



## 9. My Journey as a Child Holocaust Survivor



*Several Jewish children were hidden at the Château de la Guette children's home in France during the Holocaust.*

*Photo Credit United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*

*The views or opinions expressed in this journal, and the context in which the images are used, do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of, nor imply approval or endorsement by, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*



UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz

## Professor Robert Krell

**Dr. Robert Krell** (The Netherlands/Canada) is a Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. He is a child survivor of the Holocaust, devoted to understanding the problems of Holocaust survivor-families and supporting their well being. Dr. Krell was born in The Hague, The Netherlands on 5 August 1940. He survived the war hiding with the Munnik family and then returned to his parents, who had also survived in hiding. In 1951, the Krells moved to Vancouver, British Columbia and Dr. Krell earned his medical degree from The University of British Columbia in 1965 and completed his psychiatric training at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia and Stanford University Medical Center in Palo Alto, California.

In his private practice, Dr. Krell treated Holocaust survivors and their families, as well as Dutch survivors of Japanese concentration camps. He established a Holocaust Education Centre in 1994 in order to continue teaching programmes for high school children as a warning of the consequences of unchecked racism and intolerance. For these activities, Dr. Krell received the 1998 State of Israel Bonds Elie Wiesel Remembrance Award. He has published several books, among them *And Life Is Changed Forever: Holocaust Childhoods Remembered* with Martin Glassner, *Medical and Psychological Effects of Concentration Camps on Holocaust Survivors*, coedited with Marc I. Sherman, and *The Children of Buchenwald* with Judith Hemmendinger. Dr. Krell's interests remain in the psychiatric treatment of aging survivors of massive trauma and participating in programmes against racism and prejudice.

Dr. Robert Krell was the keynote speaker during the Holocaust memorial ceremony in General Assembly Hall on 27 January 2012. Dr. Krell's personal story of survival and perseverance is a moving testimony to the endurance of the human spirit, while serving as a reminder that the horrors of the Holocaust must never be forgotten.

# My Journey as a Child Holocaust Survivor

*by Robert Krell*

M.D., Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at the University of British  
Columbia (Canada)

I was born in The Hague, Holland on 5 August 1940. After nearly three years in hiding during the Holocaust, I returned to my parents who had also miraculously survived. I heard the stories of other returning survivors who came through our living room and told their tales of unrelenting horrors. What could a child possibly say about his or her own experiences, of the loss of childhood or adolescence, of deprivation and fear, of separation from family? We remained silent, as silent as when we had been in hiding.

On 19 August 1942, we were ordered to report for “resettlement to the East”. My parents, Leo and Emmy Krell, were aware that none of their friends who obeyed had returned. We fled the house, taking nothing with us, not even a photo album, especially not a photo album. I was placed with former neighbours, and through a series of miracles ended up in the home of Albert and Violette Munnik and their 12-year-old daughter, Nora.

For nearly three years they risked their lives simply because “it was the right thing to do”. At the Munniks', my memory begins at age two and two-and-a-half. I was leaning against my father in a chair learning to call him Uncle, as in a close friend of the family. I had to be careful not to refer to him as my father.

While living with the Munniks, I was warned to stay away from the front window. I was a little boy with a mop of dark-brown hair in a sea of blondes. I quickly absorbed a sense of danger and fear, especially when Nora took me out in a buggy. That was so unusual that I remember it vividly. We reached a viaduct that was partly flooded. A German soldier came over to help carry the buggy. I had pulled the blanket over my face. I was perhaps three years old.

---

**What could a child possibly say about his or her own experiences, of the loss of childhood or adolescence, of deprivation and fear, of separation from family? We remained silent, as silent as when we had been in hiding.**

---

Many years later, I asked Nora where we were going. Initially, she denied my memory, but I would not give in. She eventually acknowledged that we were going to visit my mother. I asked if we arrived there because I could not remember. She said we did, but unfortunately that was the day the Gestapo showed up to search the tiny apartment. We hid under the bed and my mother succeeded in turning them away.

