CHAPTER TWO

Figuring the Identities: A First Generation Predicament

My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die. – Primo Levi

This chapter proposes to study the Second Generation Holocaust survivor’s retrospection of their First Generation survivor parents’ identity in an attempt to detangle their own skewed identity from that of their parents. For this purpose this chapter elaborately analyses the First Generation’s predicament in figuring their identities, both pre and post Holocaust as presented in the Second Generation narratives. The Holocaust is analyzed as the redefiner or catalyst of Jewish identity focusing on its physio-psycho-social dimensions. The chapter seeks to examine the transformation in First Generation identity post -Holocaust, constituted by changes in the new environment pertaining to language, space and culture.

The Holocaust trauma, as a dialogic continuum, does not end with the direct survivors, but is transmitted down generations. The succeeding generations with no insight or understanding of their Holocaust legacy, feel victimized as well. So the Second Generation children of Holocaust survivors resorted to a study of their parents’ traumatic identity, in order to make sense of their own quixotic identity; because, identity, a dialogic entity, as Bakhtin propounds, is dynamic and evolves with time, being shaped and reshaped through dialogic encounters with others and with oneself, because, according to Bakhtin, one’s ‘being’ is always ‘co-being’, simultaneous with other beings. The Second Generation’s retracing of their parent’s Holocaust identities procures an
emotional immediacy for the reconstruction of their own disrupted identities, since they
have realized that their identities are continually reconfigured by their parent’s holocaust
history, even though they themselves did not personally live through it.

The ontological study of identity as a dialogic continuum has given rise to
fundamental assumptions about the decisive influence of the past over the present,
thereby enkindling innumerable discourses on it. This in turn has led to the
reinterpretation of past experiences on both individual and societal levels. As a
consequence, history today is rewritten through discourse and memory as the past
continually interacts with the present and consequently authors the changes of the self.
The Second Generation memoirs are one such rewriting of Holocaust history, which
serves as a tangible record of the Second Generation’s quest for an identity entwined with
the Holocaust.

This study takes into account the Holocaust legacy of three culturally,
linguistically and religiously diverse Second Generation Holocaust women memoirists –
Helen Epstein, Helen Fremont and Eva Hoffman, noting the different social upheavals
and transfigurations in their outlooks and identities.

Helen Fremont’s *After Long Silence (ALS)* is a disturbing memoir that describes
what it was like to grow up as a child of Holocaust survivors who converted to
Catholicism. Two sisters, Helen Fremont and Lara Fremont start on a quest for
unearthing their Jewish roots and finally retrace their family’s past which in turn leads to
painful confrontations with the only surviving members of their families. They switch
over from Catholicism to Judaism and start attending synagogues. This digging up for
roots by the Americanized daughters reawakens past dreadful memories in their parents. However this is the real breakthrough for the Second Generation as it becomes therapeutic to loosen the knot that had held them captive for so long.

Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* (LIT) is a bildungsroman. Comprising three sections, it traces Hoffman’s growth and development from her childhood and adolescence in Cracow, to the voyage to Vancouver in Canada and her final settlement and assimilation in America. However unlike for the other two writers, for Hoffman her Jewishness is not a matter of discovery. She had known it since her childhood. However her diasporic transplantation in the New World and her assimilationist tendencies relegated her Jewishness to the background. So after a trip to Cracow for a tryst with the past, she comes back to the US with a clearer sense of self to legitimize her Jewish legacy by articulating it.

Eva Hoffman’s *After Such Knowledge* (ASK) is the outcome of conversations that she has had over many years with the Holocaust survivors and her second generation peers. Having internalized her parent’s Holocaust past she became their designated carrier for the cargo of this awesome knowledge. Now she wanted to express this burden in her art of life writing. And this becomes the moment of separation, of letting go of the cult of mourning with the wisdom and strength to live with the knowledge that the Holocaust had brought them in perpetuity.

Helen Epstein’s *Children of the Holocaust* (COH) is a compilation of her conversations with sons and daughters of survivors. Helen Epstein sets out on a quest to find a group of people who like her, were possessed by a history they had never lived.
Her search resulted in the forming of an international community of second generation siblinghood.

