

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust  
Aaron Hass  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

The events of the Holocaust have been well documented. Almost ninety percent of European Jewry was murdered. But for the survivors, the psychological impact of the Holocaust has stretched beyond 1945. An innocence has been eradicated. A view of their fellow man has been indelibly imprinted: "What did the world learn from the Holocaust?" a survivor was asked. "What the world learned from the Holocaust is that you *can* kill six million Jews and no one will care."

*The Aftermath* offers a perspective of how one who has lived with terror for years is able to avoid paralysis and move forward. It is a book about how people live with gnawing doubts and uncertainty concerning their past actions and inactions, doubts and uncertainties which can cause them to feel ambivalent about their very existence. It is a tale of the anguish they feel because they possess firsthand knowledge of the evil in people, which so unjustly struck and deprived them of what was rightly theirs. For while Holocaust survivors seem, in most ways, to be like you and me, they are also aware of a subterranean world which may afflict them without warning. It is far easier to extinguish human beings than to extinguish their memories.

This is also a book about the incredible resilience of human beings. The survivors you will hear from provide observations of how, after being reduced to less than zero during the formative years of adolescence and young adulthood, men and women were able to revive a self-respect which had been under continuous siege. And because survivors of the Holocaust will soon be gone, this is a unique opportunity to observe a case study of the elasticity of the limits of endurance, and the human need and capacity to reassert a vigorous life. As the mortality of survivors overwhelms them as a group, it may be not only the first but also the final occasion we will have to hear them describe their inner lives.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*The Aftermath*

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust  
Aaron Hass  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

# *The Aftermath*

*Living with the Holocaust*

AARON HASS



**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust  
Aaron Hass  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1995  
Reprinted 1995  
First paperback edition 1996

Printed in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.*

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 0-521-47429-9 hardback  
ISBN 0-521-57459-5 paperback

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

For my father, of blessed memory, Nusyn Majer Hasfogel

And for my grandparents, who did not survive,

Aron Hasfogel

Rajzla Hasfogel

Chil Cynamon

Drejzla Cynamon

## Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 A view of survivors	1
2 "Whose fault was it?"	23
3 Mourning	41
4 Vulnerabilities	54
5 The mask of the survivor	69
6 The importance of age	93
7 Intrusions of memory	106
8 Survivor families	120
9 "Was God watching this?"	143
10 Revenge	161
11 Collective guilt	177
12 The legacy	192
<i>Notes</i>	196
<i>Index</i>	205

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust  
Aaron Hass  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## *Acknowledgments*

I am grateful to Professor William Helmreich and Dr. Florabel Kinsler for their support and helpfulness during this project. My thanks to Alex Holzman for his unflagging enthusiasm. Foremost, I extend my respect for the courage and commitment of the Holocaust survivors who exposed their story and their pain so that others would understand.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Introduction*

While doing background reading for my previous book about children of Holocaust survivors, I came across the vast literature concerning the postwar psychological adjustment of survivors themselves. The more pronouncements of mental health professionals about survivors I read, the more dumbfounded and exasperated I became. These were not the survivors who surrounded me during my lifetime. Were my perceptions, the perceptions of a clinical psychologist, so mistaken? Were survivors as depressed, as emotionally anesthetized, as unable to love, as dysfunctional as these authors would have us believe?

Indeed, survivors of the Holocaust underwent unimaginable persecution. And while we might assume that individuals who experienced physical and moral blows which exceeded historical boundaries of human cruelty *must* be irreparably damaged to the extent that they could no longer function as the rest of us do, my previous experience told me that this picture of immobilization did not accurately describe the Holocaust survivor. My subsequent investigation confirmed my belief.

This is a book about the incredible resilience of human beings. This is a book about those who survived the Holocaust and reassembled lives which had been completely and violently shattered. The survivors you will hear from provide observations of how, after being reduced to less than zero during the formative years of adolescence and young adulthood, men and women were able to revive a self-respect which had been under continuous siege. And because survivors of the Holocaust will soon be gone, this is a unique opportunity to observe a case study of the elasticity of the limits of endurance, and the human need and capacity to reassert a vigorous life. As the mortal-



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Introduction

ity of survivors overwhelms them as a group, this may be not only the first but also the final occasion we will have to hear *them* describe their inner lives.

