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The Holocaust, the Catskills, and the Creative Power of Loss

BY HOLLI LEVITSKY

My parents took their honeymoon in 1946, at the Nevele Country Club in Sullivan County, New York. The Catskills beckoned the young couple, as they had welcomed tens of thousands of Jews, young and old, American and immigrant, families and singles, for decades. Like my mother and her family, the Jews vacationing in the Catskill Mountains came primarily from New York City. In this city, and this America, it was expected that my mother's friends' parents—like her own—had thick foreign accents, spoke fluent Yiddish at home, and worked hard to succeed. One sign of success was the ability to take a summer holiday in the Catskill Mountains. Families and close friends or neighbors might share the cost of a rented van for the two-hour ride from Brooklyn to Sullivan County, and then rent rooms or cabins at the same bungalow colony or *kuchalayn* (boarding house). My mother remembers her first *kuchalayn,* in Ellenville, as a large farm with chickens and hayrides, and her father—like the other fathers—coming up only on weekends.

The author's mother, Sylvia Levitsky, with her brother in 1931 at a *kuchalyn* in Sullivan County. *All photos courtesy of the author, Holli Levitsky.*

The American and immigrant Jews, who had made the many hotels, bungalow colonies, and farms of Ulster and Sullivan counties their summer retreats year after year, were always looking for family, for *landsmanshaftn* (society of immigrants from the same town or region), for a home away from home. As a second home to generations of Jews, the Catskill Mountains became a place where a Jewish family could bond *as* a Jewish family—that is, they could practice the culture of Judaism without the pressure to assimilate. Families spending summers together with other Jews could anticipate re-creating—and recreating with—these Jewish friends year after year. The Jewish threads of their winter lives might seem to be slowly unraveling through their increasingly secular lives, but the Catskills remained essentially a subculture that they renewed each year, as yet another summer of Jews were beckoned there. Because the Catskill Mountains summoned one with the promise of prolonged engagement and deeply felt connections—replacing the congestion of the city for the wide open spaces of the Mountains— children and adults mingled in acts of *community:* feeling *nachis* as the children paraded their gifts through the weekend talent shows, cooking meals together in the common kitchen of the *kuchalayn*, meeting for card games every evening. For the parents, each day must have been another rare and wonderful moment when time stands still amid the deep well of family love, safely netted by a sense of community so complete it seemed impossible to find elsewhere.

By the time my mother's modern Orthodox family took their summer holidays in Ellenville, or Monticello, or Woodridge, staying at chicken farms or rooming houses, it was already a

segregated world. Lost was the innocence of the Founding Father's declaration that "All men are created equal." Jews were restricted from participating fully in American society in a number of ways—they experienced professional bias and discrimination by hotels, country clubs, and resorts; neighborhoods and cities limited or denied access to Jews hoping to purchase houses or land. Influential Americans, such as Henry Ford, were publicly denouncing Jews as either international financiers intent on world domination or godless Bolsheviks who undermined American policy and morality. Americans tuning into their radios during the 1930s might hear Father Coughlin's weekly anti-Semitic broadcasts from his Detroit pulpit; they might open their *Dearborn Independent* and read "Mr. Ford's Page" with its anti-Semitic commentary (Shandler 1999). Those Jews who returned each year to the Catskill Mountains—primarily from New York, but also from Detroit, Philadelphia, or Baltimore--were seeking escape not just from the thick heat of another urban summer; they were hoping to escape from the darkening forces of the era's anti-Semitic proscriptions.

II.

A new kind of Jewish immigrant community was born from and after World War II, and they, too, purchased or leased colonies together. They, too, were looking for family and a home away from home. They, too, shared a past—but their past was in a lost and now vanished world. They were stressed not only from the terrifying and exhausting act of losing their homes and families; they were traumatized from experiences that defied comprehension. For the most part, each survivor had undergone uniquely horrifying traumatic experiences during the war years. They may have survived in concentration or work camps, or in hiding—either literally or with an Aryan identity—in ghettos; they may have escaped to a safer city or country. But wherever they were, they were hunted by Nazis or their collaborators, marked for death because they were Jews. This community lost everything, yet citizens of that community survived. Where were they to go? What would they do with their lives?

