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Life gained – identity lost – Untold stories from the second- and third generation Holocaust survivors

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the families of first-generation Holocaust survivors who arrived in Sweden after World War II, hid, repressed their Jewish identities, and did not transmit their cultural heritage to their children. They raised their children as Swedish. This study was aimed at examining the experiences of 20 second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors with a non-Jewish upbringing. The results showed that the reasons why the first generation concealed their history and identity were unclear. In certain cases, their identity was hidden out of fear of being identified as Jewish and becoming the object of hate and harassment. The reason for concealing their identities has become a part of postmemory work among the study participants and is important in understanding their past. This study shows that the second and third generations also tend to hide their Jewish identity out of fear of being the target of hate.

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The testimonies of Holocaust survivors have been investigated (Larkey 2017; Thor Tureby 2020), and the stories and witnesses of first-generation Holocaust survivors are well documented and have become a part of world heritage. Not many eyewitnesses are still alive, but their children and grandchildren continue to tell stories of the Holocaust. Currently, there is a growing international field of studies on second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors and what happens when they assume the narratives of their parents or grandparents and retell them to new generations. The memories of children of Holocaust survivors have a meta-character (Vidaković-Petrov 2018). The children and grandchildren remember how their parents discussed the events they experienced and how they enacted and lived through their traumas. Secondary memories are reinterpretations of first-generation experiences and losses.

This study focused on the displacement of memory. Certain first-generation Holocaust survivors who arrived in Sweden after World War II (WWII) decided to hide and repress their Jewish identities and not transmit their cultural heritage to the next generation. Their goal was not to remember and look back but to create a new life and become assimilated into Swedish society. They provided their children with a Swedish upbringing. These children were frequently baptized and confirmed in the Church of Sweden. The fact that

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the first generation did not always tell their children about their experiences of the Holocaust is well documented in trauma transmission studies. Nevertheless, the possible trauma of living with parents who repressed their Jewish identities has not been documented. This study aimed at investigating the experiences of second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors with a non-Jewish upbringing.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors discuss their Jewish background?
2. How do children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors discuss Jewish identity?
3. Do the participants experience any forms of antisemitism?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The following section discusses the research field, followed by a section on method and theory. Most of the text comprises empirical material and the narratives of the participants.

Survey of research

This section discusses relevant research on the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors. First, we examined studies on the second generation, and then, we focused on studies on the third generation. An extensive body of literature on the testimonies and suffering of Holocaust survivors exists (Epstein 1979/1988; Thor Tureby 2020). Moreover, the research on the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors continues to grow (Aarons and Berger 2017; Gottschalk 2003; Olstein et al. 2024). The psychological trauma of people in close family relationships with trauma survivors is referred to as *secondary traumatization*. The general findings from studies on the transmission of trauma to the second generation are contradictory (Baranowsky et al. 1998; Dekel et al. 2013; Johns et al. 2022; Scharf and Mayseless 2011; Van Alphen 2006). Although the experiences of the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors may not be traumatic, they may still lead to emotional difficulties. Certain experiences appear to be more common among the survivors and their families, such as the fear of separation, obsession with food, overprotection, and the need for children to take care of and protect their parents (Fischer 2015). Traumatic experiences and resilience patterns can be transmitted over generations, such as the ability to turn a cursed inheritance into a memorable legacy (Braga et al. 2012). Wolf (2019) argued that the creative methods through which many individual parents conveyed their narratives and contributed to their children's memories can interrupt the transmission of trauma.

A major part of research on the second generation covers the transgenerational effects of the Holocaust and trauma transmission (Nadler et al. 1985; Weiss and Weiss 2000). A significant pattern observed in research on the families of survivors is *the conspiracy of silence* (Wiseman et al. 2006). This is particularly evident in the case of Holocaust survivors who hid and repressed their Jewish identities. In these families, there is an unspoken agreement to keep traumatic experiences unspoken and emotionally separated from everyday life. This is about the need to forget and the idea that withholding information will

help their children develop normally. This strategy for handling trauma often leads to the development of a *double wall of silence* maintained over generations (Kidron 2009; Samson et al. 2013). Consequently, the parents never talk about their past, and the children never ask them about it. The double wall of silence is built on a mutual agreement not to talk about and touch upon the traumatic past.