This is a book about individuals, not about a phenomenon or syndrome. It offers a perspective of how one who has lived with terror for *years* is able to avoid paralysis and move forward. It is a book about how people live with gnawing doubts and uncertainty concerning their past actions and inaction, doubts and uncertainties which can cause them to feel ambivalent about their very existence. It is a tale of the anguish they feel because of their firsthand knowledge of the evil in their fellow man which so unjustly struck and deprived them of what was rightly theirs. For while the Holocaust survivor seems, in most ways, to be like you and me, he is also aware of his subterranean world, which may afflict him without warning. It is far easier to extinguish a man than to extinguish his memories.

Feelings of vulnerability are contagious. Although not directly experiencing the persecution of the Third Reich, children of Holocaust survivors have grown up in its shadow. As one member of the second generation remarked, "The most important event in my life occurred before I was born." Hearing the stories, absorbing the anxiety, anger, and pain of their mothers and fathers, creating fantasies of their parents' humiliation and torture, have instilled a degree of uneasiness in those who never encountered a member of the Schutzstaffel, or SS.

In August 1987, my mother asked my sister and me to accompany her on a journey back to Poland, back to before. We spent one afternoon at Treblinka. After walking throughout the grounds, my mother and sister returned to the awaiting taxi. I lingered at the railroad siding where Jews disembarked at the pathway that would lead them to death. I thought of those days and nights. I wept. And then I experienced what was, for me, the most revelatory and jarring moment of my trip. As I started to leave I felt a sudden tugging at me to remain. I felt an *obligation* to remain, to share the same fate as my brothers and sisters.

(In a 1993 interview, Krystyna Oleksy, deputy director of the Auschwitz Museum, spoke of being contacted recently by many Holocaust survivors who wished to be buried at Birkenau, the killing center of the massive Auschwitz complex. In the end, these survivors feel an obligation to remain as well.)

## Introduction

For the first few years subsequent to her liberation from Bergen-Belsen at the age of eighteen, Malka Moskowitz,\* whose parents, two brothers, and only sister were murdered, experienced nightmares frequently. Following the birth of her first child in 1948, sleep, as she described it, became “much more restful.” Like many survivors, time and the regeneration of her decimated family had salved Malka’s wounds. “I didn’t dream about those things anymore.” The night before our scheduled interview, however, Malka’s sleep was punctuated by frightening images. “I was being chased by the Gestapo . . . but this time I had my children and grandchildren with me also. We were running and running. I was crying, but I was also trying to be strong. I was determined they shouldn’t get us. We turned around the corner and they were there with guns. They shouted, ‘Halt!’ I screamed ‘No!’ and woke up.” Malka’s ongoing, subconscious feelings of personal vulnerability had now clearly spread to her postwar family.

Hungarian-born Ida Koch, a survivor of Auschwitz and Dachau, had chosen to bury her Holocaust life. In 1946, as rumors spread of the imminent closing of the Czechoslovakian borders by the Russians, she decided to dash for Palestine. “When I went to Israel, I decided I would never look back. I didn’t think about that time. I didn’t talk about those things. What I’m telling you I never told to my children. Last night I was thinking about the [upcoming] interview. I cried nonstop. Everything came back.” The mere prospect of discussion had caused the collapse of defenses which Ida had fortified for decades.

Living in a sprawling suburban home, dressed in a cashmere sweater and gabardine pleated pants, seventy-seven-year-old David Himmelstein projected the confidence of a successful businessman and member of an exclusive golf club as he heartily shook my hand and ushered me to his dining room table for our meeting. However, David’s social persona gradually fell away as he began to recount his Holocaust past. It dissolved completely as the narrative reached the point of his arrival at Auschwitz with his daughter. “‘Raus, verflucht Juden,’ they were screaming.” David stood abruptly and began pacing. “Raus, verflucht Juden.” Tears welled up in his eyes. “And then they separated us.” The tears were now falling down his ruddy

\*In order to protect the privacy of those interviewed, all names of Holocaust survivors have been changed.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Introduction

cheeks. Pacing, pacing more excitedly. "And they grabbed her away from me and pushed her to the line with the women. 'Daddy, don't leave me!', she cried." David crumpled in his chair, buried his head in his folded arms and sobbed. "Daddy, don't leave me. Daddy, don't leave me." After a few moments, he looked up, attempted to compose himself, and apologized. "I didn't mean to . . . to cry . . . I usually don't cry in front of other people. . . . Nobody knows how painful it is. Nobody knows how I *really* feel."

