



Forgiveness *Illuminated*

Holocaust survivors' testimonials shed light on our ability to recover after traumatic experiences, researcher finds

by Nancy Neff / photo Christina Murrey

A University of Texas at Austin scholar tries to capture what is behind one of the most impressive human qualities—the ability to pull yourself together and bounce back after grave setbacks and major crises. It doesn't get grimmer than enduring and surviving the Holocaust, so that's where **Dr. Roberta Greene** went to glean insights into resilience, forgiveness and survivorship.

What Greene found amazed her. She discovered that despite experiencing earlier extraordinary horror, many Holocaust survivors were resilient adults. They had taken action to make new lives out of the pain of the past. Lived with it, accepted it and as one survivor said, “go on, and go on and go on.”

“As people reach old age, many review their lives, attempt to resolve old conflicts and find new meaning in life's events,” said Greene, who holds the Louis and Ann Wolens Centennial Chair in Gerontology and Social Welfare in the School of Social Work.

“Amazingly, this unique group of older adults—who experienced unprecedented separation and loss during the Holocaust, living through horrors most of us cannot imagine—built new productive

lives. They are resilient survivors who were able to move into a better place, raise families, develop careers and contribute to their communities.”

The research results provide a better understanding of how the powers of forgiveness and natural healing contribute to recovery following trauma, Greene said.

“The finding that those who have experienced such trauma exhibit resilience is in itself remarkable,” she said.

The results of Greene's study differ from earlier research that focused on pathology. Greene's study of 133 survivors, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, contradicts this previous research that cast survivors as victims but fail to report on those who became resilient adults. While some survivors do exhibit lifelong problems, almost all in her study group did not.

“There is growing evidence that, regardless of their great loss, survivors and their families show remarkable resilience,” Greene said. “Many survivors are willing to abandon feelings of resentment

and negative judgment toward others. In fact, many appear to sustain a positive outlook and hope for the future.”

Two participants in Greene’s study summed up their feelings:

“Basically, I am a very loving person, very giving person. I was raised this way. How can I forget it? But life is beautiful and it’s forgiving.”

“The bottom line is that you survived and you do the best, and you tried everything to help, every problem to solve, but if you can’t help you have to live with it— you accept it and go on, and go on and go on.”

Greene’s study, “Forgiveness, Resiliency and Survivorship Among Holocaust Survivors,” replicates a research project originally conducted in Israel. Her team interviewed Holocaust survivors living in Texas, New York, New Jersey, California, Minnesota and Washington, D.C.

Study participants included 68 percent females and 32 percent males from the ages of 68 to 95 with the average age being 80 years old. About 41 percent were under age 80. Countries of origin were primarily Poland, Germany and Hungary. A majority of those interviewed spent the war in ghettos and concentration camps and others served in partisan groups, worked in labor camps or went into hiding.

Greene is an expert in gerontology and has studied resilience in older people for several years. In another research project, she examined older adults affected by Hurricane Katrina to learn more about survival strategies.

For the Holocaust research, Greene wanted to find out how survivors have experienced the sometimes challenging transition to the final stage of life.

She asked, “Have they relived the trauma of the Holocaust as they experience the aging process or have they exhibited resilience—the capacity to bounce back despite the exposure to severe risks? How have their Holocaust experiences affected subsequent life events and prepared them for old age? How relatively forgiving are they?”

The findings will enhance the work of mental health practitioners and inform understanding of the factors that buffer against the effects of adverse events, Greene pointed out.

“This will leave us better prepared to respond to traumatic events such as hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike and those on Sept. 11,” she said. “The insights garnered from interviewing this group of survivors can help morally and spiritually equip individual communities and even the country as a whole to deal with the critical events facing us in today’s uncertain world.”

To arrive at an understanding of Holocaust survivor’s resiliency, Greene examined critical events in survivors’ lives—family circumstances before and after World War II and the adaptive strategies undertaken during the Holocaust.

She wanted to learn which influences before the war, such as a warm, supportive family environment served as protective factors; which resilient behaviors were used during the war to survive ongoing trauma and milestones survivors met that suggested they remained competent or resilient after the war.

“To understand resilience, it is important to look at an individual’s life transitions, family configurations and changing social conditions,” Greene said.

Although resilience is sometimes thought of as a trait, it needs to be understood primarily as a process that evolves over time, she said. According to resilience theory, individuals who have experienced and lived through some traumatic event should not be viewed as passive victims, but rather as active survivors whose actions, life skills and internal resilience contribute to their physical and mental survival.

A positive personality, high self-esteem and family warmth and cohesion before, during and after the war could serve as protective factors, she said, adding that these factors may also include cultural values and ethnic group support that continued in concentration camps.



Dr. Roberta Greene of the School of Social Work is an expert in gerontology and has studied resilience in older people for several years. She says it is important to remember that resilience is a process that evolves over time.

Photo: Christina Murrey



Dr. Marilyn Armour

Photo: Marsha Miller

During the war, participants engaged in many adaptive and resilient behaviors such as trying to survive in family groups, Greene said. She found their stories often contained information about how they bartered for goods, exchanged favors, bribed guards and organized underground resistance units.