Survivors of the Holocaust asked themselves these questions. When the war ended, they were young. But they were also alone. Where were they to go? Germany and Poland offered little more than bad memories and remnants of anti-Semitism. When the fugitives and survivors from Hitler's mass murder of European Jews began to come to America, they were confronted with a number of challenges; they did not know what to expect. Why was it so difficult for this wave of refugees to settle into their new lives in the United States? Why was assimilation into American Jewish life so complex for Holocaust survivors? Just as earlier Jewish immigrants held widely divergent views about Jewish practice, ritual, faith, and culture, and certainly about the issue of assimilation versus separatism, the views held by these refugees also spanned the spectrum of Jewish belief and practice. And although the US was never free of its own nativist attitudes, and anti-Semitism often followed on the crest of such waves of new-Jewish immigration, the post-WWII surge of Jewish DP (they were first called "displaced persons") immigration posed special problems.

In the first years after the war, 140,000 European Jews immigrated to America. Where they settled was usually not their choice, as special agencies had been created to deal with the onslaught of new refugees, or DPs, and their housing and employment needs. The Truman Directive facilitated certain shifts in procedures for dealing with this enormous surge in immigration, such as allowing organizations, in addition to individuals, the right to provide affidavits for DPs. The American Jewish community created the United Service for New Americans (USNA), a national agency, and the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) in New York City, to direct the resettlement process. So, in addition to quotas and other restrictions imposed upon the immigrants, they had to deal with newly developed agencies whose workers, although well intentioned, had no experience treating such monumental financial, legal, emotional, and physical needs.

Sylvia Levitsky and friend in 1939 in the Catskills.

Where did these 140,000 new immigrants (they were not called "survivors" until the 1960s) settle? What was this resettlement process like? Were they happy in their new homes? Public perception was that, in fact, the new refugees were happy to be given a second chance and adjusted relatively easily to American life. But accounts by survivors themselves, and case studies from the early years of their new lives by social workers and others, suggest otherwise. Holocaust survivors tried to adjust to what might be considered "normal" family life, but attempts were colored by the intensity of the trauma, which did not disappear with the end of the war and the liberation of the camps (Cohen 2007, 173). Although more than half of the refugees settled in New York City—which already hosted the majority of American Jews—over 40 percent settled elsewhere in the US, either voluntarily or more likely because of the mandate of the Displaced Persons Act, which hoped to avoid a large concentration of refugees in major urban areas (Cohen 2007, 174). Within the Jewish community itself, there were tensions between the established American Jewish population and the newly displaced persons. Years earlier, American Jews worried about the large influx of Eastern European Jews and their

Sylvia Levitsky in 1945 in the Catskills.

"greenhorn" ways; these new immigrants posed similar problems with language, clothing, food, and other "old country" habits. American Jews felt sympathy and compassion for their brethren, but feared that too many Jews would provoke more anti-Semitism. Thus, it was with ambivalence that many American Jews hoped the displaced persons would settle elsewhere, perhaps in Palestine (Cohen 2007, 175).

Many survivors characterize the tension between survivors and American Jews in this way: they know, as the French writer Charlotte Delbo wrote that "Auschwitz is so deeply etched in my memory that I cannot forget one moment of it" (Delbo 1990, xi). They have no choice but to return to the war years, watching conversations meander to that place time and again, feeling the loss each and every time. They could tell horrific stories of those years as if they were commonplace, as if escaping death was a trip to the corner store for milk. Who could better understand the need to talk about the terrors than those who also still lived with those terrors?

By their very act of living, survivors tell us that they survived. "All of us are born," they say, "but we survived." When you lose your family, you make friends with those who are like family, who have experienced the same loss and seek the same comfort. Survivors are a culture, a people who share a deep sense of gratefulness without forgetting for one second all that they have lost. The pleasure in being with other survivors was to be able to feel the loss and then to speak it and share it, and in some ways, to revel in their difference from the others.

