Learn from survivors' strengths, author says

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Myra Giberovitch's business card introduces her as a "genocidal trauma specialist."

She's earned that title after a lifetime of observing how Holocaust survivors overcame their pasts, including over 25 years as a professional social worker and researcher.

Far from depressing, Giberovitch has found her work inspiring and life-affirming.

In the vast majority of cases, the survivors coped, even excelled. And they rebuilt their lives with virtually no outside support, not even from the Jewish community, she said. Instead, they relied on their own inner resources and each other.

Giberovitch is the author of *Recovering From Genocidal Trauma: An Information and Practice Guide for Working with Holocaust Survivors* (University of Toronto Press).

The key word is "Recovering." Giberovitch firmly believes people can and do overcome the effects of mass atrocities and that professionals should be more cognizant of that resiliency.

Giberovitch is the daughter of survivors and was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany after World War II. Both of her parents came out of the Lodz Ghetto and Auschwitz death camp.

While primarily a manual for anyone working with the now aged survivors or having an academic interest in the subject, the book is also something of a memoir for Giberovitch, who feels she learned far more from survivors than she could ever give to them.

The book is dedicated to those who "overcame the most severe forms of persecution and went on to become productive members of society.

"Your survival is an example of the human spirit's ability to adapt, rebuild and recover from mass atrocity crimes."

Although Montreal became the home of thousands of survivors, Giberovitch says there were no community-based services specifically tailored to them until the mid-1980s – 40 years after the war, something she discovered while completing her social work internship at McGill University.

She initiated the first such social service program in Canada and, in 1997, she founded the Holocaust survivors' support services and drop-in centre at the Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors, which she still supervises.

"Most of the services discussed in my book started by listening directly to survivors," she said.

"Conventional perceptions of Holocaust survivors, as reflected in the mental health literature, focus on their pathology and deficits. Such perceptions often lead to assumptions that survivors are permanently scarred

Myra Giberovitch

and cannot recover.

"I view survivors not as debilitated victims, but as competent, adaptive, resourceful and resilient individuals who cope as best they can with their Holocaust experiences and present-day challenges."

But she does not minimize their suffering, and many do, indeed, show classic post-traumatic stress symptoms, which have exacerbated as they age.

Giberovitch simply argues that we should not look exclusively at the negative because that would be to deny their resilience.

"There are many books and articles about the theory and pathology of severe trauma and its clinical treatment, but not much information about survivors' adaptation or programs focused on recovery."

Giberovitch hopes *Recovering From Genocidal Trauma* will fill that gap by focusing on the strengths of survivors.

This approach begins with listening to survivors talk about their experiences – before, during and after the war. One thing Giberovitch learned early in her research is that survivors do want – and need – to talk.

The models provided in the book, she believes, may be applicable to survivors of other, more recent genocides. She has received feedback that some of the techniques would also be useful for those recovering from other types of trauma, such as physical or sexual abuse.

Many, often for the first time, are turning to social service and health-care professionals for help.

Giberovitch said it is vitally important that these professionals understand these people's history, why they react to certain apparently benign situations with such apprehension, and how their needs are different from those of others the same age. ∎