Germany and lived through Kristallnacht as a child. In the late 1930s, her parents sent her to a children's home in France, hoping she would be safer there, and eventually Kugler sailed to the United States in 1941, aged 11. But Kugler can remember nothing of the SS guards who stormed her house, the misery of saying goodbye to her mother, or the two week-long voyage across the Atlantic. All she remembers is getting off the ship and arriving in America.

“I didn’t feel whole,” she says. “Hitler robbed me of my memory and he robbed me of my childhood. I knew that things happened before I turned 11 and I used to look over my shoulder, looking for that child. Where was she?”



Despite having no recollection of life in Nazi Germany, Kugler’s childhood experiences have shaped her existence since. The area where she stayed outside Paris was heavily bombed, and for decades, Kugler would hear the sound of falling bombs in her head. Once, during her 40s, she hallucinated that she had a number tattooed onto her arm, just as Auschwitz prisoners did.

Amazingly her parents survived the war, but Kugler was almost 50 when she finally asked her mother to explain what had happened. "I felt like a fraud," she says. "I felt like I was hearing the story of someone else's life."

Kugler is now 84 years old, and in the past few years she's visited the places in Germany and France where she spent the first decade of her life. "I can feel the trauma and the terror of the Nazis, who were everywhere," she says. "It is important. It took a large number of years but I've started to feel like I was there, and I feel better for it."

Those like Knoller and Kugler, who are able to talk about their experiences, are among the mentally strongest Holocaust survivors who are still alive today. Many others, who have suppressed the horrors so fiercely that they still cannot tell their stories, suffer far more from the trauma of what they saw 70 years ago.

Old age can be a particularly difficult time, as retirees finally have the leisure to reflect on what they went through. Dementia is an added fear, as sufferers lose their short term memory but maintain their long term memory, and so have a renewed focus on childhood experiences.

"Dementia is quite often when the mechanisms used to suppress trauma break down and people suddenly start remembering distressing things from a long, long time ago," says Hacker Hughes. "I've seen cases where people reach a great age and cognitive decline sets in, and that's when they really start having symptoms and feeling distressed."

Aviva Trup, who runs the Jewish Care Holocaust Survivor's Centre in London, says that nightmares, anxiety and depression are common. Many believe they have a duty to tell their story before they die, so that future generations never forget. But the burden of retelling their trauma can also re-ignite feelings of anguish.

"The coverage this week has created quite a few triggers for a lot of people," says Trup. "They say, 'Did you see the Eichmann show on TV? Did you see those bodies? I remember waking up and using bodies to keep me warm'. Here that would be a normal conversation."

Susan Pollack, who was sent to Auschwitz 70 years ago aged 14, was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust.

"The experience is always with me," she says. "Were we human beings, were they human beings? Why did they make us so inhuman and create such devastation? I've been able to relegate it to a more manageable place in my psyche but I've never lost it. I've learnt to live with it."

On Tuesday, Pollack will visit Auschwitz for the first time. She faces the trip with great trepidation.

“I try to remain strong,” she says. “I cry out when I think about it. When I allow myself to get emotional I could cry non-stop, even now.”

For information about Jewish Care Holocaust Survivor's Centre or to make a donation, visit their website or call 0208 922 2222

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