Sixty-four percent remembered resolving to live, 50 percent recalled making friends, 55 percent turned to others or banded together, 50 percent found ways to get extra food and 48 percent cared for others.

Greene found that although some Holocaust survivors reported feelings of anger and continuing disbelief in their old age, they also recounted that during their time in concentration camps they maintained personal bonds, made choices and “controlled their lives through their own special and sometimes secretive means.” For example, they set up governmental structure and schools, performed concerts and even wrote poetry.

“An analysis of the interviews showed positive themes—even within the camps,” Greene said. “Survivors talked of making a conscious decision to go on living, celebrate life and think positively about themselves.”

Resilience, said Greene, also is one’s ability to maintain coherence or continuity in one’s life story. It refers to a person’s individual and collective behaviors, circumstances and achievements that allow them to overcome adversity.

“Or, in the case of the Holocaust,” she said, “the actions a person might have taken to survive and find meaning—such as caring for another, joining an underground group or undertaking acts of sabotage.”

Study participants recalled:

“I was very strong in my belief that we would survive. I knew that I had to survive. I had a mission to survive. I did everything to do it. Whatever was necessary. In the Partisans, we killed. We blew up bridges.”

“We learned to survive by our wits. We learned to scrape and save whatever we could barter with others.”

“When I was at Buchenwald, I worked in the quarry close to the fields of carrots and potatoes. You would eat potatoes raw as there was no place to cook. . . . We would exchange and barter. We would steal from the trash can potato peelings or whatever was left over. We would steal at night.”

The survivors’ life patterns after the war also were positive. All the participants had married and all but six percent had children. In addition, they continued previously interrupted education, with 35 percent attending graduate schools. Careers established by the survivors ranged from business to dairy farming with some engaging in medical research or teaching.

Forgiveness also is increasingly being seen

as a means of emotional healing that enables people to reduce anxiety, anger and depression and enhance self-esteem and a sense of hope. **Dr. Marilyn Armour**, an associate professor in the School of Social Work, is co-investigator for Greene’s study.

A former family therapist, Armour knows a lot about carrying around pain and vengeance and the power of dialogue and forgiveness. Forgiveness is defined as the willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, condemnation and subtle revenge toward an offender or group who acts unjustly.



This fused glass, “Remember—One for Each Million,” was created by a participant in The University of Texas at Austin forgiveness and resilience study for the 10th anniversary of the Houston Holocaust Museum. The six candles represent the six million Jews who were murdered during the Nazi Holocaust. The artist and his brother were forced into the Piotrkow ghetto in Poland that supplied labor for a nearby glass factory.

“The whole idea of forgiveness is an intentional act by the victim,” said Armour. “It’s not something that just happens.”

She examined the study’s data to try and find out what the Holocaust survivors had done to make meaning out of what happened to them.

“What actions did they take during the Holocaust, after they arrived in the U.S. and now as they have gotten older?” she said. “What pursuits in life have mattered to them and perhaps given them a sense of power?”

Greene and other scholars believe the new millennium will be a time of political, economic, cultural and ideological changes that will dramatically affect how health and social services are defined. From the research, Greene plans to develop a survivorship or resilience-enhancing model that accounts for the phenomenon involving the ability to survive and recover from severe adverse events or traumas.

The model will discuss what actions and beliefs enhance the survival of individuals, families and communities, allowing them to deal with feelings of distress and then begin to heal.

“Given the far-reaching social and economic changes that are predicted to affect the aging population, there needs to be a shift in geriatric practice to models that help maintain the independence and well-being of older adults,” she said.

An understanding and implementation of a “resilience philosophy”—one that turns the attention of health and human service providers to people’s inner strength and enables them to successfully overcome the psychological impact of adverse events—can revolutionize clinical practice, Greene said.

“Although adverse events can threaten people’s psychological and social stability, the level of trauma and recovery vary by individual,” she said. “Some may suffer just a few lasting effects while others may experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Nonetheless, most people do show remarkable ‘self-righting tendencies’ or resilience—despite it all.” ✦

Nancy Neff, University Office of Public Affairs.

Photo: Christina Murrey

Fall 2009 Event

Holocaust Survivors: Stories of Resilience

Oct. 27, 2009

8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

UTOPIA Theatre, School of Social Work

Co-sponsored with Jewish Community Association of Austin and Texas Hillel

Dr. Roberta Greene, members of the research team and invited guests will present the findings of the study on “Forgiveness, Resilience and Survivorship among Holocaust Survivors,” funded by the John Templeton Foundation. The first of five symposia will be featured at The University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work UTOPIA Theatre on Oct. 27.

Among the panelists will be **William Meinecke**, United States Holocaust Museum Memorial historian; **Mary Lee Webeck**, Houston Holocaust Museum education director; and several Holocaust survivors who participated in the study. The event is open to health practitioners, educators, students, community organizations and agencies, Holocaust survivors and the general public. **CEUs Available:** Social Work, LPC, LMFT

Dissemination of findings also will be presented at other research sites in New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Dallas. Details of all symposia will be available as they are confirmed.

Contact the Office of Professional Development, **ssw-profdev@utlists.utexas.edu** or **512-471-2886** to receive more information about the symposium.