Shattered Lives, New Beginnings:
Holocaust Survivors Rebuilding in Houston

by Jenna Berger

As a train pulled in to Houston's Union Station in October 1949, a family of three, fresh from the displaced persons camps of Europe, stepped onto the landing unaware of what their future would hold. With her newborn daughter held tightly in her arms, Louise Joskowitz and her husband Rubin were both excited and nervous as they arrived at their destination. They did not know anyone in the city, yet a few young women were already at the station, ready to welcome them to their new home.

"We were awaited at the train station by a couple of ladies. One was Mrs. Friedman, from the Jewish Family Service. And they took us to a prepared apartment…and we got a one floor apartment…We came in October. We thought we were gonna die over here; it was so hot 'cause we were not used to the climate at all. Very, very hot. And they gave us the furniture, a full refrigerator, the rent was paid for three months, and they took my daughter to the doctor right away…we came in and my husband got work right away."[1]

Rubin Joskowitz holding his infant daughter, Pepi, who was born in a displaced persons camp in Europe on their journey to America.

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Like many other survivors of the Nazi genocide, these refugees came to America looking for a brighter future, free from discrimination and persecution. The United States was an extremely desirable destination, since it remained untouched during the war and emerged with its economy intact. Many refugees also saw it as a land of freedom, hope, and opportunity.

The American Jewish community recognized that something had to be done to help their European brethren. Very few survivors were able to leave Europe immediately after the liberation of the concentration camps.[2] Most languished in Displaced Persons (DP) camps waiting and hoping that they would soon be able to rebuild their lives outside of war-torn Europe.

Between 1945-1953, approximately 140,000 Holocaust survivors emigrated to the U.S.[3] Four hundred of those survivors, or "newcomers" and "new Americans" as they were called at the time, joined the vibrant, growing Houston Jewish community. The 14,000 Jews in Houston in 1948 made it the largest Jewish population in the southwestern United States, with the exception of Los Angeles.[4] Houston had several synagogues throughout the city and suburbs, a newly-built Jewish Community Center, and a Jewish newspaper.[5] The various institutions already in place greatly helped as the community developed its resettlement plans.

A variety of factors drew Holocaust survivors to Houston. Many came because family members were willing to sign affidavits for them, assuring that the newcomer would not become a burden to society. These individuals arrived with a support structure already in place, with the strength of such assistance varying from family to family. Houston also was a desirable destination because it had a bustling economy with many available jobs. For others, social service groups arranged their destinations for them. Working with Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS) and United Service for New Americans (USNA), Houston's Jewish leaders agreed to accept a certain number of "units" each month and assume full responsibility for their resettlement and adjustment.[6]

Between June 1, 1948, and May 16, 1952, Houston welcomed 318 individuals under Displaced Persons Act quotas, and an additional 88 "non-quota" individuals who were allowed to immigrate after family and friends signed affidavits for them.[7] "Many of the latter group adjusted themselves…without the necessity of financial assistance; others, however, had to be taken care of by [United Jewish Campaign] funds," reported community leader J.L. Zuber. He continued, "The total cost to the Jewish community of Houston for resettlement and rehabilitation of newcomers from the period January 1, 1948, through April 30, 1952, amounts to $86,970."[8] Despite the increasing costs of resettling the immigrants, Houston's Jewish community accepted the challenge, always working to meet the quotas that the USNA assigned. The caseworkers involved in resettlement recognized the growth and development taking place in Houston and saw it as a good place for a fresh start.