Still, the public face of the postwar immigration surge has long shown the happy state of refugees settling in the US after their terrifying experiences. Americans, in general, were under the impression that bringing these displaced European refugees to our democratic republic was enough, and that once settled here, they could quickly return to being father, mother, wife, husband, son, daughter. But this attitude sadly contradicts the reality of life for most, if not all, of these survivors. For they were survivors, and being survivors meant they had had to leave their many dead, mostly murdered relatives, friends, and neighbors behind—graveless, and without mourners. They had witnessed the worst atrocities humans were capable of committing. And then they had to go on living.

Survivor Ruth Klüger, author of the 2001 memoir*, Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, writes that when she first came to the US as a displaced person, her American aunt told her, "You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe. You have to make a new beginning. You have to forget what they did to you. Wipe it off like chalk from a blackboard" (Klüger 2003, 177). Klüger rejected that invitation to forget, as evidenced by her widely successful memoir, published first in German as *weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (1992), and selling over 250,000 copies in Europe before being rewritten by the author in English for a specifically American audience. The widespread belief was that survivors were better off leaving the past behind—neither thinking nor talking about what happened in Europe. It would also be better for Americans—Jews in particular—to have the Jewish refugees start over as Americans, leaving the baggage of the European disaster at the door of importation.

But even as family, friends, caseworkers, and others urged the survivors to forget the past and what was lost, we know now that it was not possible for victims of such trauma to simply leave everything behind and start over. Survivors tried to tell their stories to fellow Jews, but found little sympathy and little interest among them in hearing about the atrocities, which some found too gruesome and others simply could not believe.

Perhaps even more startling were the social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists who treated the survivors' traumatic experiences and symptoms as if they were within the normal range of human experience. There were a number of reasons why people in the helping professions didn't or couldn't address the particular mental and physical health issues of survivors, and why the American Jewish public was equally resistant to offer the kind of help they needed. Among the reasons were 1) guilt over being safe in America while the Jews of Europe were being murdered; 2) the first workers' responses in the displaced persons camps indicated a triumphant physical survival of even the most war-torn individuals—but without regard to these survivors' emotional fitness;

3) the professional norms of the time in the healing professions were Freudian in nature—which meant any mental health diagnosis was filtered through the patient's childhood developmental difficulties, and thus treatment would include the analysis of concepts pertaining to the survivor's prewar personality—and absurd in retrospect; and 4) an inability to confront the depths of the Holocaust's destruction. All of these reasons facilitated a gulf between the American Jewish community and its professionals and the survivors (Cohen 2007).

Moreover, countless studies have shown that the massive physical and emotional disruption of the lives of Holocaust survivors have continued to affect them to the end of their lives. Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer refers to their present lives as "a life after 'death' called survival, and a life within death for which we have no name, only the assurance of witnesses…" (Langer 1991, 35). Clearly, the trauma of the Holocaust caused an irreparable rupture in the memories of survivors and became the focal point for their identities.

III.

The gulf continued to widen over time, as survivors tried to tell their stories but found little sympathy and little interest in hearing about the Holocaust. And so, for several decades after the war ended and the refugees had settled into their new homes, they looked for ways to replace what was lost. They turned to American culture, which seemed so successfully to shape identity, to *tell them* how to become more part of the American victory, and less part of Jewish victimhood. If they tuned in to their televisions on May 27, 1953, they might have seen survivor Hanna Block Kohner unveiled as the honoree on one of the most popular entertainment programs of the 1950s: *This Is Your Life*. They would have heard the host, legendary Ralph Edwards, muse that Hanna seemed more like a "young American girl just out of college, not at all like a survivor of Hitler's cruel purge of German Jews." She was an American hero, washed clean of any Jewish particularism. They might also have watched their televisions with great interest in 1961, as the Eichmann trial unfolded in Israel, preparing to hear the totality of the final solution against the Jews emerge, story by story. Instead, when they opened their *New York Times* or watched the CBS *Evening News*, the American press coverage presented the Holocaust as a universal tragedy, using the trial to raise, in a general way, moral questions about responsibility and the nature of evil.