Studies have shown that third-generation Holocaust survivors are burdened with carrying on the torch and remembering their parents' stories (Krantz 2018). This mission occasionally clashes with the identity formation of children and teenagers. Being part of a *replacement generation* and a living memorial candle can be overwhelming and cause challenges in identity formation during adolescence (Juni 2016). The results of different studies considerably vary. For example, the findings of an Australian study suggest a higher secondary traumatic stress level in third-generation survivors compared with a Jewish control group without a direct Holocaust survivor ancestry (Olstein et al. 2024). An American study reported significantly higher secondary traumatic stress levels and poorer family communication in third-generation survivors than in a control group (Giladi and Bell 2013). Other studies did not show evidence of tertiary traumatization in third-generation survivors. Instead, these studies show remarkable resilience and the capability of the second generation to protect their children from being affected by the trauma of first-generation Holocaust survivors (Sagi-Schwartz et al. 2008; Yaroslawitz et al. 2015; Zerach and Solomon 2016). Post-Holocaust generations are mostly guided by the stories told by their parents and grandparents. The grandchildren attempt to weave the strands of stories together to create continuity and identity in life (Aarons and Berger 2017).

There is a lack of studies on Holocaust survivors who changed their names and their religious identities and began alternative life stories (see, for example, Green 2022; Porter 2008; Stein 2009). Porter (2008: 76) writes: "Rearing their children as Catholics must have appeared to the parents as a method of ensuring that their children would be 'normal,' whereas if they were Jewish, they might feel alien and at risk." The stories of numerous Holocaust survivors who suppressed their Jewish identities are mostly untold. An important exception is a study by Muller-Paisner (2005) concerning Jewish children, often infants or children so young that they did not have any recollection of what happened, who were hidden by their Catholic neighbors during the Holocaust. Muller-Paisner, who is a trained psychoanalyst, studied how these individuals struggled with their identities when the secrets of their past were revealed to them late during their lives. Similarly to Muller-Paisner study being strongly connected to the local conditions in occupied Poland during the Holocaust, our study is framed by the local context of Sweden being directly affected by the consequences of the Holocaust mainly after the war. In this context, we closely examined how the second and third generations grew up with parents who chose to become Swedish, leaving their Jewish heritage behind. In addition, we investigated how the continuity of the Jewish heritage and the will to reconnect to a Jewish identity have been affected by an increase in antisemitism in Swedish society (see, for example, Krantz 2018).

Method and methodology

The study participants were recruited in different ways. The first two families (eight individuals) were recruited through a key informant, whom the researchers met at a

conference. Through announcements and descriptions of the project in newspapers and other forums, more than 40 individuals with similar backgrounds contacted the researchers. Out of these, 12 additional participants who fitted the criteria were selected for participation, after providing informed consent. The distribution of the participants was 10 second- and 10 third-generation Holocaust survivors (20 in all). We interviewed six women and four men from each generation. The age ranges of the second- and third-generation survivors were 54–77 and 25–54 years, respectively.

The participants were interviewed individually based on a semi-structured interview guide, following the themes of the research questions (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014). The interview guide was inspired by a narrative methodology, and the questions were intended to follow the informants' stories in a linear way, initially focusing on how their parents and grandparents told their stories of their background, and how they arrived to and adapted to the Swedish society. Thereafter, the questions centered on how the second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors talked about their identities, lives, and cultural background. Finally, we also asked questions on how they looked upon the possibility of regaining a Jewish identity in contemporary Sweden and on antisemitism.

Each interview lasted 60–90 min, after which they were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews constitute the main empirical material of the present project. They were analyzed *via* thematic analysis, through which we searched for variations and patterns in the statements of the participants (Braun and Clarke 2006). The narratives followed a similar structure. Initially, the informants discussed their family history, with a specific focus on their parents' and grandparents' denial and repression of their Jewish background. The subsequent theme explored questions around Jewish identity, and the third theme focused on the relapses in regaining the Jewish identity, largely due to antisemitism. Exploring these three themes and their interconnectedness was the main focus of the analysis.

In previous studies related to trauma transmission, participants frequently avoided answering sensitive questions that may touch on their experiences of guilt or feelings of guilt transferred from their parents (see, for example, Alexander 2002; Hunter 2019). To protect the participants and their stories, we developed rigorous procedures to protect their identity and make them comfortable with the research situation. This study was reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (case number 2023-06300-01). All the names of individuals, locations, or any other form of information that could identify the participants have been replaced with pseudonyms. Written informed consent was obtained. The interviews occurred in January and February 2024.