Throughout the postwar years, rural Texans (of various ethnic and racial backgrounds) flocked to Houston, hoping to cash in on the prosperity that flowed throughout the city.[9] Houston was one of the emerging Sunbelt cities that had much to offer newcomers because of its constant growth and development, indirectly supported by federal funds. The returning GIs with all their benefits in tow and "consumers with maturing U.S. war bonds to cash in" helped to foster prosperity throughout the city.[10]

Unlike older, crowded cities of the northeast, Houston had room to grow, making it an ideal location to resettle. After World War II, *Business Week* highlighted Houston as having the most industrial plant construction of all U.S. cities, with New York City a close second. As growth in various new industries brought new workers, other businesses were created

to service these new industrial workers. Construction workers were needed to build the new industrial facilities, the growing city's infrastructure, and the homes for the region's new citizens. Houston was a city on the move, and the national resettlement agencies took notice.

The majority of Holocaust survivors came to America with no family, little money, and little to no English skills. For those without relatives, organized groups took the place of family. On the national scene, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) migration services and HIAS helped resettle Jewish refugees, working closely with local organizations to welcome these "new Americans" to their new home. In Houston, the collaborative efforts of the Jewish community welcomed the survivors upon their arrival via train, plane, or ship, and offered support for the next five years of their lives, if need be. Most, however, found employment and stood on their own two feet within the first year of their arrival. The main organized body for these efforts was the Refugee Service Committee (RSC) of the Houston Jewish Community Council.[11]

The Jewish Community Council divided the work into three main parts, with a different community group taking the responsibility for each part. The RSC dealt with the technical work, including filing affidavits, location efforts on behalf of people in this country for their relatives overseas, and aid for overseas survivors. Casework, such as resettlement and employment, was left to Jewish Family Service. The Houston section of the National Council of Jewish Women took responsibility for port and dock services, education classes, Americanization classes, and "generally helping newcomers integrate into the communal life of Houston."[12] The Jewish Community Center (JCC) also got involved providing the much needed social aspects of resettlement. This division of labor helped the community address the newcomer's varied needs—financial, emotional, and social.

Council of Jewish Women—Houston Section

Members of the Houston section of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) welcomed the survivors upon their arrival to Houston.[13] Overall, NCJW-Houston's main goal was to make the stress of immigration and rebuilding as painless as possible. Upon arrival, the refugees found furnished apartments prepared for them by the NCJW, with refrigerators full of groceries and closets full of clothing. The organization also helped the refugees with shopping and "teaching them American ways."[14]

Louise Joskowitz with daughters, Pepi and Geri, in front of their first Houston apartment in 1953.

The NCJW also sponsored English classes and citizenship classes held at the JCC. Some had previous knowledge of English; however, the vast majority had to start from scratch. In order to fit with the newcomers' schedules, NCJW offered multiple classes each week. The *Jewish Herald-Voice* described the students' devotion to learning English: "Their enthusiasm is remarkable and no climatic trouble can keep them from their class."[15] Even torrential rains and humid summer heat could not keep them away.

Many learned simply from watching movies and television and reading the newspaper. For some it came easier than it did for others. Bill Orlin began his preparation for life in America while still in the DP camps. "During my stay in Butzbach [DP camp], it's very important to me, I started subscribing to an American magazine, *Time* magazine, and that's where I learned most of my English… *Time* followed me around wherever I was for the next fifty to sixty years—including to this date," said Bill, while motioning to the stack of *Time* magazines next to his kitchen table.[16] This story is indicative of the survivors' drive and dedication to becoming American, learning the language, and fitting in. Nearly all mentioned the difficulties and successes in trying to learn English and become an American.

NCJW also held citizenship classes to prepare the newcomers for their citizenship tests. Morris Penn recalled the nervousness and anxiety he and his wife felt while preparing for their citizenship exams. "We were a little afraid that we wouldn't make it and we wanted it so badly."[17] But with the help and encouragement they received at these classes, they passed on the first try. Morris also noted that their teachers were extremely proud of them. The collaborative efforts that were so crucial in making the initial phases of the resettlement program run smoothly benefited greatly from the support of the Council of Jewish Women-Houston section. These women were extremely devoted and dedicated to "integrating the new citizen in the community, to the benefit and enrichment of both."[18]

Jewish Family Service

Jewish Family Service (JFS) played a central role in Houston's resettlement program. Since the Houston chapter formed in 1912 as the United Jewish Charities, it has been the main social work agency for Houston Jews in need of help. These newcomers were no exception. While JFS provided support for most of the survivors, it focused on helping the child refugees that arrived in Houston.