Helen Epstein’s *Where She Came From – A Daughters Search for Her Mother’s History* (WSCF) offers a second generation glimpse into a vanished world through the lives of three remarkable women: Helen Epstein’s great grandmother, Therese, whose life was marked by tragedy; her grandmother Pepi, whose fashion career took her from pre-war Prague to Paris and Berlin and her mother Frances whose liberated existence came to an end with the German invasion of Czechoslovakia. Epstein recreates the society that shaped her female ancestors and the forces that shaped her own life as a child growing up in the safe harbour of post war America.

These Second Generation memoirists focus on the details of the past everyday life of their parents during the radically abnormal circumstances of the genocide, by unearthing their parent’s hidden or forgotten Holocaust memories, because past experiences embalmed in the mind as memories influence an individual’s present and also construct and configure identity. A traumatic past, whether one’s own or inherited, casts indelible, terrorizing memories which inhibit normal identity formation since residual traumatic memories keep intruding and disturbing an individual’s identity.

The extreme, demonic nature of the Holocaust left back traumatic memories in survivors, which are triggered time and again, even ages after the lapse of the trauma. So, an exhumation of these traumatic memories is essential for exorcising or at least for coping with this trauma. The unprecedented nature of the Holocaust, the unimaginable speed with which it was carried out and the unaccountable number of victims it produced
in so short a period of time, rendered impossible a comprehensive witnessing of the event
and left victims and survivors numb, empty and speechless – in short, deeply traumatized.
These traumatic memories deeply imprinted in the psyche, interrupt consciousness and
normal everyday living. As Cathy Caruth asserts, “To be traumatized is precisely to be
possessed by an image or an event”. (Caruth 4)

The extensive continuum of the Holocaust dialogue, with its tentacular grasp on
the survivor’s self, remains an indelible aspect of the past that must be remembered
without being subsumed. However much the survivors relegate the Holocaust to the
background, its spectral memories keep reverberating in fissures. These memories are
two-fold: the memory of the injustice and the memory of the survival, which
amalgamate, reconstructing a new identity of survivorship. There can be no proper
understanding of contemporary Jewish identity without consideration of the profound and
continuing impact of Holocaust memories on it. The Holocaust trauma brought about
either a break or retardation in the survivor’s identity. The regressive situations the
survivors were exposed to caused an atrophying of their pre-Holocaust shtetl identities.

In Helen Fremont’s After Long Silence, Fremont’s maternal aunt, Zosia was an
outspoken, unbridled bundle of energy, right from her childhood up to the time of the
Holocaust: “She was a battery pack of pure unbridled energy, an impatient, impulsive
little fireball whom my grandmother had to peel off the ceiling every five minutes.” (58)

Adolescent, teenaged Zosia became Cracow’s heartthrob. For her higher
education, she went to Prague and came back sophisticated beyond recognition. A rebel
at heart, Zosia had the nerve to marry Giulio, an Italian gentile, defying the refusal and
dire threats of both their parents. And when news of Zosia’s fugitive marriage reached her parents in Lvov, they gave up their daughter for dead:

Since they were Orthodox, they could not have tolerated their daughter’s marriage to a Catholic. Absolutely impossible. They would have considered Zosia dead and severed all connections with her. They would have sat shiva for her and followed traditional Jewish customs for the dead. She no longer existed for them. (71)

Yet, despite her parent’s disavowal of her, Zosia came back at the onset of the Holocaust, amidst high risks, resolved to rescue her family. When Poland was on the crest of a wave of destruction in 1939, Zosia was travelling all alone goaded by a sheer sense of filial piety:

Zosia was trying to save them, I think, to bring them back with her. It had been over two years since she had seen them, and her sense of loss must have been unbearable. She had thrown her family away, her heritage, and now I think she was returning to collect them…She could never have lived with the guilt if she hadn’t gone back. (96)

Zosia’s affair with the NKVD officer, using the bait of her charms, was yet another precarious decision that reflected her shrewd presence of mind and altruistic risk-taking for the sake of family. By alternately brandishing her sensual, feminine charms at NKVD headquarters and by fulfilling her filial duties as a wife and daughter at home, Zosia struck a delicate balance and maintained it with elan:

On Saturday nights Zosia powdered her face, pressed her eyelashes, trimmed her nails and painted her lips…She selected a face, an expression,
a laugh and an attitude that was appropriate for the job before her. At
seven o’clock the NKVD officer came for her…Zosia dated him for
months, playing the coquette, keeping him soft and pliable in her hands,
like a lump of dough. …the danger of her family’s deportation to Siberia
was over, Zosia no longer felt the imperative of her relationship with the
man…She succeeded in getting him to dump her. (118)

Both her parents were out of work, so it was Zosia who really supported the
family, bringing home bartered goods from other shopkeepers. .. As a pharmacist at Platz
Akademicka, Zosia made deals with other merchants. She promised to save various
medicines for them if they saved supplies for her. Then, at an arranged time, they bought
from each other at the official State prices, which were quite cheap. “She worked the
black market,” my father said. “No!” my mother corrected him, shaking her head with
irritation. “She outwitted the black market.”(109)

Zosia could easily reconstruct and reposition her identities – be it as Jewish/
Polish/ Italian/ blue-blooded countess or clandestine black marketeer. She could
effortlessly switch roles to the need of the hour. She became her family’s saviour, to
whom they surrendered completely:

They gave themselves over to their older daughter, who had become an
operator. Her parents knew it was a gift she had, or she was the gift, and
they grew used to her miracles: She found eggs when no one even had
bread; she brought home milk and flour and jam when the streets were
empty and people starving. (ALS 160)
Zosia moved through clandestine channels, running risks and errands for the underground.

Helen Fremont’s mother Batya, unlike her volatile sister Zosia, was more down to earth, enamoured by books and languages. With her armoury of languages, she had already equipped herself for any nationality:

During the rainy fall of 1937 in Lvov, (Batya) lived at home and studied English with a private tutor. She read Dickens and Shakespeare, conjugated verbs and tripped along the pebbly road of pronunciation. For years she had been building up her arsenal of languages to unleash someday on an unsuspecting world… (Batya) was beginning a course of study that would save her life. (ALS 91-92)

Batya’s romancing Kovik, a fellow Jew, was poised and also blessed with her parent’s wholehearted consent: “She (Batya’s mother) had always liked my father (Kovik). Although penniless, he was clever, hard-working, and ambitious. “She encouraged my relationship with Mom,” Dad once told me.” (ALS 101)

After Zosia’s disownment by her parents, Batya rose to the occasion and she and Kovik proved invaluable surrogates of the prodigal daughter. After Zosia’s return, Batya seconded her in protecting and providing for their aged parents.

Batya too repositioned her identities effortlessly- in her workplace, as Maria, the sister-in-law of an Italian count, in charge of the book keeping, and translation of documents for the Italian officers and back home, as the loyal, Jewish daughter of her aged parents:
She was still her parent’s daughter, still the good girl with the white-and-blue armband of a dying race. She stepped cautiously across Zamarstwowska Street and into a side street. In the shadow of a doorway she slipped the armband off her sleeve, tucked it into her pocket, and walked out of the ghetto. Her gait changed, her eyes, her face. In an instant she turned into Maria, a Polish girl, the sister of an Italian countess. (ALS 165-166)

Zosia and Batya’s lives depended upon their will at playing these newly-constructed identities:

Zosia and my mother molded themselves like clay. Their survival would depend on the creative shapes they could twist into, the speed with which they shifted, and how well they played their roles. Hollywood had nothing on them. They were acting for their lives. (ALS 165)

The Holocaust had ripped off the former unique identities of the siblings, Zosia and Batya and so for survival, they had to be elastic and juggle with too many roles and nationalities. Batya had to reconstruct yet newer identities as Maria Tannen – a poor Polish orphan and later as Giuseppe Rossi – a young, Italian soldier:

She fingered her furlough papers and rolled her new name over her tongue: Giuseppe Rossi. She had to shed another skin now, and she was already so worn out. She had shed her parents, her past, her friends, and her life. She had become Polish Catholic, crossed herself and said her prayers daily. Now she would change again. She would become Italian, a soldier, a man. (ALS 200)
Finally in Rome with Zosia, Batya had to rise to the occasion and become the sole breadwinner of Zosia’s family: “My mother left each morning for the office, bringing home her small salary, on which four adults and one child now lived”. (267) This was a repositioning from simple beneficiary to sole benefactor – which Batya assumed without much ado.

