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Henry's Holocaust

In 1994, in the wake of *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg founded Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, commonly called Shoah Foundation—*shoah* is Hebrew for holocaust. The organization's initial purpose was to interview those who could provide eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust. Time was of the essence: it had been 50 years since the war, survivors and other witnesses had aged, and some were growing feeble in body and mind.

It was a monumental goal: to find those who could attest to the holocaust because of their personal experience, have them give testimony in a videotaped interview, and subsequently archive these accounts in a way that would make it relatively easy for future scholars to access the information. The foundation aimed to digitalize 50,000 first-hand accounts so that any future researcher would be able to go to the archive, input, for example, "Auschwitz," "twins," and "1943," and a list of video links would pop up on a screen: interview segments that dealt with that combination of factors. Someone interested in that topic could watch and listen to those clips, or the entire interviews they came from.

Before the main interviewing phase was over, in 1999, the Shoah Foundation surpassed its goal; it conducted nearly 52,000 interviews in many countries and in many languages. Though most were with survivors, there were interviews with soldiers who liberated the camps, attorneys at the Nuremberg trials, those who lived in hiding, those who escaped to safer areas, and many others who had been personal eyewitnesses to some aspect of the Holocaust.

I was one of a dozen people hired by the Shoah Foundation to make sure that interviewers followed interviewing protocol. My job was to watch taped interviews,

take notes, and then call the interviewers and give feedback. It was important for interviewers not to ask leading questions and to make sure that interviewees talked about the facts they themselves had seen and heard, and nothing else: no hearsay, no opinions, no political or social commentary.

We, the reviewers, got together once a week at the Shoah office for a two-hour meeting, and during a year's worth of these gatherings, I became friendly with Henry—himself a survivor—who held the same position I did: reviewing interviews. Henry was charming, funny, smart, honest and self-deprecating—an altogether winning combination.

As a Polish-born survivor of concentration camps and death marches, Henry—short, compact, with thick glasses—had been interviewed during the early days of this Spielberg project, but that was before the Foundation's interviewing techniques were systematized, so Henry's interviewer kept interjecting his own survival experiences. As a result, Henry's first interview came out choppy and truncated, and the story wasn't told in a coherent way.

When we were reaching the end of the interviewing phase of the project, Henry requested to be interviewed *again*. Normally, that would have been denied; but Henry, as a respected employee and supporter of the foundation, was entitled to a second bite of the apple. He was scheduled for a second interview and he requested that I conduct it.

In the run-up to the interview, Henry and I got together several times. The pretext was to talk about the upcoming interview, but the real reason was that we enjoyed each other's company: he liked telling stories and I liked to listen. He came to my house a few times, where he met my younger son, Zeke, age thirteen at the time. Henry immediately sniffed him out as a "cool kid" and every time I'd see Henry, he'd ask me, "How's that cool kid Zeke doing?" In passing, I also mentioned that my older son Rafi was an undergraduate at an Ivy League school.

"So you have one scholar and one cool kid. Good for you," Henry said.

"Not so good for me," I said. "Rafi's education is costing us a fortune—which we don't have—and Zeke is too cool for school. Rafi tells us truths we'd rather not hear, while Zeke's always making up stuff and wouldn't know the truth if it hit him in the chops."

Henry laughed. "Count your blessings," he said.

On the day I was to interview Henry at his modest home in the San Fernando Valley, I arrived at 10:00 am, at the same time as Shmulik, an Israeli videographer. Henry, wearing a sport jacket and tie, showed us into the house and his wife Janet greeted us with tea and cookies.

As Shmulik set up his lighting, I asked him how many cassettes he'd brought. "Ten," Shmulik said. "That should be enough, right?" He was being sarcastic. Ten cassettes, at a half-hour each, would give us five hours, and our usual interviews were about two hours. However, I was familiar with Henry's story and figured it would be more than twice that long. I knew that if it went to a fifth hour, I'd have to juggle the ending to fit everything in.

Shmulik signaled that he was ready and we started. During the interview, I followed our protocol. The first half-hour was spent on the period before the war—where Henry's family lived, who they were, what they did to earn money, where he went to school, what his home life was like: playing games, celebrating Shabbat and Jewish holidays, what foods they ate, what vacations they took. Since Henry knew the interview protocol as well as I did, it was only necessary for me to ask the simplest of questions, and he would respond in great detail.