JFS collaborated closely with the Pauline Stern Wolff Memorial Home, a residential care facility for orphans, troubled youths, and "indigent widows,"[19] in placing these children in foster care. The age of the immigrant upon arrival greatly influenced how they would adjust. Most of the youngest immigrants were around fifteen to seventeen years old, simply because the majority of children younger than that did not survive the war. Because of their age and the fact that many were often the only survivors in their entire family, social workers had to reevaluate how to handle these cases.

In Houston, these younger survivors were often mature beyond their years, a result of having to fend for themselves throughout the war. However, they had also been deprived of their childhood. This contradiction, according to contemporary social workers, was difficult to reconcile.[20]


THE JEWISH HERALD-VOICE JANUARY 3, 1952

Council of Jewish Women Aids New Americans In Adjustment To New Life

A photo taken at a Chanukah party given for New Americans on December 16 at the Jewish Community Center by the Houston Section, National Council of Jewish Women. An entertaining program, refreshments, and prizes for all children attending were features of the afternoon. January 3, 1952, Courtesy *Jewish Herald-Voice*

Because of the traumatic experiences they faced and because of their young age, they sometimes clashed with those who tried to help them.

Despite efforts by JFS to make the newcomers comfortable at the Wolff Home, Holocaust survivor Lea Weems remembered it as a place lacking the warmth and comfort needed by orphans who had experienced the traumas of war. "It was a very cold place to be in," she recalled, "but it was ok."[21] Despite less than ideal conditions at the Wolff Home, many who passed through recognized as they grew older that the organizations had done the best they could at that time. A JFS staff member helped to put the adolescent adjustment in perspective: "They arrive angry at the world in general. Life has been very tough on them. It is tough to start over here again. Once they work out the resentment that is in them, they do fine."[22] Some had difficulties in adjusting to life in Houston, and needed a scapegoat to place the blame on. JFS was often that scapegoat.

While no severe critiques of JFS's efforts have been made publicly, some survivors recalled, concerted efforts to help often were not that successful. Survivor Leon Cooper, who was almost eighteen years old when he arrived in Houston, noted, "The JFS people were 'amateurs.' We were too old for foster homes but [they] still tried."[23] Wolf Finkelman, who also stayed at the Wolff Home, recognized that he "expected a lot. JFS was helping but didn't do as good a job as we had expected."[24] It is difficult to gauge how successful an organization was in helping the younger new Americans settle into life in Houston. Each experience was very much colored by initial interactions with places like JFS and the Wolff Home. In turn, these interactions were influenced by the survivors' expectations and what the social workers thought the newcomers needed.

Contrary to the less than positive experiences of some younger survivors, Sol Stopnicki, who was 27 years old when he arrived, noted a warm reception by Houston's Jewish community and the JFS: "[They] took us to JFS. And from my standpoint, we had a very excellent reception here from the Jewish community. It was exceptional. They were so nice and caring and tried to help us out. As a matter of fact, everybody had apartments already with furniture, with food…they give us money in advance, try to get clothing for us, and look for jobs."[25] Critics and supporters alike agreed that JFS worked tirelessly in the late 1940s and early 1950s to help the refugees adjust to their new lives in Houston.

Jewish Vocational Service

Once the newcomers settled into their apartments, they turned to the challenge of finding employment. Working closely with the Jewish Family Service, the Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) helped hundreds in job training, guidance, and placement. The last two years of the 1940s saw an increased number of immigrants coming to Houston. Luckily, as Fred Wiener, executive director of JVS, noted in the May 1951 annual report, "We are fortunate to be in a part of the country that is far more able to absorb workers in a developing industrial system than are the already over-crowded and developed areas of the north and east, where scores of new Americans are unemployed."[26] The concern of overcrowding New York and other east coast cities prompted national resettlement organizations to disperse immigrants throughout the U.S., bringing many of the survivors to Houston and other cities.

