

Grief can resurface as Holocaust survivors grow older

A support group in Côte-des-Neiges helps Holocaust survivors cope with advancing age, a time when the deaths of family and friends and the loss of autonomy can rekindle past horrors

BY MONIQUE POLAK, SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE OCTOBER 18, 2014



Myra Giberovitch, takes notes while listening to holocaust survivors, Henia Bronet, Joseph Fishman, far right, Davi Marcus, far left, Ted Bolgar, with cap and Max Kulik during s Cummings centre on Tuesday September 09, 2014.

Photograph by: Pierre Obendrauf, The Gazette

At 92, Eva Bass is fiercely independent. "I live on my own. I manage without help," she says. But Bass's face crumbles when she recalls how her mother, sister and aunt were murdered in Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp where Bass was imprisoned during the Holocaust.

Notorious Nazi doctor Josef Mengele sent the three women to the gas chambers almost immediately after they arrived in Auschwitz. "I still feel it today when my mother started to cry," said Bass. "Her last words were to me. She said: 'My dear child! My dear child!'"

Every Tuesday morning since 1997, Bass has been attending a drop-in group for Holocaust survivors. The two-and-a-half-hour sessions are held at the Cummings Centre, a seniors centre in Côte-des-Neiges, and facilitated by social worker Myra Giberovitch, herself a daughter of Holocaust survivors.

"I come here because I know the people here and they know me," said Bass. 1374

In its early years, the drop-in group had nearly 70 members. These days, attendance ranges between 30 and 35 people, reflecting the fact that Holocaust survivors, who represent one of the oldest populations to have experienced genocidal trauma, are dying out.

Working with Holocaust survivors — listening to their stories and helping them cope — has become Giberovitch's life work. An adjunct professor of social work at McGill University, she recently published a book called *Recovering From Genocidal Trauma* (University of Toronto Press), a practical guide to understanding and helping survivors of mass atrocity.

Giberovitch has observed that old age can be especially difficult for Holocaust survivors.

"Aging and associated challenges such as the loss of autonomy and the deaths of family and friends may remind survivors of their wartime experiences, triggering feelings of grief, vulnerability and powerlessness," she said.

One memory in particular continues to plague Ted Bolgar, now 90. The incident took place when Bolgar, who was born in Hungary, was 20, and he and his friends were forced to march from the Warsaw Ghetto to Dachau, a distance of more than 1,000 kilometres. "We had practically no food or water. We passed a river and the Nazis let us drink. There was a deaf mute boy with us. We had been protecting him. The guards whistled for him, but he didn't hear. So they sent their dogs after him. In the end, the river took him away," said Bolgar.

Bolgar only joined the drop-in group in 2013, after hearing about it from his 98-year-old swimming partner, another Holocaust survivor who has since died. "She said, 'It's interesting.' I have aqua-fit until 9 on Tuesdays at the Westbury Y and I meet a friend at noon, so I needed something to do," he said. But Bolgar continues to attend — and not only because the drop-in group suits his schedule.

"I feel better when I'm able to talk about what happened."

Giberovitch said she believes that in some ways, Holocaust survivors relate best and feel most at ease with others who have undergone similar experiences. In her book, she describes "a chasm between survivors and the rest of the community which continues today." As a survivor she interviewed for her book put it: "Everyone looked at survivors like being people from another planet."

The drop-in group was Giberovitch's idea. Even as a child growing up in Montreal, she was aware of the support her parents found in other survivors and in mutual aid societies, known as *landsmanshaften*, created by Polish Holocaust survivors.

"We grew up in this community of Holocaust survivors. I had surrogate aunts and uncles to whom I was not bound by blood," Giberovitch explained. She modelled the drop-in group on those *landsmanshaften*.

Participants of the weekly meetings often direct the agenda, bringing up subjects that concern them ranging from cuts to services for seniors and world politics to their memories of the Holocaust. Funding for the drop-in group — for such things as room rental, social workers' salaries and some refreshments — comes partly from the German government through an organization called the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which aims to secure compensation and restitution for survivors of the Holocaust and heirs of victims. (<http://www.claimscon.org/>)

Sometimes, environmental triggers can cause distress for Holocaust survivors. Ten years ago, following surgery, Côte-St-Luc resident Bettina Lewy Bayreuther, now 88, had a bad reaction to anesthetic and panicked when orderlies came to subdue her. "I said, 'Don't come in here! You're like the Nazis!'" Bayreuther recounted during an interview. She has attended the drop-in group for nearly a decade. Before that, she saw Giberovitch privately to deal with feelings of isolation and depression. Born in Berlin, Bayreuther and her family fled Germany for Spain in 1933. They lived as refugees there and later in Italy, South America and Morocco before settling in Montreal.

"Something draws me to the drop-in group. Perhaps it's that others have suffered perhaps even more than I have," Bayreuther said.