Henry was born in 1925 and brought up in Czeladz, a Polish town not far from Krakow. His father was a coal-miner—odd for a Jew. His family loved classical music, but they couldn't afford to buy him a piano, so they got him a harmonica—according to Henry that harmonica would end up saving his life. When he talked about this, Henry's hand rested on a Hohner harmonica lying on a small table nearby, as if waiting to be called upon during the interview.

As we were coming to the end of the first cassette, Shmulik signaled that there was a minute to go, so I found an appropriate place to stop the interview. While Shmulik changed cassettes, Henry went to the bathroom. During the first cassette, Henry had mentioned that his mother used to sing him lullabies, so during the second half-hour I asked him if he could sing one. Henry agreed and sang a heartbreaking Yiddish melody, *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*—"Raisins with Almonds".

Afterwards, he talked about the period before, during and after the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. After the Germans crossed into Poland, his town was on the alert, knowing there was nothing they could do to stop the offensive. Still, two weeks later, before the Nazis swooped into their small town, Henry and his family were able to celebrate Rosh HaShanah.

Henry—called Henryk at the time—was 14 and his family spent the holiday with some others from the town, including, Henry said, "a beautiful 12-year-old girl named Jadzia. I fell for her the moment I saw her." In the next few years, Henry held on to that vision of the lovely Jadzia. It sustained him, he said, through the camps, death marches and the deaths of those he loved.

In 1943, when he was 17, Henry was at Dyhenfurth concentration camp. "I weighed nothing, maybe 90 pounds, I probably could count the number of days of life I had

left in the single digits, maybe a week left to live. It was winter and I was working with these heavy tools. A pick, a shovel, clearing roads. I didn't have long to live if that kept up. But I still had my harmonica, the one my parents had gotten for me. And I'd learned how to play some pieces. So one night I was playing Schubert's "Serenade". You know the one..."

At my urging, Henry picked up the harmonica and played the familiar melody. His playing was rusty, but the Schubert music came through clearly and emotionally. After a few bars of the well-known piece, Henry carefully laid the harmonica on the small table beside him.

"So the Nazi commandant heard that I played, you know, those things get around, and he called for me to come to his office and ordered me to play. I was terrified. He told me to play the Schubert...so I did. The commandant heard me play and nodded and from then on I was able to get some more food. Substantial food. Because of that song, I survived. A miracle."

Later in the interview, Henry told a haunting story about a death march and his father's collapse. "The commandant had given me some bread, a whole loaf. You know how much that meant? A whole loaf? If only I'd been able to get some to my father, but there was no way. If only I could have helped him survive." Henry cried. He and I both knew that this situation called for me to be silent while the camera remained focused on his soft sobbing.

Cassette after cassette, Henry continued his story. I was the director and Henry the actor, going over stories and images that had not only been seared into Henry's blood and bone, they'd been seared into our collective post-World War II consciousness. With all the books and movies about the holocaust, most people are now fully aware of the broad outlines of Henry's story. To be sure, each survival story is unique, but it's also generic in its broad shape, and Henry's story was similar to many of the testimonies we had reviewed: ghettos, camps, marches, death, gas chamber smells, screams, smoke from crematoria. As I listened to Henry's story, the hundreds of interviews I'd heard blended into a single story of human suffering.

When the interview was at the start of the fifth hour, Henry talked about a death march he escaped from. After escaping, he hid in the woods, where he joined local farmers and partisans, who protected him until liberation in May, 1945.

During the year that I spent at the Shoah Foundation, one of the puzzles I'd tried to sort out was whether there were common factors among those who survived: Was it the result of definable reasons, or was it merely random, the luck of the draw? After the first few dozen interviews I began to think that it had to do with a certain contrariness,

a refusal to go with the flow: trusting one's own instincts rather than following orders or conventional wisdom.

To a degree, Henry fell into that pattern of survivor behavior. At a time when others might have curled up and died, Henry dug out his harmonica, and played his guts out. It saved his life. At a time when others were following the person in front to what turned out to be certain death, Henry sneaked away from the pack and hightailed it into the forest.

