

# Recovering from genocidal Trauma

## An information and practice guide for working with Holocaust survivors

Mike Cohen  
The Suburban

As the daughter of Auschwitz and Lodz Ghetto survivors, Myra Giberovitch has devoted much of her life to the Holocaust. She has done so as a community activist, professional social worker, researcher, educator and community layperson. With the release of her new book *Recovering from Genocidal Trauma*, a comprehensive guide for understanding Holocaust survivors, she has been able to provide a unique approach towards those individuals who lived through this dark period in human history.

Recovering from Genocidal Trauma is already being touted by Jewish community leadership here as an essential tool for anyone who studies, interacts, lives or works with survivors of mass atrocity. "It is a comprehensive guide to understanding Holocaust survivors and responding to their needs," Giberovitch says.

"In the late 1980s I started the first community-based social service for Holocaust survivors in Canada," Giberovitch writes. "Over the course of the next 25 years, as I endeavored to address the needs of hundreds of Holocaust survivors and their families in the Montreal Jewish community, this book took shape. It is the culmination of my life's work."

Giberovitch uses auto-ethnography in an accessible style to record professional experiences and a socio-cultural and historical context illustrated by her family's journey in prewar, wartime and postwar years. She employs a strengths-based practice philosophy that begins by listening to and learning from Holocaust survivors. In the book she draws upon current research and practice information from social work, sociology, medicine, neuroscience and gerontology to develop innovative service models and programs, apply practical techniques, and use individual and group interventions to empower survivors as they recover from tragedy and adversity.

"My life's work has its beginnings in early childhood," Giberovitch says, alluding to being a daughter of survivors. "My mother was the only survivor from an extended family of 80 members. At that time, they lived in a displaced persons camp in Bavaria, Germany, just after the war. I became the first child born in my parents' circle of friends. Fortunately, I have a few baby pictures from this period, something very rare. I am dressed impeccably in little dresses hand-made by a dressmaker in the DP camp. In some pictures, I hold a doll and in others, I

stand in a rattan baby carriage. My parents often conveyed the satisfaction they, and their friends, derived from seeing an abundance of baby carriages in the camp. My birth transformed my parents' lives and brought them joy because I symbolized their survival and hope for the future. Helping people change and making a positive difference continues to inspire my passion today."

Much of the book revolves around the limitations of viewing survivors from solely a pathological perspective, providing a balanced perception by discussing adaptation and strengths, vulnerabilities related to war experiences, and challenges of aging. "This book is a valuable resource for anyone who studies, interacts, lives or works with survivors of mass atrocity," she says.

The book is divided into five parts: international human rights legislation; a theoretical overview of trauma and its consequences; a discussion of empowerment philosophy; professional interventions and responses to survivors encountering common issues, triggers and emotional reactions; and major milestones survivors accomplished on their journey towards recovery that are applicable to other survivor populations.

Topics discussed include mass atrocity crimes and international human rights legislation; survivor contributions to society; the therapeutic relationship; psychological and environmental factors that mitigate trauma and aid psycho-social adjustment; interaction between trauma and aging; group services; intergenerational programs; environmental triggers; therapeutic interventions to emotional reactions; vicarious trauma and self-care; and recommendations for a national resource for mass atrocity survivors. There are also case examples, a glossary and comprehensive references.

"I would like more people to develop a balanced perception of mass atrocity survivors," Giberovitch says. "Increased awareness can provide a fresh perspective when understanding and interacting with survivors. I follow a strengths-based philosophy with both individuals and groups. It provides me with a foundation for my practice and workshops. Listening to survivors and learning from them gives me valuable insights that influence my approach when responding to their needs."

At last week's book launch



Myra Giberovitch

there were members from the Rwandan community in the audience who are struggling to recover from their genocide. Sandra Gasana, one of the panelists from Page Rwanda spoke about the applicability of this book to their community. "This is a very exciting time for me," Giberovitch says. "I am receiving encouraging feedback about the book from the different audiences for which it was intended. Most impor-

tantly, I am hearing from survivors who tell me they feel heard and validated. Some are purchasing copies to give to their children so they can understand them better."

Giberovitch will speak at Beth Zion Congregation (5740 Hudson) in Côte St. Luc on Tuesday, April 29 (7:30 p.m.). For more information about the book go to [www.myragiberovitch.com](http://www.myragiberovitch.com).

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