How did they replace what was lost and essentially irreplaceable? How did they go on with their lives, in the face of this vacuum? For the survivors of Hitler's Europe, there was no way to replace all that had been taken from them. Indeed, in trying to recover their lives in this new land, they faced misunderstanding and frustration. The American and earlier immigrant Jews had a difficult time understanding the extent of the survivors' loss, since they either didn't know the world of Jewish Eastern Europe before the war, or left before it became a graveyard. How could the survivors' friends and neighbors, Jew or gentile, understand what it had been like to survive under those circumstances? In the lives of post-war American Jews, who were fearful of calling attention to themselves as Jews, conformity became the new religion. If assimilation cost them their identities, it was worth it not to stand out and face tacit, overt, and even deadly forms of anti-Semitism that the Jews had faced in Europe.

Even if they were not religious, conformity to American national identity—whatever it looked like at any given time—did not comfort the survivors. Each survivor had a harrowing and unique story about what they lost. And although what was lost differed from person to person, the imperative to tell the tale of that loss was common to most survivors. Reclaiming their lives meant seeking a community within which they would find affirmation and comfort, and some found that community in the Catskill Mountains, where together with other survivors, they could retreat from the (sometimes creepy) postwar cultural patriotism of their American brethren. They could be with those who were like family, friends who shared the worst moments of their lives together, in the same concentration camps, resistance units, and hiding places. They had escaped death and were still escaping, taking these summer holidays together as a way to elude the stares and questions and silence that surrounded them when their summer clothing revealed the tattoos, or when the past was inevitably brought up for

The author with other children at play outside the bungalows, Sullivan County, late 1950s–early 1960s.

The author's parents, Sylvia and Louis Levitsky, dancing in the Nevele Hotel during their honeymoon, 1946.

conversation and the war traumas were massaged again and again as they needed to be. Sometimes, even in such a bucolic setting, comfort came only when the like-minded were together, mulling over their shared pasts in complete understanding. What would they lose if they agreed to silence their cries? To dismiss the past as if it hadn't broken them? They knew they were cracked and broken. They still heard screams and cries for help they could not answer. They feared dogs, uniforms, the German language. They wandered around the open fleshy landscape, so similar to the mountains of their homeland, wielding their flashlights like weapons. And in the card games, bridge tournaments, and daily games of chess and checkers, over endless re-tellings of their stories, they found family, and home. The Catskills offered many Jewish European survivors of the Holocaust a world of their own within a larger world, for them without home.

On the East Coast, the Catskills' resorts that catered to survivors were destinations that might have mirrored the holidays of their former lives, save their stories of suffering and loss. They might have escaped the Nazis with nothing or almost nothing of their former life intact, but their pre-war lives had been rich with family, friendships, religion, culture, school, work, and holidays. If they had lived in Poland (not unlikely, since Poland's pre-war Jewish population of 3.3 million was the second highest in the world), they might have taken summer holidays in the quaint village of Kazimierz Dolny on the Vistula, or winter trips for mountain hiking and skiing to Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains.

Together in the ghettos, camps, and in hiding, survivors shared innumerable experiences that made them what one might call intimate strangers. They shared the hardships of hunger, thirst, disease, infestation, horrifying and cruel living situations, torture, the witnessing of atrocities towards others including loved ones, random selections for death or loss of liberty and uncertain future, and for most, loss of family, home, belongings, hair, clothing, and for the younger survivors, loss of childhood as well. In the bedlam of that world, tightly bonded friendships formed. It is not surprising that the survivors who survived together, or who were from similar areas, pursued life together afterwards.

How can those of us who were not there imagine the complicated and ongoing effects of the trauma on the postwar life of Holocaust survivors? From their early days as misunderstood DPs, the survivors found comfort in one another's shared experiences. The impulse to be together in the Catskill Mountains—or in social groups or l*andsmanshaftn*—came from the same desire for comfort.

Together, survivors talked about the past, sharing their darkest moments in the camps or in hiding, but also sharing details of their pre-war lives. Other survivors would know what it meant to have been born in the Polish towns of Bilgoraj or Lututów or the big cities of Lodz or Warsaw, and that their lives did not begin as Jewish victims of Hitler, but as human beings who were loved and wanted.

IV.