Theoretical framework

The transmission of testimonies of the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors in classrooms worldwide is a constant warning against prejudices, antisemitism, racism, and hate speech (Alexander et al. 2004). According to Alexander (2012), experiencing and living with trauma is a sociological process: identities are continuously deconstructed, reconstructed, and secured by facing the present and future and reconstructing the earlier life of the collective. Alternatively, as Assmann (2016: 111) expresses it,

Since our memory does not preserve a coherent sequence, but rather always makes available only tiny pieces and segments out of which we construct an image for ourselves, the retrospective narrative can change in the course of a lifetime without it being the case that we are falsifying the memories themselves.

According to Alexander (2012), the trauma process undergoes processes of routinization and institutionalization. The meaning of cultural trauma is constantly reinterpreted. Memories are rooted in concrete spaces, gestures, languages, and objects and brought to life in multilayered family narratives. In addition, memories are tied to different rituals, remembrances, and celebrations. As Halbwachs (1941/1992) reveals, the past is not preserved but reconstructed based on the present. Assmann (2016) distinguishes between three memory functions. First, there is *neural memory*: the emotional, material, and bodily memories of first-generation Holocaust survivors. Second, there is *social memory*, which is conveyed over generations through narratives. Finally, there is *cultural memory*, which can be conveyed over several generations through objects, documents, symbols, and signs.

There is a strong connection among neural, social, and cultural memory processes. Here, we applied the concept of *postmemory*, to capture the processes of secondary and tertiary trauma transmission, and the identity processes occurring in the context of families and intergenerational connections among first-, second-, and third-generation Holocaust survivors. Hirsch (2008: 107) describes *postmemory* as follows:

Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.

Postmemory is a social and cultural memory. The social memory of the second generation carries traces from the neural memory and sufferings of the first generation, manifested in nightly screams and depression. The third generation is further displaced from the original trauma, and their narratives are formed both by social memories from their parents and grandparents and by cultural memory, the material and sociocultural transmission of memories, and artifacts. In addition to investigating these transmissions of memory and trauma, we examine how the Jewish identity is either suppressed or regained in the stories of our participants.

Untold stories from second- and third-generation holocaust survivors

The study findings are presented following the themes of the research questions. First, we investigated how second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors attempt to reconstruct a narrative and storyline to capture the experience of their parents and grandparents during, before, and after the Holocaust. Second, we focused on how the informants regained or disconnected from their Jewish heritage and identity. Finally, we determined to what extent the participants experience antisemitism in Swedish society.

Reconstructing family history

Most individuals and family members we interviewed have been totally or partially disconnected from their Jewish family background. Their parents, first-generation Holocaust survivors, either remained quiet about their Jewish background or provided their children with fragments of the background. These children began to frequently ask questions when older. Occasionally, the children did their homework on the Holocaust before interrogating their grandparents; thus, the family history gradually became clearer. In many families, the grandparents were reluctant to talk about the war and the Holocaust. As an extreme example, we have narratives such as that from Bengt (64 years old), whose father told the family that he came from Denmark. When the father died, Bengt began some research in the archives and discovered that his father had a Jewish background and that most of his relatives were murdered during the war. When Bengt told his mother about this, she was utterly shocked.

Other stories like that of Katrine (68 years old) are typical. She was a teenager when she discovered that her mother was a Holocaust survivor. Katrine's mother married a Swedish man, joined the Church of Sweden, and seldom talked about her Jewish background. At that time, Katrine began to ask questions. This was not well-received, and her mother told her, "It is all too frightening; I do not want to put this burden on your shoulders." Katrine wanted her mother to come to her school to talk about the Holocaust and her experiences during the war, but her mother said no; she did not want to revisit the past. Furthermore, Katrine's son, Mats (42 years old), began to ask his grandmother questions, but she did not want to tell her story. When she died, Mats traced her story back to the war, and gradually, with the aid of documents, books, archives, and a Facebook group, he compiled a narrative of his grandmother's journey from Lodz to Sweden.