Why did these survivors agree to be interviewed? Why did they put themselves through this ordeal? On many a drive home, I agonized: Did I have the right to prod these frayed nerves? During follow-up telephone contact with several survivors, I heard of sleepless nights and the disquieting aftermath of my questions and their answers. A Belgian national, Anna Maline, whose horrific odyssey included Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Theresienstadt, wept often during our five hours together. After a particularly emotional juncture during which she described her arrival at Auschwitz, where she was shaven of all bodily hair and forced to stand naked for the humiliating examination by her captors, I asked, "Would you like to take a break?" "I survived Auschwitz. This is nothing," she responded.

These survivors wanted to be heard. Having kept his Holocaust self hidden all these years, Shimon Newman, who survived by masquerading as a Pole, remarked, "I don't want to die without having told at least someone how it was, how I felt." Shimon Newman wants us to know the full impact the Holocaust had on him, and not simply the events which occurred between 1939 and 1945. "Speaking about this is my way of mourning," Sol Feingold told me. "I dedicate this interview to all who were killed." After arriving as a family in Auschwitz, Sol's mother, father, and pregnant sister were immediately sent to the gas chambers.

Survivors had made promises to those who were murdered. Indeed, for many, staying alive to tell the world what they had witnessed became a vital motivating force during the Holocaust. "This is my obligation," Harry Goldberg intoned. "That's why I'm talking to you. Trust me, I don't need it." While most survivors successfully recreated a more than simply functional life after liberation, and experience an intense desire to "move forward and not look back," this orientation to the future did not imply a wish to forget. On the con-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Introduction

trary, speaking with me was further evidence of their intention to remember.

I could not leave without having coffee and a piece of cake, Anna Maline insisted. We finished, and while putting the dishes in her kitchen sink, I thanked her.

“Your interview has been very helpful. I know how difficult it was – ”

“You don’t understand,” she interrupted. “I’m glad somebody wants to listen. Mostly, people don’t want to listen. Thank you for wanting to hear. Thank you for wanting to write about it, for being interested.”

No one ever asked survivors how they *felt* then. No one asks survivors how they feel now. We may have learned the facts, or even the details, of what transpired, but we do not know about their lasting, emotional effects. (Yet we have the *illusion* of knowing survivors because we have seen Elie Wiesel’s pained expression in numerous documentaries.)

The mental health community, writers, and artists have focused their attention on the pathological inheritance of the Holocaust, but they have rarely acknowledged or credited the strengths residing in survivors, which not only have enabled them to pick up the shattered pieces of their lives but also in many cases have resulted in more than adequate postwar functioning. One reason for this failure to note the positive adjustment of many survivors may be the fear of permitting the denial of the trauma’s severity. We may feel forced to emphasize survivors’ subsequent pain in order not to minimize the reality of previous losses and the pitiless brutality to which they were subjected. Nevertheless, to understand the survivor, to understand the obstinacy of the human spirit not to be permanently squashed, we must also appreciate the successes of those who emerged.

I interviewed fifty-eight Jewish survivors for this work. They came from eleven countries – Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Denmark, Holland, France, Germany, Yugoslavia, Belgium, Austria – and all were caught in the net of the Third Reich for most of the war. They are all presently living in the United States. However, several had first emigrated to Palestine/Israel and chose – after enduring several years of hard labor, inadequate living facilities, and the lack of physical security owing to the ongoing state of hostilities – to make their life an

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Introduction

easier one in America. They believed they had already experienced more than their fair share of hardship. Each interview was conducted in the survivor's home and lasted an average of four hours. Except for six, whom I knew superficially through our contact at Holocaust-related functions, the survivors and I were strangers before I got in touch with them. Many, however, had heard of me or my most recent book, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation*.

Approximately one-third of those I approached refused me. "I want to leave all that buried," they emphasized. One female broke off our interview in midstream as her emotions threatened to overwhelm. Some had never before spoken about their Holocaust past. A few had recorded their testimonies for various archives. None, however, had participated in a nonclinical exploration of the lingering postwar consequences of their previous adversities.

Indeed, for most survivors, it is their Holocaust story which preoccupies them. It is the Holocaust which must be spoken of and remembered: If I have any difficulties now, this is nothing compared to what was. And besides, it already was. I can't do anything about it. You just pick up the pieces and move forward. Of course, not everything is always smooth, but so what? You do what you have to do.