Kovik Buchman, Batya’s fiancé was a thoroughly self-made man who became a self-trained second best decathlete of the Polish team. A student prodigy who took all his classmates and professors by storm, Kovik was fanatically determined to get a medical degree and relentlessly pursued it amidst recurrent setbacks.

Even after getting his medical degree, he was not given his diploma. But without succumbing to despair, he unabatedly kept repositioning his identities - he settled in Italy, first mastered the Italian tongue, studied medicine in Italy, got an Italian medical degree and finally became a medical practitioner. He retained this never-say-die attitude even after he was sentenced to six years in the Gulag, as a ‘Socially Dangerous Element’, wherein he invented means and erstwhile pastimes to survive his exile:

To fend off boredom, my father and two or three other prisoners began a chess club. They painstakingly saved bits of their bread rations over a few days, fashioned them into chessmen, and improvised a game board. They played on the sly, with one prisoner keeping an eye out for the guards.

(ALS 139)

His unrelenting encounter with the Uzbekistani prisoner, who stole his single T-shirt, and whom he ultimately destroyed with his eyes, testifies to his steely resolve to
break the soul of the man who stole from him. It was also a reconfiguration of his prison identity – from that of helpless prisoner to that of prosecutor – a staunch defender of the right at all costs: “I don’t care about the T-shirt”, my father said, his voice wooden. “But you must learn that you cannot steal from your fellow man; we are all in the same boat; you must treat us with respect.” (ALS 142)

His stern severity was a survival stratagem - a reconstruction of his humane identity that he manipulated remarkably to ward off dejection and other intruding prisoners. “He learned how to wrap his feet in rags. He learned how to make a needle out of a fishbone……..He played chess from midnight until dawn when sleep refused to visit him, and he learned to mark chips on a board”. (ALS 144)

A diehard optimist, Kovik Buchman survived the Gulag sans teeth, sans health, sans friends but full of hatred to escape. It was hatred and not hope that helped him to survive when corpses increased all around him.

He learned to keep his mouth shut… He learned to avoid the whores, the women on the make, the criminal prisoners. He learned to mistrust the other political prisoners, especially the ones who seemed most friendly. He learned to rely solely on himself, on his own wits, his own hands, and his own feet. Occasionally he did a favour, but only when his back was covered. He managed a few favours and a few favours came back to him.

And only then was he able to survive the Gulag. (ALS 44)

His escape from the Gulag with neither papers, possessions nor food, and with only one good arm was because of his fierce determination to tell the world of the Soviet
Communist atrocities: “When the war is over”, my father nodded, in a low voice, “I will return to Poland and write about this. I will tell the world what the Soviet ideal is really all about! One day I will get my revenge”. (ALS 121)

In *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman recounts that she who was born towards the close of the war in Prague, was told very little about her parents’ prewar life in the shtetl of Zalosce near Lvov. Both of them came from families of merchants. Boris Wydra, Eva’s father was the village rake who chased girls and did not finish high school. Eva’s mother Maria Wydra’s family was the more orthodox. Even though she was a talented pupil, she was not allowed to go to the university. So her decision to marry Boris, one of the town’s notorious guys was an act of rebellion.

Boris Wydra was a thoroughbred gambler, adept at risky money making schemes. He also brought up his daughter in a highly unwomanly fashion, initiating her into all kinds of boyish sports. His decision to emigrate to Canada was fuelled by his longing to realize the American Dream. But used to rough, hard living, he was disillusioned by the cloying amorphousness of Canada when he settled there.