Grandma was in the Lodz ghetto the whole time, from when they opened until they closed, and they took everyone to Auschwitz. She was a part of a group of about 500 women who were transported the whole way. They were together, and followed each other from camp to camp, and so on, until they were liberated in Ravensbrück, and she came to Sweden. So, I have found children and grandchildren of the other women who were a part of this group, and united them all here in a small Facebook group. I have found about 60 women and their children, and grandchildren, around the world, and everyone has been able to share stories. And even if it is not grandmother's truth, the things they told are very close to "her story." Some have written books about the whole thing, and so on, and some are out lecturing around in England and in the USA, and Australia as well. And I've even reunited two women, who grew up together, they were now around 100 and 99 years old, and they lost touch in the 1950s. One is living in Toronto, and the other in Stockholm. So, six months ago or something, they met on Facetime, and both died a few weeks ago only.

Mats has devoted a lot of time and energy to rebuilding his grandmother's story. He does not view himself as a Jew although he acknowledges his Jewish background and assumes the responsibility for telling his grandmother's story. Postmemory can take many forms. This is an example of how the narrative of a Holocaust survivor is saved and restored by the third generation. Using social media and archives, Mats successfully reconstructed his grandmother's narrative and built a community around the group of women with whom his grandmother shared a traumatic experience.

Similar to Mats, Mathilda (60 years old) attempted to reconstruct her family history but from a different starting point. She did not know anything at all about her father's background. She knew that he arrived in Sweden from Hungary after the revolt in 1956 and that he never wanted to discuss his upbringing or share any information about his past. By the late 1990s, several years after her father had passed on, Mathilda, out of curiosity, googled her rather unusual family name.

My father was such a distant person, he never said anything at all that was personal for him or about him. So, by the end of the 90s when the Internet was well established, I googled my rather unusual family name. I received long lists of people with that name who had been murdered in 1943, and I did not understand anything at all. It was so strange because I have always been interested in the Second World War and all that, and it was ... anyhow I kept googling and concluded that these must be my relatives and there must be living relatives in Hungary today.

Mathilda decided to contact some distant relatives she knew and visit them in Hungary. She was told that her father had carefully instructed them never to say anything about his past to his daughter. The pieces of their concealed family history were revealed and reconstructed. Mathilda learned how her father survived the Holocaust, about the family business before the war, and how he was born and raised in a different area than Mathilda had been told. "To me, it was a very special experience to have a blank sheet filled with names and faces; I did not know anything about my father before," Mathilda says. Mathilda found it difficult to handle this new information. She began to reflect on whether she was a part of this family history. She asked her mother what she knew about her father. Mathilda's mother claimed to be as surprised as Mathilda herself. It took more than a year before she decided to tell her children. She was concerned about how this new background could affect them and the potential danger that could evolve if they were identified as Jews.

In most cases, the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors have reconstructed the stories of their parents and grandparents. Through different sources, the second and third generations constructed a postmemory, that is, their stories of what occurred and how this might have affected them and their life stories.

Disconnecting from or regaining Jewish identity

The reasons why first-generation Holocaust survivors avoided talking about their past and their Jewish heritage are often unclear or unexplained. The children and grandchildren of the first generation do not have a logical storyline or narrative of why their Jewish identity was buried. The most common explanation is that the first generation was afraid of what could happen to their children if people discovered that they were Jewish. In this sense, hiding was a survival mechanism. Most of the participants were raised Swedish, and many (but not everyone) were baptized and confirmed in the Swedish protestant church. This also implied that the participants often had only a vague notion of what it meant to be Jewish. They had minimal knowledge of ceremonies, rituals, and symbols. Although the participants know that they have a Jewish background, the ways they relate to this fact vary considerably. In certain cases, the family history tends to grow and become more important over generations.

Marianne (37 years old) is a third-generation survivor; her grandmother managed to escape Berlin in 1938 with her husband. Most of the family that remained fell victims to the Holocaust. Marianne's mother was born in Sweden after the war but lost her mother at an early age. Marianne's grandfather asked his mother who lived in the US to come and help him with his children. She was an Orthodox Jew; therefore, Marianne's mother was brought up by her in the Orthodox tradition. For a reason unclear to Marianne, her mother decided that her children would grow up as everyone else in Sweden, also meaning as non-Jews. Thus, she did not cultivate any Jewish traditions at home. When Marianne grew up, she noticed photographs of relatives atop the bookshelves, and her mother mentioned that many relatives had been murdered by Hitler, but that was it. When she was 14 years old, she was confirmed in church but also confused.