Nora had good reason to forget that memory because she had endangered us all. Except for that lapse, she proved to be a wonderful older sister, hiding my existence from her school friends and coming home early to teach me how to read and write. And I was a terrific little brother: quiet, cooperative and obedient. I never complained, not of pain or illness. I did not cry — ever. Not until liberation.

After the war's end, I protested having to leave the Munniks' home and return to my parents. The three of us had survived. Almost everyone else in my family had been murdered, including my mother's and father's parents and all of my aunts and uncles. My Aunt Mania's son had survived in hiding, similar to me. But Aunt Mania had been killed at Sobibor and her husband at Auschwitz, so my cousin was orphaned and remained with his rescuers. Liberation was not particularly liberating for Jewish children. A new set of challenges arose: how to survive survival.

At this point in 1945, we knew so little. But the news spread quickly. More than 80 per cent of Holland's 140,000 Jews had been murdered.<sup>1</sup> Of those deported via Westerbork to Auschwitz and Sobibor, only about 5,000 returned.<sup>2</sup>

I did not yet know I was a Jew. In fact, my first postwar school was a Catholic kindergarten, where I was the Mother Superior's prize pupil, or perhaps most promising convert. I learned about being Jewish from hearing the stories of survivors who gathered in our home. They spoke in Yiddish of Auschwitz and other mysterious places. Their stories were ably translated by my second cousin Milly, who had returned from Switzerland, where her family had escaped. Hearing stories no child should ever hear, we listened even more attentively. Our experiences meant we had grown up too quickly, too seriously. We had become elderly children.

Apparently, there were children willing to speak. Some tried to be heard. Yet, few were asked, "What was it like for you? What did you see? What happened to you? How did you feel?" Adults assumed that children were lucky. Lucky not to have memories. Lucky not to have suffered unless they were in concentration camps. Lucky not to have understood what was happening. Most of the assumptions proved to be wrong.

The pre-war mental health professionals, who had been pre-occupied with even a single trauma experienced by a child, were nowhere to be seen. Jewish children subjected to a relentless series of traumas for months and years received little help. Perhaps the problems of brutalised children were simply too overwhelming even for the healers. We remained silent. It was expected of us.

Therefore we were alone, struggling with fragments of memories that were painful and made little sense. Most of us thought

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Fate of the Jews Across Europe", Yad Vashem, <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/about/09/europe.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Netherlands", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Holocaust Encyclopedia, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005436>.

we were a little crazy and kept that belief, as well as other secrets, to ourselves. The reality of being hunted left many with a sense of shame. Who but the guilty are pursued with such ferocity? But we had not done anything. The Jewish people were the target of a genocidal assault on their existence, and genocide demands the killing of children. The Nazis and their legions of enthusiastic collaborators achieved near success. In the countries under German occupation, 93 per cent of Jewish children were murdered.<sup>3</sup>

---

**Hearing stories no child should ever hear, we listened even more attentively. Our experiences meant we had grown up too quickly, too seriously. We had become elderly children.**

---

My parents and I immigrated to Canada in 1951. There, I felt liberated. This was my chance to become normal. We children learned the language and we learned to fit in.

Yet, I still encountered the murders of Jewish children through the eyes of Holocaust survivors who were friends of my family. In our Synagogue, Anshel, a broad-shouldered, powerful man, sat in front of me.

He would turn to greet me with a huge smile and firm handshake. But on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, his shoulders shook as he mourned the murders of his first wife and two children, ages three and five. And I would cry with him. There were others there who had lost their children. I learned from their tears how to cry in silence, just as I had learned to live in silence. Silence is the language of the child survivor. Unlike the older survivors and their second-generation children, we maintained our silence for forty years.