Plans called for placing immigrants in a city that could benefit from their skills. Finding the right fit for the newcomers was essential so that they could find a job and work towards self-sufficiency, an important factor in rebuilding their lives. Houston's strong economy created many positions that these newcomers could easily fill. In June 1949, survivors Haskell and Sonia Witenberg and their twin sons arrived in Houston. The JDC arranged for them to come here because Houston had a need for tailors, Haskell's trade.[27] The more immigrants who arrived with skills matching the needs of the city, the easier the job was for JVS.

Isaac S. Brochstein was a member of the Refugee Service Committee and worked with JVS to help find jobs for the Holocaust survivors. His custom woodwork and furniture business, Brochsteins Inc., established in 1935, provided a job for a young cabinetmaker arriving from the DP camps. Survivor Louise Joskowitz gratefully recalled how her husband was able to go straight to work and begin providing for their family, thanks to the Brochsteins.[28]

The new Americans were anxious to get to work, develop productive lives, and, as one refugee wrote, "do my share and contribute to my new country."[29] This aspect of resettlement again highlights the important role the refugee played in Houston's development, simply by their presence and ability to fill needed jobs.

Jewish Community Center's Gateway Club

The social adjustment of the survivor was a very important aspect of the resettlement process. Always at the heart of recreation and activity, the Jewish Community Center (JCC) became the ideal locale for newcomers to gather, meet, and integrate into the community. The JCC created the Gateway Club with the goal of helping new Americans adjust to life in Houston, by "hastening the Americanization process."[30] Membership was limited to new Americans only, with the more established immigrants who had been in Houston ten years or more arranging activities for the most recent arrivals. With over 200 members for the several years of its existence, the Gateway Club held a variety of social events for the newcomers. Crowds of over 100 new Americans attended bingo parties, film nights, wiener roasts, and Passover and Chanukah celebrations. Such playful activities and many other events had a specific goal: "to integrate the newly arrived immigrant into the American way of life and to speed his social adjustment."[31]

The JCC quickly became a hub for all Jewish activity, especially for the newcomers. Many survivors even met their future spouses at JCC events. Survivor Ruth Steinfeld recalled, "The Jewish Community Center used to be my home away from home…. I went to the Center a lot. Then Larry and I became kinda good friends."[32] Larry and Ruth were married shortly after. At most JCC events, the new Americans had the opportunity to meet with fellow immigrants, but they also mingled with American-born Jews. A few even married American-born Jews, which undoubtedly aided in their integration process. The community took very seriously the importance of social adjustment in the overall resettlement and saw the various activities offered at the JCC as an effective way of doing so.

The JCC's social programming, the JVS's career counseling, the overall guidance and funds that JFS provided, and the welcoming activities of the NCJW all contributed in making Houston's Refugee Service Committee the most comprehensive resettlement program the city had ever seen.

Joskowitz family portrait, c. 1953, one of their first photographs of them in their new American clothing.

However, during these initial years of resettlement, several challenges threatened the success of the institutional support being provided to the newcomers. The RSC could not always manage and control all the challenges that arose. Surmounting these challenges required the efforts of the survivors themselves, as well as the initiatives of Houston's Jewish community.

"For the first time in the last twelve years I feel really free; and for the first time I feel a little independent and useful. Now I can do my share and contribute to my new country."

—"A New American Writes A Letter," *Jewish Herald-Voice,* March 16, 1950.