In *Where She Came From*, Helen Epstein’s mother, Frances (Franci) was her mother Pepi’s protector, best friend and confidant against her despotic, womanizing father who had absconded. A staunch feminist, Franci very casually aborted her first child and resumed work. She could never forgive her husband Joe Solar for restraining her from joining her parents in their deportation. Unable to overcome this remorse, she became a chain smoker. She did not break down when she lost her husband, but calmly accepted it, by immersing herself in her salon. This was a remarkable repositioning of her
identity from dependent wife to independent career woman. With her shrewd presence of
mind after her arrest, she not only got through Dr. Mengele’s, (the Nazi physician
notorious for his inhuman medical experiments) harrowing selection by declaring herself
as an electrician, but she also later proved to be adept at it with no previous electrical
knowledge whatsoever.

As per the Bakhtinian precept of dialogic dynamism, individual identity is forged
through verbal, non verbal, symbolic situations, shared or opposed ideological positions
and plurality of voices engaged in a dialogue. The individual identity emerges through a
mutually participatory dialogue during which the self and the other address each other.
This other may be another individual, society, ideology, race, event, etc. It is against this
backdrop that the self negotiates its identity.

For the Holocaust survivors, the Holocaust trauma as the crucial other negotiates
their identity. It is in this dialogic process that survivors reposition and reconstruct their
post Holocaust identities, because as Bakhtin says, identity is context-dependent and
sensitive to external influences. Bakhtin views humanity as indeterminate and
unfinalizable. As per this ideology, a person can never be fully revealed or known in the
world, because of constant change and unfinalizability. And since the self is
unfinalizable, according to Bakhtin, it entails the reconstruction and repositioning of
identity.

After years of normal idyllic living in their respective shtetls, the First Generation
found themselves in pandemonium when the Holocaust took them unawares. Of the
nearly nine million Jews living in Europe, six million perished; only one-third escaped
the Nazis, some by fleeing to other countries and others by hiding themselves in bunkers in the forests, or by passing as Christians with false papers, or by being hidden for months and years in the constricted quarters of a secret pantry, attic or cellar. Only these very few who tactfully repositioned or reconstructed their identities were able to survive the Holocaust.

However these reconstructed identities were not irreversible, but rather made the traumatic past a dialogic continuum in the present. Upon liberation, most of these survivors were physically and mentally drained, diseased and stripped of their human attachments. They lost not just their families, but also their religion, social and family traditions, their communities, their sense of belonging and identity. Haunting memories of dead family members and relatives kept reminding them that their lives would never be normal again. Nevertheless, they set forth on a quest for a new beginning, home and family. So they tried to subsume the traumatic memories of the Holocaust in order to embark on a new beginning. Despite their urgency to move on, for many, this shroud of wellness, eventually gave way to a host of emotional and physical difficulties: “Despite the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can alter people’s psychological, biological and social equilibrium”. (VanderKolk&Macfarlane 488)

Victims of chronic trauma like the Holocaust often suffer from a multitude of physical disorders from which there is no release. The diabolic conditions of the concentration camps defy description and any attempt to do so would only result in understatement. The awful food provided was also inadequate resulting in malnutrition and a living corpse condition.
Survivors who escaped death from the gas chambers and crematoriums were subjected to ghastly inhuman experiments, which proved a slow torture until death. Mortality rates were escalating each day due to multiple infections, frost bite, fatal injuries, incessant diarrhea, diseases of the respiratory tract, gastrointestinal disorders and chronic malnutrition. Clothing and shelter were inadequate beyond imagination. Lice-infested diseases and scabies were also rampant. Premature aging was also a very predominant feature.

Helen Fremont’s mother, Batya who was attacked by a Ukrainian mob during the Holocaust, lost her period for nine months. Had she been raped? Did she have a child living elsewhere? These thoughts hounded Helen. Her father, Kovik too had hurt his arm during his escape and it later had to be amputated. He also lost all his teeth: “the ones that weren’t knocked out rotted in his mouth. Years of watery soup and saw-dust-filled bread left his bones brittle. His teeth dried up and crumbled. His ankles ballooned out, and his stomach swelled. Bit by bit, he turned into air”. (ALS 144)

For Eva Hoffman’s parents, the years of living in the cold, damp attic and the inhuman conditions during their period of hiding enslaved them to acute aches and psychosomatic illnesses: “For one whole year, my parents were sequestered in this man’s attic, where they mostly sat on a clump of hay – cold, lice covered, often hungry”. (LIT 21) And Hoffman was a close witness to this trauma, their nightmares and rheumatism those were the legacy of their years in hiding, to their sudden, inconsolable mourning.