A turning point came in 1981 at the First World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem. I heard Rabbi Israel Meier Lau state that at age eight he was the youngest survivor of Buchenwald. It was like a bolt of lightning. He was eight years old, I was

---

<sup>3</sup> The author's own estimates, based on the work of Deborah Dwork in *Children with a Star*. She estimated that 11 per cent of Jewish children alive in 1939 survived the war, but that figure includes children spirited out of Europe on Kindertransports and rescued prior to 1 September 1939.

five, and my cousins were six and nine. We were all child Holocaust survivors. Within a year, I helped found the Child Holocaust Survivors' Group of Los Angeles, organised a panel of child survivor psychiatrists and psychologists to speak at the American Psychiatric Association meetings in 1984, and served on the Advisory Committee for the First International Gathering of Child Survivors in New York in 1991. About 1,600 people attended; most were children who had survived in hiding, along with a smaller number of child concentration camp survivors.

We child survivors had found our voice and we had found each other. We were the only ones who truly understood the impact of those terrible years. We were pursued by our memories. Not pleasant recollections of childhood, but memories encompassing darkness and fear, hunger and cold, and the endless grief and mourning for lost family and lost childhood.

Since then, we have gathered annually under the auspices of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust and their Descendants. We have met in Los Angeles and Toronto, in Prague and Amsterdam, in Montreal and Jerusalem, in Houston and Cracow.

Together, we tackle the issues that plague us: the meaning of faith, the struggle with our identity, the intrusion of fragments of memories and the nightmares. These nightmares, which we seldom mention, never go away. Mine reek of death. Death remains close to those who survived. My mother discovered late in life that her parents and little sister had been hiding in a hole dug into frozen ground in a forest in Poland. Local Poles discovered them and murdered them with shovels and axes. From that point, I was burdened with the thought of who was the first to die. Did 13-year-old Raisel, my aunt, see her parents murdered, or were they witness to their daughter's death? How were such things possible? I remain haunted by their absence.

Throughout the Holocaust, children were burned alive in pits. They, along with their families, were driven into wooden synagogues

and set on fire. Others were buried alive. Babies were killed in ways too brutal for words, words that I cannot speak. And this was done by people inspired by teachings from the pulpits in the churches they frequented.

As a consequence, perhaps we survivors have come to view death differently. My father never set foot in a Jewish cemetery, not even for the burial of friends. He suffered from an overdose of death. Elie Wiesel, author, Nobel Prize recipient and survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, captured the essence when he was asked about his readjustment to life. He said, "Our educators after the war thought they had to help us adjust to life. Our problem was how to adjust to death. Death was an everyday phenomenon, we were used to death. We woke up with corpses. After the war we had to develop a new relationship of respect, awe and fear in the presence of death".<sup>4</sup> How true. Death had lost its meaning. What is the meaning of the murders of 1.5 million Jewish children? What is the meaning of the murders of nearly one million Rwandans in 100 days, a rate of some ten thousand per day?<sup>5</sup> The meaninglessness of the killings is intensified by the arrogance of the killers.

As one survivor in my programme once confided, "I must tell you something. In Poland, in my village, the Germans arrived. One with a camera posed a little girl for a photo. She was, of course, Jewish, the daughter of a friend of mine. But she had blue eyes and curly, blonde hair. He placed her by a tree, gave her an apple, walked away, turned and shot her in the head. The apple fell. He picked it up wiped it, and ate it. I can still hear the crunching". It is the meaninglessness of these murders that must be addressed.

His Excellency Richard Sezibera, M.D., former Ambassador of Rwanda to the United States, addressed the Houston Forum on "Children and Genocide" that formed part of our annual gathering

---

4 "Children during the Holocaust", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005142>.

5 Kigali Memorial Centre, <http://www.kigalimemorialcentre.org/old/genocide/index.html>.



of child Holocaust survivors in 2001. He stated, "Memory is the highest, and perhaps the most meaningful tribute one can pay to the victims of genocide. Those who commit genocide do not only intend to kill, but to erase their victims from the collective memory of the world". He continued, "We survive, and we remember. We heal and we become agents of healing. For personifying this, I salute all the survivors of the Holocaust."<sup>6</sup>

I am so proud that Holocaust survivors have spoken out and have been faithful to memory. We have struggled to find meaning and thereby enabled others to speak of their own tragedies. Our insistence on preserving memory has not prevented other genocides, but perhaps has served as a reminder for those in power, making it harder for the killers to kill. It is clear that we must remember that which we would rather forget. But we cannot; we are not allowed to forget. We must not participate in the murder of memory, the ultimate objective of the murderers.