Americanization and Assimilation

One of the biggest challenges of the resettlement program was integrating the newcomer into the community and encouraging acculturation. The RSC developed programs and activities to help during the adjustment phase. These programs succeeded because of the newcomers' openness to this new life, as seen in their active participation, and the efforts of the RSC. "A great deal of time [was] spent assisting the family in understanding the American way so that his orientation would be rapid."[33] Presented with a series of Americanization courses, programs, and general attitudes on how they should behave, the survivors valiantly embraced American culture. While there was external pressure from the community to fit in and become American, there was a clear drive from the newcomers themselves to shed their "newcomer" designation and simply become like everyone else.

The newcomers had been persecuted in Europe because they were different. They were seen as the "other." Most came here looking to shed "the other" moniker, and live a peaceful life, blending in with those around them. Several described their feelings early on as just wanting to fit in and be like everyone else. Survivor Ruth Steinfeld spoke about her first interactions with her future husband. "He called me a 'greener,'" she recalled. "A 'greener' represented green, not yet an American, green around the ears or whatever. How could he call me a greener? I'm an American. I speak English, ya know."[34] She continued, "My main thing was to learn English, to not have an accent, and to be like everyone else. That was my goal."

While her goal to fit in seems self-imposed, she later related that some external factors may have played a part. When asked whether she felt pressure to become American, Ruth responded that she was definitely influenced by others around her and longed to be like everyone else.

The survivors continued to persevere towards their goal of feeling at home in their new country. Edith Mincberg "really wanted to learn the American way of life," while Helen Rosenbaum felt that "slowly, slowly, I became American."[35] The Houston survivors' oral histories indicate a devotion and appreciativeness for the lives they built in Houston, and more importantly, in America. Many held a special affinity for Houston, staying here from the moment they arrived in the late 1940s and early 1950s until the present.

Newcomers to Houston took courses to help them "Americanize."

Many of Houston's newcomers felt very passionate about their new homeland, so much so that they were willing to join the military and defend their new country. The majority of newcomers arrived close to the Korean War, and some were even drafted into the army. Bill Orlin recalled his time in the army with much enthusiasm. "I got a greetings from General Eisenhower, advising me that my friends and neighbors are proud to present me for service in the Armed Forces of the United States. I went willingly. There was no problem on my part. My parents, especially my mother, were very upset... She cried, and I told her, I gotta go, I gotta. If I'm gonna live here, I gotta represent this country and be a good citizen, whatever is involved."[36] Even though they were not yet citizens of the United States, many brave young men willingly went to fight for the country that was giving them a second chance at life.

While most newcomers had to wait the five-year waiting period before getting their citizenship, those in the military received it earlier. Orlin described the dramatic experience of being sworn in as a U.S. citizen while serving in the army, stationed in Germany. The American consulate was headquartered in the old IG Farben Company complex in Frankfurt, the company that provided death camps like Auschwitz with Zyklon B, the poisonous gas used in the gas chambers. Despite the irony of the location, Orlin remembered it as "a fantastic experience. It was extremely exhilarating. This was something I wanted to do from the time I was in the DP camp and that I wanted to come to the U.S."[37]

Those who waited the full five years for citizenship also looked back fondly on the experience as an epic moment in their lives. Survivor Morris Cweigenberg tried to express his feeling upon becoming a citizen: "Its hard to explain, if you aren't a citizen, you kinda feel like you don't belong 100 percent."[38] But once he got his citizenship, he felt more complete. "There is nothing like this country," he noted.

Receiving one's citizenship clearly was a momentous occasion, a moment that seemed to demarcate the period between early resettlement and when the newcomers ventured out on their own. They were no longer newcomers. Nor were they yet "Holocaust survivors." They were just Americans living their lives like other Americans, trying to establish themselves and provide for their families.

Most seemed to embrace this new chapter of their lives. The survivors who arrived in the years prior to 1955 spent their time working hard to achieve the American dream. They built and expanded businesses, raised families, and worked to become like every other American. After several years of relying on financial and moral support from the Jewish community, survivors finally began to reap the benefits of their new lives in America.