Last year, Giberovitch received a call from the Donald Berman Maimonides Geriatric Centre in Côte St-Luc, after one of the facility's residents, a Holocaust survivor, began screaming in the shower.

"She was afraid gas would come out of the nozzle," said Giberovitch, who recommended that a staff member put their hand under the shower to show the woman that it was safe, and also to reassure her that what she was remembering had happened long ago.

At 90, Henia Bronet is still well enough to walk from her home in Snowdon to the Cummings Centre on Tuesday mornings. A survivor of the Majdanek, Birkenau and Auschwitz concentration camps, began

attending the drop-in group in 2002. Joining the group led Bronet to begin to speak more openly about her experiences during the Holocaust. Bronet, whose parents and two siblings perished during the Holocaust, says that as she grows older, she finds it increasingly difficult to accept what happened.

"Now, there's nothing to look forward to. You don't want to look back. Now I think, 'Why did it have to happen to my mother and my father and why did it have to happen to anyone? How could it happen and nobody stood up?'"

But even in those dark days in the concentration camps, Bronet benefited from the support of friends, and she credits those friendships for helping her to survive. "I had lager sisters," she said, referring to the friends she made in Auschwitz. "I shared my bed with another girl. We shared every piece of bread we ever got," Bronet recalled.

In her work with Holocaust survivors, Giberovitch uses what she calls "a strengths perspective," encouraging individuals to recognize their own courage and resilience, and to see themselves as survivors rather than victims.

Ted Bolgar has visited hundreds of schools, mostly in Quebec, to share his Holocaust experience with young people. He has also gone on the March of the Living, an educational program that brings students from around the world to Auschwitz, a dozen times.

This year, Bolgar met with survivors of the Rwandan genocide at a Concordia University event. "They said they felt guilty to have survived. I said, 'No, I am not guilty. I didn't kill anybody.' With all due respect, I feel the real resistance was to survive," said Bolgar.

Giberovitch's mother, Fela Zylberstazn, died in 1997; her father, Moishe Grachnik, is 95 and lives at the Donald Berman Maimonides Geriatric Centre in Côte-St-Luc. Though he is exhibiting early signs of dementia, Grachnik's memories of Auschwitz remain clear. He tells his story in Yiddish, and Giberovitch translates: "I had brought a sack of potatoes with me. A Nazi guard tried to take it away. I said, 'No, this is food.'" Another prisoner said to me, 'If you don't give it to him — and then he pointed at the smoke coming out of a crematorium' — that's where you'll go.'"

Grachnik is proud of his daughter's work with survivors and of the book she has produced.

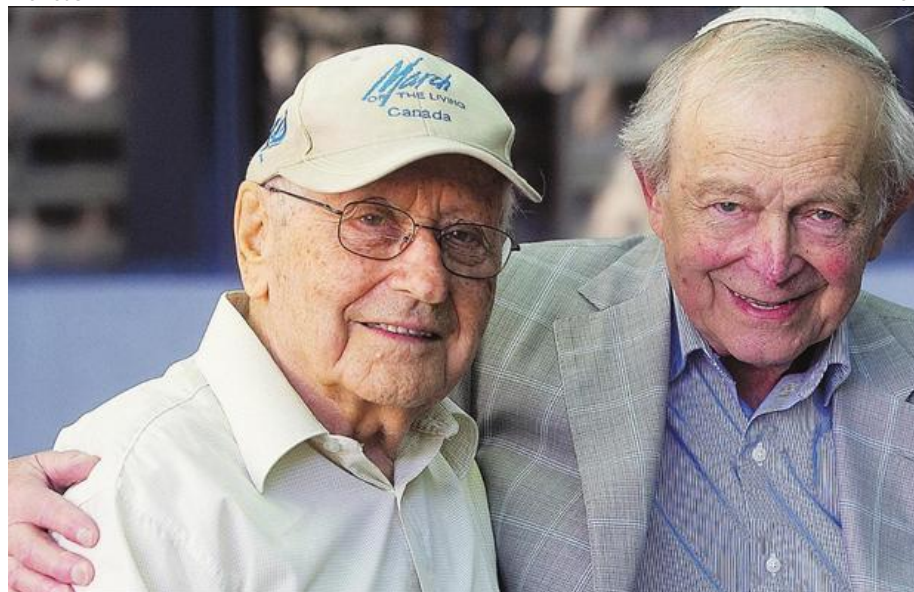
"The work is good. Lots of people were left after the Holocaust. It's important to work with them. It's important that the next generation should remember what happened," he said.

Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who would like information about joining the drop-in group should contact the Cummings Centre's in-take department at 514-342-1234. To learn more about Giberovitch's work, visit her website at <http://www.myragiberovitch.com>

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Holocaust survivors Ted Bolgar, left, and Max Kulik attend a drop-in support group held at the Cummings Centre
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