We must teach, and that confers the awesome responsibility to veracity and truth. Teachers cannot talk of Anne Frank and her belief in the goodness of mankind without including details of her betrayal and gruesome death in Bergen-Belsen. We do not know what she might have said had she survived. And we must pursue justice. For in genocidal murders, the perpetrators have not only killed and left behind wounded survivors, but they have torn the fabric of human society.

We must remember our losses. The murdered Jewish children have left a tremendous void. We will never know what they might have contributed to human existence. But we can guess. Of the 1,000

---

**We have struggled to find meaning and thereby enabled others to speak of their own tragedies. Our insistence on preserving memory has not prevented other genocides, but perhaps has served as a reminder for those in power, making it harder for the killers to kill.**

---

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard Sezibera, "From the Holocaust to Healing the World", edited by Stephen Johnson (Houston Holocaust Museum, 2003).

children found in Buchenwald on 11 April 1945, 426 were brought to Ecouis, France to recover. That small group alone produced Rabbi Israel Meier Lau, recently Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel; his brother Naftalie Lavie, a former Israeli Consul to New York; Rabbi Menashe Klein; the physicist Kalman Kalikstein; many physician-specialists in the United States and France; medical directors of hospitals; numerous teachers and businessmen; and, of course, Nobel Laureate Professor Elie Wiesel. Few, if any, became a burden in the countries where they settled. Not one exacted revenge unless revenge includes the successful recapture of a meaningful life against overwhelming odds.

We observe the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust each year, reminding us what is possible when racism and prejudice run wild. In remembering the Shoah, we ensure that all those who deny this tragic event in order to write their own fictional version are exposed for the world to see. No longer can a fascist leader with mass murder in mind dismiss his critics, as did Hitler, with "Who remembers the Armenians?" We have chosen to keep hopes and dreams alive for our people, as well as our children and grandchildren. For surely we have learned that hatred directed towards the Jewish people never stops with Jews. We are your warning, we elderly children now grown old. Listen to us carefully. We carry a message from over there.

Please see page 116 for discussion questions



Petr Ginz was just 14 years old when he was separated from his family and sent to the Terezin Ghetto. He wrote four novels, a diary and produced hundreds of works of art. One of these is shown here, created before he was murdered at Auschwitz at age 16.

Petr Ginz (1928-1944) Night Blossoms, Linoleum-cut.

Credit: Collection of the Yad Vashem Art Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of Otto Ginz, Haifa



Children's identification card issued by the German police to Inge Engelhard, in which she has been given the middle name of "Sara" and declared stateless. This card was used in lieu of a passport when Inge entered England on a Kindertransport and was stamped by immigration authorities in Harwich.

Photo Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The views or opinions expressed in this journal, and the context in which the images are used, do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of, nor imply approval or endorsement by, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

## My Journey as a Child Holocaust Survivor

### Discussion questions

1. As outlined by Dr. Krell, what did Jewish children experience during the Holocaust? Why would perpetrators of genocide target children in particular?
2. Dr. Krell quotes Professor Elie Wiesel who said, "Our educators after the war thought they had to help us adjust to life. Our problem was how to adjust to death." What challenges did child Holocaust survivors face re-adjusting to society?
3. Much of the discussion paper focuses on the power of memory. Why is memory so important? What is the relationship between memory and healing? How can we better preserve the memory of those who have lived through genocide?
4. Dr. Krell combines a very personal narrative with statistics on the Holocaust. What does this combination accomplish? How do both aspects of the discussion paper complement one another?
5. What message do child Holocaust survivors, now grown, have for future generations? Why is it important that child Holocaust survivors tell their stories?