Since most survivors lost the majority of their relatives during the war, starting a new family often became a priority. Some even married and became pregnant while still in the displaced persons camps. Many female Holocaust survivors of childbearing age longed to start families and fill the void created when their relatives were taken away and murdered. By the mid-1950s, most had already started families, and their children grew up with all the benefits of being an American citizen. When they arrived in Houston, a newspaper article described Edith and Joseph Mincberg as "a happy couple, hard-working and determined to give their son all the advantages that can be his in a free country."[39] They did this and more.[40]

Most of the survivors worked tirelessly to provide for their children and ensure that they were protected from the horrors of the world around them. Edith Mincberg recalled that making the conscious decision not to have a child in Europe was the "best thing that ever happened to her."[41] Survivors' children often were their pride and joy, the center of their universe.

They provided stable homes for their sons and daughters, and according to sociologist William Helmreich, they did more so than American Jews.[42] He found that survivors' family lives were "remarkably stable," their economic patterns showed they held down jobs better, and their social interactions showed that they did quite well socially, joining synagogues and other organizations.[43]

Many female survivors defined their own personal success through their role as a mother. Lea Weems' sense of success is tied to her role as a proud mother, although she shied away from claiming any responsibility for her children's achievements. After telling about their education, degrees, and career paths, she proudly remarked, "they are exceptional kids. That's my pride and joy and I had nothing to do with it, except to encourage them. I really get credit for it where I shouldn't."[44] Despite her modesty, seeing her children succeed was the validation she needed to feel successful herself. This was especially important for female survivors who worked inside the home and did not have the opportunity to bring home a paycheck.

For the male heads of households, aside from having children, the top priority was finding steady employment. The desire to provide a stable life for their families drove many male survivors to work extremely hard to become gainfully employed. After they grew weary of the entry-level, menial jobs available upon their arrival, most branched out on their own, creating small and medium-sized businesses.

Their drive for self-sufficiency had much to do with the encouragement from the community, but also came from within. One new American wrote, "Somehow we wish to repay the Jewish community for bringing us to America and for making it possible for us to start life over again. But… all we have is our hands and the few skills that we have been able to retain since 1939. Our worldly possessions are slim. But we do have ambition, willingness, and a strong desire to make up for lost time."[45] By not giving up and working towards building a strong life, it was a way to prove that Hitler did not win.

From furniture and jewelry stores, to construction firms, to import-export businesses, survivors started all types of businesses, which added to Houston's growing economy. The wives of those who were married often helped out in all aspects of the business. Trust between husband and wife was extremely important, and was one of the driving factors behind Bill Morgan's pursuit of his future wife, Shirley. Bill's close friend, fellow survivor Walter Kase, recalled, "When he met Shirley, he felt she was a solid person, someone he could trust with his life, his work, and his means. That was the most important thing to him because he had lost everyone."[46]

Bill Morgan could easily be seen as the poster-boy for Holocaust survivor postwar success. After several years of different jobs, including owning a snack bar, selling used cars, and peddling meat door-to-door out of his car, he settled on a career in construction, creating from the ground up a highly successful nationwide real estate development firm, The Morgan Group. As his biographer writes, "Bill Morgan's timing was perfect."[47] He entered the construction and real estate business just as Houston was growing by leaps and bounds. With a rapidly expanding population that reached 1.3 million by the late 1960s, Houston desperately needed new housing. His success came from years of hard work and a dedication that never wavered.

Moreover, it is amazing to think back where he came from and what he went through. Born to a peasant family in small town Poland in 1925, Morgan made it through the war after escaping the ghetto and hiding on a farm in the Ukraine. His parents and six brothers and sisters perished. The war interrupted his youth as well as his education. He came to the U.S. with a seventh grade education and went on to become the CEO of a major corporation. He had no MBA or law degree; instead, he relied on his "degree in survival" to help him succeed.[48] By coming to America, he got a second lease on life. He also demonstrated that success post-migration was not necessarily dependent on the immigrant's pre-migration economic and educational levels.