And yet, they weep. Fifty years later.

Although the focus of my interview was on their postwar life, I asked survivors, at the outset, to tell me briefly about their circumstances during the Holocaust. I not only desired a context for my understanding of their adjustment, but I also wanted them to contact those crucial formative years as they attempted to make sense of their life which followed. I understood that I might also find coincidences of certain factors or experiences during the Holocaust and postwar psychological effects.

On several occasions I debated whether to continue this project, distressed to see the pain elicited by the material. As a child of Holocaust survivors, I grew up hearing my parents' often repeated plea designed to control my behavior and limit its potential for causing further anguish: "How could you do this to me after all I've been through?" Perhaps this subconscious taunt periodically disheartened my resolve.

It is singularly disturbing to see older, vigorous men and women cry. We are shaken by the fragility of those who are parental figures,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Introduction

of those who have promised to protect us by the natural strength inherent in parenthood. For these were my parents. There was so much overlap between other survivors' experiences and, more notably, feelings, with those of my own mother and father. They spoke with accents. They gestured alike. They wanted me to eat.

At the same time, I wanted to know and understand more about their past as a way of drawing closer to my own immediate and extended family. The more I knew about what it was like then, the greater would be my capacity to grasp the circumstances of the murder of my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles, and others, and others.

So I wanted to absorb their stories as well as understand their consequences. Because of time constraints during the interview, I always found myself wanting to hear more of what it was like then, and having to control that urge. And there was a part of me which believed (as survivors do) that the stories, the events, are so overwhelmingly important to acknowledge and remember that my focus was misplaced. Despite the numerous personal memoirs about life and death during those years, and paucity of first-person accounts of the aftermath, I still wanted more of the former. It seems as if there is never enough. Perhaps there should be six million stories of six million victims. For those who did not return – they, too, *deserve* to be known. How prisoners were forced to line up in the bitter cold of December at Flossenburg, told to strip naked, and hosed down. More than one hundred at that *Appell* (roll call) froze to death.

"In the ghetto, there was a little child about four years old. And she was a very happy and friendly child. Even the Nazis liked to talk to her. One day she was walking alone and one of the Nazis asked her if she would like a candy. 'Would you close your eyes and open your mouth?' And he shot her in the mouth."

And, as we move further away from the events, because these narratives are so unimaginable, so contrary to our self-perception, more and more voices will assert that they must have been embellished. At the very least, men, women, and children will simply become blurred, abstract numbers. For most, including Jews, the Holocaust is already a piece of distant history. For survivors, the Holocaust was *yesterday* . . . and today.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57459-4 - The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust

Aaron Hass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Introduction

In the spring of 1989 I was invited by the Goethe University of Frankfurt as a Visiting Professor to teach “The Psychohistory of the Holocaust.” Understandably, I met resistance from the university-age Germans who attended my lectures about the historical and racial aspects of the Final Solution. However, on a day when I began speaking of the postwar lingering of that period on survivors, I sensed a change in mood, a greater attentiveness, a certain sympathy. The fact that, for hundreds of thousands of individuals, the Holocaust did not end in 1945 was a new concept for these students. This was a contemporary phenomenon, one which coincided with their own carefree lives. (A postscript: Toward the end of my stay, I was approached by a representative of the university administration and asked if I would consider returning the following spring to teach the course again, and perhaps make this an annual event. During that interval, the Berlin Wall, a symbol of punishment for what the Nazis had initiated, was dismembered. When the moment arrived to finalize arrangements, the university suddenly seemed far less interested in presenting such a course, citing budgetary constraints. Reunification had provided further impetus to the German desire to close the book on that period of their history.)

Survivors despair. “I’m glad I can tell what happened, because people don’t believe it. . . . People don’t want to believe what happened to us,” Anna Maline laments. Anna and her comrades dread that the Holocaust will be forgotten or distorted. Anna understands that we want to forget, that we want to move away from reminders of peril. She is also keenly aware that she and others like her will soon pass away and there will be no one with the credibility of the eyewitness to tell us what occurred. But many survivors also feel the personal relief of self disclosure, and a responsibility fulfilled in their efforts to prod our collective conscience.

“I never talk about it. Now, I talked with you. It’s like I told the world.”