Helen Epstein’s mother, Franci who was injured in the concentration camp when a roof collapsed on her back, became maimed chronically of a chipped disc. Ever since
then she started complaining of colitis, migraine, muscle spasm and melancholia. Helen Epstein remained a helpless victim to her mother’s recurrent bouts of pain:

I could see the pain creep through her body, trapped, moving from place to place, eluding a list of specialists which grew longer each year. Internists, neurologists, osteopaths, chiropractors, even hypnotists had treated my mother. They put her in traction, prescribed lotions, pills, injections, exercises, diets. But the pain would not go away. (COH 50)

And whenever this pain overtook her, she used to scream at Helen for help:

“Don’t just stand there like an idiot! Help me sit down!” she would order, in a tense, distorted voice. Or worse, she would say nothing. She would gasp and remain in the position in which pain had cast her, her eyes like wounds”. (COH 50)

As the survivors become older, the psychic and social adaptations they made in order to rise from the trauma, fall under new assaults and become critical, creating unwelcome reminders of the myriad losses that they had experienced, even after decades of seeming adjustment to life after the Holocaust. Suicidal tendencies of survivors are a result of this identity crisis that arises when their protracted traumatic identities resurface. As Elie Wiesel recounts: “between our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced.” (Holocaust 7)

At sixty-nine, Franci suffered a fatal brain haemorrhage, which robbed her speech and paralyzed her body. She had no illness or disorder, so her suicidal attempts and sudden death were due to a retriggering of her protracted concentration camp identity.
When Kurt Epstein, Helen Epstein’s father was sent to the concentration camp of Terezin, he was given the job of food supply of about 4500 people three times a day. The food provided was very meager and sometimes they were provided meat that was stamped ‘Not for Human Beings’. And all these accounted for his chronic fury.

The Holocaust trauma as an event serves as a steadfast constituent in authoring or reconfiguring the dialogically changing identity of survivors. A basic parameter of contemporary trauma theory is that trauma creates a speechless fright that tends to divide or destroy identity. Trauma refers to an individual’s emotional response to a devastating event that disrupts one’s sense of self and leads to a dissolution of the self.

The many long term psychological effects of Holocaust trauma on the mental health of survivors are indeed complex. One reason that the survivors withstood the horrors of the Holocaust was the hope of reuniting with their families and loved ones. Upon liberation however they were astounded by the shocking discovery that their loved ones had perished and also by the brutal manner of their deaths.

Almost all survivors had experienced some form of psychological mortification. They had survived after evading death in endless selections in the camps, in inhuman living conditions in the bunkers and forests. This resulted in “survivor guilt”, yet another event that constantly repositions their identity. And the survivor becomes a guilt-ridden, self-hating being, for having survived, when so many of their loved ones perished. This guilt also forces the survivor to wallow in the past, unmindful of the present or future. The greater guilt for Hoffman’s mother was being a passive witness to her sister’s death:
It’s her sister whose memory arouses my mother’s most alive pain. She was so young, eighteen or nineteen – “She hadn’t even lived yet,” my mother says – and she died in such a horrible way. The man who saw her into the gas chamber said that she was among those who had to dig their own graves, and that her hair turned gray the day before her death. (LIT 7)

“Survivor syndrome” is another traumatic condition characterized by multiple symptoms like chronic depression and anxiety, insomnia, nightmares, personality changes, disturbance in cognition and memory, withdrawal tendency, isolation, seclusion, alterations in personal identity, psychosomatic conditions and a living corpse appearance. One major reason for the survivor’s eternal depression and bereaving was repressed mourning. As Holocaust victims, they did not have the time to mourn or bury their dead. This absence of a mourning ritual so crucial to their Jewish faith was the most unbearable and resulted in an inability to feel or project emotion in normal ways as expected of the situations. In the concentration camps, forests or bunkers, repression of mourning was a survival stratagem to continue the animalistic existence without losing one’s mind. However for many, this protracted, repositioned identity reemerges as traumatic memory without any erasure whatsoever.