One explanation for the strong work ethic of so many survivors is that to these individuals, work meant survival, both in the camps and in their subsequent lives.[49] *Arbeit Macht Frei* (work makes you free) were the words they read as they walked through the gates of Auschwitz. Those lucky enough to walk back out through those gates lived by those words in the United States as well. Houston's newest citizens did remarkably well, and through their hard work and determination, they became an integral part of the Jewish community and the larger Houston community.

Shaping Integration

During this period of integration, several factors shaped how the survivors reacted to their new lives in America. The changing role of Judaism in their lives was central in the rebuilding process. As Jews, their lives had been threatened because of their religion and many watched as family members were murdered for that same reason. Many asked themselves, where was God during all of this? Many questioned their religiosity while others abandoned it completely. Survivor Morris Cweigenberg came out of the camps no longer believing in God. Nevertheless, he still participates in all the traditions and celebrates the Jewish holidays.[50] Many needed to question and redefine their Jewish identity, before they could comfortably be part of the Jewish community. Especially since most were living in Jewish neighborhoods and interacting mostly with other Jews, they frequently had to face these issues.

Survivor Sol Stopnicki recalled that all the newcomers were moved into the Third Ward/Riverside neighborhood, a predominantly Jewish area at the time.[51] By the mid-period of integration, the shift of Jewish residency towards Meyerland in the southwest part of Houston had begun, and the survivors moved right along with them. For survivors, this close proximity to other Jews hastened the identity rebuilding process. But because they were also a small minority of Jews interspersed with other ethnicities, they were also more prepared to integrate into the larger Houston community.

In Houston, many became very involved in the Jewish community, joined synagogues after they had children, had their children bar and bat mitzvah'ed, and supported the State of Israel. However, as far as religious beliefs, most seemed to stick with the traditions. Survivor Bill Orlin clearly illustrated the point: "I am not a religious Jew. I'm a traditionalist—tradition in the truest sense of the word."[52] Psychologist and second-generation survivor Aaron Hass explained survivors' ambivalence towards religion, but dedication to "ritual traditions" as a way for "the survivor to pay homage to his parents, and to feel closer to them and his past."[53] Although most did not become devout Jews in their religion, they became dedicated members of the Jewish community with a strong, reconstructed Jewish identity.

Breaking the Silence

While working so hard at rebuilding their lives and integrating into the community, survivors often had suppressed much of their emotional baggage. Just as very few survivors in Houston sought therapy upon their arrival, even fewer got professional counseling to help work through the long-term effects of the Holocaust. In several instances, survivors felt like they probably

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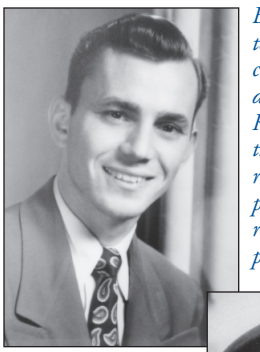

Bill Orlin was proud to serve his new country after being drafted during the Korean War. Worried that he might never return, he took this portrait (left) after receiving his induction papers.

Because of his knowledge of several languages, he was stationed in Hanau, Germany (right) even though he had not yet been made a U.S. citizen

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should have had counseling, but for a variety of reasons, they never did. At least two remarked that they "didn't hold psychiatrists in high esteem" or "didn't believe in psychiatrists."[54] Others just never thought to seek help themselves. They were determined to prove themselves as independent and self-reliant, a result of early pressure to become self-supporting. However, this left unresolved feelings that would resurface later in their lives.

Morris Penn described how his Holocaust memories often resurfaced while driving long distances for his job as a traveling salesman.[55] This distracted him so much that he missed his exit on several occasions. The memories of war, death, concentration camps, and many other atrocities were often too hard to push aside.