I was sad because I couldn't be more Jewish, or because I didn't know what to do, what to be, how it was. But I knew that this was a false path, a sidetrack, this confirmation thing, that it wasn't really me, I knew that. It wasn't me to be in the Church of Sweden, so the real me should have been in a synagogue.

Although Marianne maintained an interest in her Jewish background, she argued that she did not feel like a "real" Jew. When her mother died from cancer, Marianne felt that she was destined to carry on her Jewish heritage. Thus, she joined the Jewish Congregation in Stockholm; nevertheless, she still felt slightly uncomfortable. This sense of being uncomfortable often related to her lack of knowledge of basic Jewish traditions and cultural marks. As an example of this, she told a story of how she ordered earrings with a Star of David online. When she met a cousin from Israel, she showed her the earrings, and her cousin said, "That is not the Star of David!" Instead, she had bought earrings in the form of pentagrams (the five-pointed star). She was very embarrassed. Marianne decided to cultivate certain Jewish ceremonies, and she now identifies as Jewish.

The first generation hid their Jewish identity for other reasons as well. Elisabeth (54 years old) was born in Poland in the early 70s. When she was very young, her mother and grandfather left Poland for Sweden, in the aftermath of the so-called 1968 pogrom. At that time, her grandfather told his daughter, Elisabeth's mother, that they needed to leave because he was Jewish. This was the first time he mentioned being a Jew, but he never talked to his daughter or granddaughter about it again. Moreover, he did not talk about his family and relatives who were murdered during the Holocaust. As an adult, Elisabeth tried to piece her background together.

After [Granddad] had passed away, I tried to ask my mother, to collect the pieces about Granddad, if there was something she remembered or knew about his background. She could only recall that some of the dishes from her childhood were referred to as dishes that Granddad's mother used to cook. She knew that he was from the countryside, and that he always in his entire life enjoyed walking in the forest or going fishing, so that in a sense was his background. She never dared to ask any further, and I really believe that it even did not cross her mind that he was a Jew. To me it is so incredibly strange; how could his background be so concealed?

In the late 1970s, Elisabeth's grandfather began to commute to the Hague for a period. As it turned out, he became a key witness in a war crime tribunal, where he testified

about how he saw his entire village, including his closest family, get massacred during the Holocaust. He never told his daughter or Elisabeth what he did in the Hague. Elisabeth discovered later when reading newspapers about the court case and by gaining access to the court protocol. Elisabeth gradually reconstructed her grandfather's story and simultaneously began to think about how that story altered her identity. During the interview, she was asked if she saw herself as Jewish, and her answer was a firm "no." Then as one of her daughters had resumed the search for the lost identity of the family, she said that she was considering formally converting to Judaism and that she has recently bought a Magen David necklace for her daughter.

In many of the families of our participants, the Jewish background and identity have been concealed or restrained. First-generation Holocaust survivors assimilated into the Swedish culture. They did not pass on any knowledge of Jewish symbols, ceremonies, or traditions. Occasionally, the second and third generations attempted to reclaim their Jewish identity. In doing so, they often felt lost and disoriented, lacking central pieces of information and tacit knowledge about being Jewish.

Relapses in regaining Jewish identity due to antisemitism

As mentioned above, the study participants have, in different ways, attempted to piece their family history together and, in several cases, this has led to reflections on their eventual Jewish identity. Some of them have made efforts (from small and symbolic to profound and life-changing) to enact a new Jewish identity. When they talked about this process, they related to their perceived ability to be Jewish, in relation to how they understood and interpreted threats of being subject to antisemitism. To the study participants, it was frightening and strange to sense that they might be hated because of an identity they were not raised to have and often happened upon by coincidence.

Anders is 38 years old, married, and has two small children. He was brought up in a family that had reclaimed certain parts of their Jewish heritage. During the interview, when asked if he would refer to himself as Jewish, he replied as follows:

Yes, yes, I would; at least I think so. I'm proud of my heritage. On the other hand, it depends on who is asking, and in which context. As it is today [with the increasing level of antisemitism after the Hamas-Israel war], there is so much antisemitism all the time. I do think that I would to the best of my capacity still try to explain in what way I am Jewish. However, I would not say it in a situation where it could make me vulnerable.