A survivor from Krakow, the cultural center of Poland, might have had something of a life not terribly unlike my mother's. Perhaps this survivor's European surroundings were a little more elegant, her friends more diverse, her interests and travels more sophisticated than my mother's first-generation American Jewish upbringing. Still, she would have watched Loretta Young and Greta Garbo at the movies and read *Gone With the Wind*. Her mother might have been glamorous—not old-fashioned, like my maternal grandmother. Like my mother, she might have had a sister and a brother, though her childhood might have been more privileged, with well-educated, modern parents, not immigrants who could barely speak the language and were superstitious. This survivor would have had housekeepers who cooked and cleaned for the family, beautiful clothing, holidays in the Tatra Mountains. My grandmother would have spent all day in the family's small kitchen, preparing gefilte fish and baking *mohn* cookies or *mandelbrot*, like

her many neighbors, and then taken their holidays together at a chicken farm in Sullivan County.

What was the survivor thinking as she moved from the ghetto to Plazsow and then to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, losing her family, friends, and home, and growing from child to young woman? The long days of swimming, hiking, and tennis and the winters of ice-skating, skiing and sledding were replaced by endless days of inconceivable hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and the fear of random beatings or death. She might have witnessed a girl her own age in unimaginable torment, as her mother was shot by camp commandant Amon Goeth. She might have watched her sister, naked and shorn, begging for her life from Dr. Mengele. She might have been on the same train to Bergen-Belsen as Anne Frank. Neither privilege nor youth kept this survivor out of harm's way. Her "coming of age" experiences were loss, humiliation, and the totem she shared with other Auschwitz survivors: the numbered arm tattoo.

One can only imagine the complicated and ongoing effects of this trauma on the postwar life of such survivors. Still, the natural vitality of the Catskills has always been presented as so forceful that it has the power to calm even a fevered soul. Cradled by the setting in the Catskills—their dramas and resolutions, their war and pre-war lives—are played out on its landscape; its boundaries—geographically but also emotionally—safely cushion the ride. You know you are safe because of those boundaries. In this bungalow colony, or lodge, or hotel, with these friends beside you, you can stretch yourself a little further, dance a little harder than usual. And you may return to your house and neighborhood the same person, but you will always have these friends in your heart—they will be your lost father's wide arms, your murdered husband's loving embrace. And, in time, family becomes a place in your heart that you carry with you always, even when the end comes. Even when you're on the other side, and the photographs are a postcard from a ghost story you once knew. Even when the rituals remain only in memory, revealing a place no longer there.

Nineteen forty-six was a popular year for weddings, and the Nevele was filled to capacity with newlyweds that post-World War II April. My parents moved west to my father's native Detroit, but during magical summers of my childhood, we drove in our borrowed station wagon to meet my Brooklyn cousins and aunts and uncles who continued to rent a bungalow each year. Our extended family would take meals together at a resort nearby. Always, there would be daylong activities for the kids and long lazy days for the grownups. Mothers would sit by the lake or the pool with their hair tied up in *shmatas,* smoking Kents, and playing Canasta or Spite and Malice or Michigan rummy, and fathers might take their sons out fishing, or more likely, take a long, hard summer nap. It was a world that seemed as if it would continue forever, a landscape larger than life itself. On that canvas sat the Yiddish-speaking *alte cockers*, the family tummlers, the smarty-pants cousins, all real then, all ghosts now. The clear, quiet lakes upon which rowboats held the promise of young love—or lost virginity. The elderly couples helping each other walk carefully to the next card game. In my mind, this multi-generational, self-enclosed Jewish subculture, full of loving, abundant, exuberant life, should have continued forever. Yet it no longer exists. It was, after all, another world. Was that era a flash point, always signaling its own demise? Perhaps it was.

The wealth and breadth of testimonial and imaginative responses to Jewish life and culture in the Catskills stand as a testament to the power of nurturing such worlds in memory. These shared memories offer lessons about the challenge of aging, the comfort of old friends, the power of memory, and the importance of embracing joy even in the face of mortality. This legacy is also the broader Catskills legacy and gives us an opportunity to dwell in that world again. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Shakespeare identified the need we all have to hold in memory that which was loved and lost: "Praising what is lost/Makes the remembrance dear," even as that loss is absolute and all consuming (Shakespeare, V, iii, 20).

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