Since most did not seek counseling, they found other outlets to help themselves come to grips with their past. For several survivors, making the pilgrimage to Israel in 1981 for the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors was a defining moment in their lives. There some learned more about what happened to their families, providing the closure that many needed. Sisters Ruth Steinfeld and Lea Weems had never known what happened to their parents. Although Ruth knew that they were gone, she still kept a little hope alive deep down inside that one day they might return.

During the gathering, Ruth and Lea finally learned the fate of their parents. "For me, it felt like I finally was normal. It wasn't fun knowing my parents were dead, but I knew by now—I was 51 by then and I never gave up waiting for them—but realistically I knew they were gone. But I never knew where or what, so I could make it up any way I wanted to. When they put that monument up in Jerusalem, I knew then, that was the end of that. I finally buried my parents, normal, the way people bury their parents."[56] This trip to Israel helped the sisters accept the death of their parents.

In addition to going back to the place where the traumatic events took place, some have found writing and speaking about their experiences as a form of therapy.[57] Upon Ruth's return to Houston, she immediately called the Houston school district and told them, "I'm a living historian." Her new goal in life came to be talking to young people about the Holocaust.[58] Finding a purpose within her tragic past—educating students on the dangers of prejudice and intolerance—helped Ruth, and many other survivors as well, to move forward with a new acceptance of their Holocaust past. Ruth is a prime example of a Holocaust survivor who benefited from the community upon her arrival and then later gave back to the community.

Following the gathering in Israel, Lea Weems recalled, a group of survivors started talking about creating a speaker's bureau that would send survivors out to different schools to give students a first hand account of the Holocaust. While it was difficult for most survivors at first to share their stories, "it got easier as time went on. It was liberating to talk about it."[59] Lea had never even talked about it to her children. "They never wanted to ask because they thought it would hurt me and I didn't want to tell them because I thought it would hurt them." Speaking to schoolchildren and educating them about the Holocaust became the center of many survivors' lives. Some never felt comfortable enough to speak in public about their story, however, those who did found it rewarding.

Ruth Steinfeld and friends celebrating after she received her citizenship.

Those uncomfortable with speaking publicly found writing about their experiences to be a fruitful method of expressing their emotions. This past year, a new program for survivors called "The Memory Project" began at Holocaust Museum Houston. Based on a similar program at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, The Memory Project helps survivors to "creatively channel their memories into writing."[60] By giving survivors an opportunity to express themselves in a supportive environment, the museum preserves for posterity the memories that may have otherwise never been recorded. Whether it is through writing, speaking, traveling back to Europe, or attending reunions, survivors have found different ways of coming to grips with a past that had gone unresolved for most of their lifetime.

The silence finally dissolved within American culture, and many survivors embraced the new social climate and began to speak freely about their past, no longer having to hold it inside. Like many survivors, Bill Morgan found speaking very difficult at first. However, after time passed, he had a profound realization: "I have two choices really. Take that experience with me to the grave or share so it doesn't repeat itself. The damage is done in my heart. [There's] just no way to erase it."[61]

The Holocaust survivors who came to Houston for a new beginning found that and more. They were welcomed into an expanding Jewish community and it was not long before these individuals were giving back to the community that took them in. Several of Houston's survivors went on to become influential businesspeople, and they made contributions to the Houston economy and to a variety of philanthropies in the city, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The fact that most survivors were able to put their lives back together and integrate into a community at all should be seen as a success.

The resettlement program that the Refugee Service Committee organized, combined with the tireless efforts of the newcomers themselves, helped to make the transition to life in Houston as smooth as possible. These individuals were subjected to some of the most cruel and inhumane living conditions and had undergone severe traumas. Yet, they put these trials behind them and moved forward to become contributing members of society. Surely, many survivors struggled and faced immense challenges as they fought to rebuild their shattered lives, but they responded with determination and appreciation for their second chance at life. ■