Eva Hoffman’s father, Boris Wydra, only when he was in his eighties, began to speak about the death of his brother, whom he had never mentioned to his family. Eva’s family had considered their father a hard man, but now they realized that behind the stifled cold exterior, there simmered long-suppressed, love and guilt. It was ironically unpardonable to him because they had been killed accidentally in crossfire after liberation. And having no one to help him, he had buried them himself. It was this agony
that made him speechless about them all those years. Only fifty years later did he break
down and erupt his lament of protest and remorse.

Such suppressed emotions prove hazardous to one’s mental and physical health.
Emotional numbing damages even future relationships. This survival stratagem of the
victim days, which was beneficial during traumatic conditions, becomes a serious
liability post-trauma.

Another important characteristic of survivors is their inability to verbalize their
trauma. They are analogous to spiritual cripples, who have not lost their limbs, but their
will and zest for life:

The experiences they had lived through were extremely hard to process, to
assimilate into a dignity image of themselves; the feelings that followed
often too wrenching or too overwhelming for routine acknowledgement.
There were in every case things that were hard to make sense of, to bring
to the lucid scrutiny of one’s own mind, much less to the public light of
day. The unspeakable and the unimaginable – those words nowadays so
automatically applied to the Shoah – may have initially had to do as much
with the literal inadmissibility of the survivors’ anguish as with the nature
of the events themselves. (ASK 47)

Most of the survivors, who had lost their families, got married hastily to fellow
survivors in sheer desperation to beget children and to recreate their families, so as to
compensate for their earlier losses, to counter the massive disruption of their lives and to
undo the dehumanization and alienation that they had suffered. They sought to become
parents in order to construct a new identity for themselves. Begetting children which was considered urgency, perhaps as an attempt to replace their murdered relations, exacerbated the already absurd milieu for raising children. Women survivors, who became pregnant immediately after the end of the Holocaust, were apprehensive about the safety of their unborn child, as they felt that they would transmit to their offspring a perpetuation of their trauma. They were also fearful of impending disasters that the future might hold for their children.

The compulsive neurotic behavior of the survivors also led to stifling parenting styles, which in turn had a retarding effect on their children. Many married couples still found themselves obsessed with their former families, or unable to develop an attachment to the newly established liaisons. Because they are so preoccupied with their former families, they respond to their present children’s normal robust activities and need for control as an interference with their secret mourning or as an extra burden on their already taxed resources.

In several survivor families, at least one of the parents had ceded parental responsibility entirely, continuing the shadow identity of the war years- that of the emotionally absent parent. A second generation survivor in Epstein’s, *Children of the Holocaust*, Sara said that her father had found her mother all alone in the cold after the war, rescued her and then married her. But her mother was very embittered about having married a man with no money and whom she did not love, while her sisters had all married rich settlers in Israel. Sara’s father had a wife and two sons before they were
killed during the Holocaust. And he too was obsessed with them and always kept talking about them, ignoring his present wife and child.

So, Sara who grew up deprived of parental love and care, laments that for her parents, their own needs were their priority. When Sara was a child, her mother used to eat more than what she gave her children. Physical abuse was also very common between mother and daughter:

I think they used on their kids the techniques for survival that they had learned in the forest. The order of normal life was so confused for them during the war that abnormalities became normalities. People were capable of everything. Anything was permissible in order to live. Their needs became the center of their universe. My mother was like that. I think when I was a child she ate more than she gave us. We were there to fill her needs, not the other way round. … My father always used to say that even in the forest she always took food for herself instead of thinking of other people. (COH 117)

Another Second generation survivor in Epstein’s group, Albert Singerman’s parents too did not show him love or affection. He remembers his mother as an extremely high strung, hypochondriac who kept recounting the camp tortures in all its gory details, until he yelled at her to stop. The tensions and problems in his home were the most extreme Epstein had heard about.