Anders showed us the tattoos on his forearms, two of which have Jewish symbolism, the Magen David and a tribute to his family in Hebrew. He explains that he can conveniently lower his shirt sleeves if he senses a need to conceal them and, thus, his new identity. The fear of antisemitism ripples over generations.

Olof, whose mother came to a rural part of Sweden as a Holocaust survivor, has been struggling with his Jewish identity along with being subjected to secondary traumatization due to his mother's deeply rooted trauma. He has strong ties to one of his granddaughters, who has discovered her Jewish background. He talked about this when he referred to his fear of encountering antisemitism.

I'm not all that worried for my own sake, of course I was frightened after what happened in October [the Hamas attack,] but I'm an old man, and it is natural to fear death at my

age. But I think a lot about Julia [his granddaughter]; she lives in Stockholm and then I wonder what will become of her? I know that she wears the Star of David as a necklace and as a symbol of her heritage, but she told me that she has chosen to take it off. She decided to do so a few days after the Hamas attack. Why the hell can we never learn from history? I have my political engagement in the lefties party, and it has been so fucking much about what Israel does and doesn't and what I think about that. People ask me how I can call myself Jewish these days. I don't know what to say, I vote in Sweden not in Israel.

Olof got upset when he talked about Julia, and he said that he felt guilty about passing down an identity that could cause her harm.

Marianne, whom we referred to above, has reconnected with her Jewish identity. She has visited synagogues and attempted to connect with certain Jewish holidays and symbols. Although she is certain about her Jewish identity, she is also fragile and sometimes feels that she is faking being Jewish. In the interview, she addressed this uncertainty, and it became clear that the recent events in Israel and Swedish society scared her. She vividly described a recent incident that occurred outside her home. A couple of young boys threw a soccer ball at her window, and it was clear to her why they targeted her window.

Interviewer: Are you personally afraid of antisemitism?

Marianne: Yes. Yesterday, some young people threw a soccer ball at our window, where there is a Menorah. So, they threw the ball again, and again at our window. One guy looked like he might be in eighth or ninth grade. I asked: "Why our window?" And then they said: "No, it was nothing." I just asked: "Why exactly our window?" and they said: "No, it was nothing, we're looking for a guy, it was the wrong window," and so on. And I just asked: "But why are you going on and on here and like throwing balls at windows? Do you live around here?" Then they said: "Yes, we, (laughing) we live here. Yes, we do (laughing)," and they ended up like this. Then I asked: "What's your name?" and then he first said: "Erik," and then he was laughing at himself and then I said: "What's your name?" and then he said ... I think his name was Yassin or something like that, and then I asked ... I kind of wanted to get in contact with them, in some way ... well, I didn't want them to see me as an enemy, because I was really scared. And then because I was really scared, I somehow wanted them to empathize with me, and I said that: "You know, I have a five-year-old at home who got really scared, she has autism, and she thought like it was like a real monster, so please, not our window."

What Marianne encountered here can be described as an expression of everyday antisemitism (cf. everyday racism). In this case, it is played out by young boys as something harmless and innocent. However, Marianne, who was the target of the attack, interpreted the ball thrown at the window as an attack on the family.

Rebecca is 25 years old. Her grandparents came to Sweden after the war; they had both been in different concentration camps. Her grandfather frequently talked about his camp experiences and described how people were murdered and slaughtered. Rebecca has developed a strong Jewish identity. She often thinks about her grandparents and their stories.

I think that my grandparents, who are no longer alive, have shaped my identity, since I was quite small, I would say anyway. Partly, in the sense of being Jewish, and to have grandparents who survived the Holocaust, this is something that empowers and strengthens me. So, this is a responsibility, like what it means and that they won't live

forever. What kind of responsibility do we have, that is, my mother and father who are like ... or my mother who is a child of a survivor, and then there is me and my sister who are grandchildren. So, it has been very much like this. I don't know, I feel split, because as proud and as strengthened as I am by it, I can also feel a stress of them dying out, like.

When Rebecca talked about what happened on October 7, 2023, in Israel and the hate toward Jewish people after this, she immediately thought of her grandparents.