Toward the end of the ninth cassette, Henry talked about how, after liberation—when he was 19—he returned to the village of Czeladz. Once there, he learned that his parents and many of his relatives had died. He looked for anyone he knew, any familiar face, and suddenly he found Jadzia, the girl whose smile had stayed in his mind through the years of dark terror. She had survived! They fell into each other's arms and vowed undying love for one another.

In the tenth cassette, Henry (nee Henryk) said he and Jadzia married and immigrated to the United States, where they became Henry and Janet, a couple that worked hard, brought up two sons and eventually settled in the San Fernando Valley section of Los Angeles. A frequent guest speaker at high schools, Henry repeatedly told student groups his miraculous story of survival and how, soon after liberation, he reconnected with his one true love.

Of course, all the people we interviewed with the Shoah Foundation had something in common: they had survived. They had suffered enormous tragedy, lost loved ones, been physically and emotionally tortured; but the fact remained: they had survived. This gave every testimony an in-built degree of happy ending: a Spielbergian happy ending. In order to underline this happy ending, the final scene of Shoah Foundation taped interviews with survivors was a touching tableau: the survivor surrounded by his or her family: spouse, children, grandchildren—as if to say, *You see? You tried to kill me but you failed. I survived and have a line of descendants who'll live their lives in spite of your efforts to snuff us out.*

When we reached that moment in Henry's interview, Henry quietly whispered that the final shot would be only of him and Janet. It was odd, and Shmulik's eyes met mine: What's going on? No kids, no grandkids? I knew Henry had two sons. Though I'd spent a good bit of time chatting with him, though he and I had met at my house and at restaurants, I had no idea why Henry's children, or his children's children—if they had any—would not be in the final scene.

Shmulik filmed the last shot with Henry and Janet pointing to pre-war photos that, somehow, had been salvaged. Shmulik carefully focused in on these photos, panning,

zooming in. Then Shmulik turned off his video camera, packed his gear, said his farewells and left.

I was about to go, but Henry touched my arm, signaling for me to stay a short while longer. As Shmulik's car pulled out, a van pulled in to the vacated spot. Two men in their 40s got out of the van. From the way they walked, from their eyes and body language, it was obvious that both these men had varying degrees of psychological and developmental disability.

"My sons," Henry said, his voice breaking slightly. "Marvin, he's the older one, he sweeps up at MacDonald's, you know, they got this program, providing menial work for people [with disability]. And Harry, the younger one, he's at a day care center all day, where they take care of him."

I was shocked: frozen and ashamed. I had complained about my sons…my God! I tried to hide my reaction from Henry, but I couldn't. Was the impairment suffered by the two sons a result of drugs Henry and Janet were given at the camps—of experiments they were subjected to? Had their chromosomes been damaged by treatment they'd received at the hands of the Nazis? Is that what happened?

It seemed comparable to Job's plight. So: Henry and Janet will have no grandkids. This is it. The end of the line.

"I feel bad," Henry said.

In a shocked whisper, I said: "I understand."

"No," Henry said, "I don't think you do. I mean maybe…maybe I should have included the boys in that last scene, no? What do you think?"

I wasn't sure what to tell him. In a moment of clarity, Henry was suddenly aware he had Spielbergized his own story and felt guilty about it. He was aware that he had bought into the idea of a happy ending for himself, and for Janet. A Spielberg ending.

All of our interviews at the Foundation had, if not happy endings, at least satisfying endings. And *this* is the record that future researchers will draw upon to understand what happened. No doubt Spielberg had noble motivations for preserving these testimonies—and, of course, you can't interview the dead. But had the others unwittingly done as Henry did? Was this an unconscious factor of survival as well? Because of the massive amount of testimony the Foundation had amassed, would a Spielbergized image of the aftermath of the Holocaust be the one passed on to future generations?

Suddenly, in my mind, I saw the movie that could be made of Henry and Janet's life. With appropriate musical crescendo, it would end in 1945, when Henryk and Jadzia, still teenagers, like Romeo and Juliet, reconnect and fall into each other arms,

astounded that the other had survived, totally in love, young and optimistic and looking forward to the rest of their lives.

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