The first thing in my head is Grandma and Grandpa, always. So, it's like a little signal that goes through my whole body precisely because, yes, but specifically the Jewish [aspect] ... also because they came from such damn oppression, and like that, it becomes extra sensitive. And I just ... It sounds completely crazy, but I was a little grateful that they didn't ... that Grandpa had time to pass away before all this happened, and that grandma was so far gone that she didn't see or understand. That was my first feeling really, that it was like this: "Thank God they don't get to see this." Yes, so there was also like a great sadness somewhere, and a fear of like: "Shit, what will happen in the future?" like. We're such a minority too, so that like this ... It's also scary when you see so much hate because we've seen what hate can ... or leads to, so it's a fear too, so, a fear of the future.

Rebecca has become more careful about how she expresses her Jewish identity. Her parents have also told her to remain safe, and she occasionally hides her symbols, like the Star of David. Reenacting a concealed Jewish identity cannot be reduced to an individual solipsistic project. Acceptance, encouragement, hesitation, and hostility from the surroundings will set preconditions for how the new identity may play out. The increasing public presence of individual experiences of antisemitism after the Hamas attack has raised a new and unanticipated obstacle for the participants to openly express and visibly show a Jewish identity.

Discussion and conclusion

Certain first-generation Holocaust survivors, who arrived in Sweden after WWII, hid and repressed their Jewish identities and did not pass on their cultural identity and heritage to the next generations. Their goal was to create a new life and become assimilated into Swedish society. This study focused primarily on the experiences of second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors with a non-Jewish upbringing. The second and third generations have occasionally attempted to reconstruct the stories of their parents and grandparents and compile the pieces of their family histories. This usually involved gathering facts and information from different sources. Inspired by the concept of postmemory, this study examined how memories and stories are told and retold and how this affects identity formation.

When the second and third generations begin to recapture and reconstruct their family history, they often have little basis to build a functioning narrative. They must partially lean on archives, oral history museums, and other secondary sources. Sometimes, they create a Facebook group to collect information. Postmemory is not an "authentic" memory that builds on the experiences of first-generation Holocaust survivors but a made-up memory (a memory of memories). Therefore, when stories are told and retold by relatives, children, and grandchildren, they are also remade and restructured. This also goes for Jewish identity. In a sense, it is something lost, but reconnecting to a Jewish identity does not mean "finding" one's true self, but rather reconnecting to a

family history and using different fragments and pieces from this storyline to construct a “new” Jewish identity.

In certain cases, the Jewish identity was hidden out of fear of being identified as Jewish and becoming the object of hate and harassment. Regrettably, the second and third generations also tend to hide and not acknowledge their Jewish identity. The unknown reason for concealing the identities has become a part of postmemory work among the participants and plays a central role in understanding their past. Thus, it is a driving force behind the urge to know what was lost. Fragments of information about the reason behind the concealment of their identity are pieced with information on events before, during, and after the Holocaust obtained from archives or newly discovered relatives.

We have learned that piecing together these family memories can cause conflicts between siblings, parents, children, and other relatives. The reconstructed postmemory provides the individual with a guideline for a new direction in life. It also contains the contested cultural capital of the family. When Marianne was asked how her spouse related to her new Jewish identity, the fact that she saw their children as Jews, and the fact that he was not a Jew, she simply answered, “He is cool about [the fact] that he is not a Jew, but he is a Jew-friend.” After a moment of silence, she continued by showing a sense of guilt that he, as a “Jew-friend,” had to face the effects of antisemitism.

The family histories presented in this article could be read as an example of something unusual and untypical; however, while conducting this study, we have met a considerable number of people with similar stories. After the war, many Jews were afraid that someone similar to “Hitler” would appear again and threaten their families and lives. Building a new life, forgetting and repressing their Jewish identity, and giving their children Christian and Swedish names were a part of their survival strategy. Today, when antisemitism is increasing in many European countries, these fears have become more realistic again.

Moreover, we would argue that the experiences of the informants in this study are more common than one might expect. The number of the Jewish Holocaust survivors that came to Sweden and remained is unknown but is estimated to be approximately 7000 people (Rudberg 2017). It is nearly impossible to ever determine how many of those remained in the countryside or in small towns, that is, in areas with no Jewish congregations or institutions. We will also never learn how many married non-Jewish spouses and will know even less about how many concealed their Jewish background. In this study, we have foremost reported on the Holocaust experience that exists in Sweden and documented vital aspects of it. Certainly, our study needs to be followed by other studies, but we have been able to establish that a saved life may come with a lost identity.

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