For Helen Fremont’s parents, simple, child-rearing tasks became greatly strenuous. Her father “often told (her) that surviving the Gulag was easier than raising
children”. (ALS 146). Whenever Helen and Lara had their childish squabbles, their mother used to drop down on her knees and lament that she should have died along with her dear ones. This unusual behavior of the mother scared the children into compliance. But they were deeply affected by her overtly emotional handling of an ordinary sibling squabble.

Undoubtedly, not all survivor parents were bad or indifferent towards their children. In fact, most of them meant desperately well. Having been burdened with great losses, survivors clung too desperately to their children to the point of suffocating them. Some others were afraid to exhibit attachment to their children, lest they be snatched from them once more. Since survivors had lost almost all their loved ones, they feared that loving anyone meant losing them and they did not want to go through this pain once again. These changes in their post Holocaust selves authored their attitudes to their significant others.

To Epstein’s parents, she was a miracle- the fact that she was born healthy after her mother’s near sterility during her camp days was incredible:

Franci is a wonderful person. Yesterday evening she worked until nine o’clock. At ten, she left for the hospital and in four hours the child was born. Without drugs, without screams… We are very happy… I would never have thought that after all we lived through in the last few years, we would ever be so happy. (WSCF 302)

So Epstein’s parents pampered her with food, music and dance lessons. Epstein was taken skating, skiing and bicycling… all on a budget that barely sufficed to pay their
rent. This reaction was actually a surrogate to the material deprivations that they
themselves had suffered during the war.

Epstein’s father got angry whenever he saw his kids sad, listless or hurt: “After
the war, I put three things what were most important to me”, my father would tell people.
“First freedom. Then health and the third thing contentment. I wanted that my child will
live in a free country without any experience what I had to suffer”. (COH 62)

Aviva, Epstein’s second generation peer, who had a very close relationship with
her parents, found them to be overprotective:

“Overprotective? I don’t know if that is the word for my parents. Yes, I
suppose that would be the word. They’re worriers. They always perceive
the worst possible outcome for things. Little things. Like when I was in
elementary school, all the excursions we made were in trucks, not buses.
They wouldn’t let me go because they thought it was dangerous, because
there had been two accidents in the last ten years where children were on
trucks. It’s a kind of family joke. You can’t go into the next room without
my father saying, ‘Be careful!’ I think it’s become an automatic reflex
with him. He doesn’t even think of what he says. If my mother goes to the
grocery which is literally across the street, he will say, ‘Be careful!’ (COH
121)

After all their infernal encounters, Fremont’s parents decided to shield themselves
and their children from those nightmarish memories. So they became Catholics and
sealed away their Jewish past from their children. They wanted happiness desperately and
they implored their children to be happy at all costs: “My mother and God would bargain a little, and she would extract from Him a promise of our well-being in exchange for her vow …. A deal with God, and she did not dare back down.” (ALS 11)

Dina Wardi, an Israeli psychotherapist, in her book Memorial Candles refers to survivor parents as either ‘fighters’ or ‘victims ’- those who resurrected from their ordeals and those who gave in to complete passivity. The fighters, who coped better with their condition, demanded from their children great achievements which would mean ‘not letting Hitler win’. They wanted their children to have a victory over Hitler. Eva Hoffman remembers her father as a fighter, with his intolerance of frailty and his unreasonable demands of her sister and herself to succeed at all costs. This identity of Hoffman’s father as a fighter was a repositioning from that of defending water Polo champion pre-Holocaust to defender of his children’s rights and safety post-Holocaust.

Although most survivors repressed their tragic, traumatic memories in their subconscious, the intensity of the Shoah and its subsequent aberrations, kept them reverberating in their selves. Eli Rubinstein, another second generation survivor interviewed by Epstein said that his father became very edgy and jumpy whenever anyone confronted him about the Holocaust. His mother too was obsessed with war memories and she used to drift into them unawares as she stood in the kitchen, preparing dinner. When Epstein was a child, her mother would lock herself in the bathroom for hours and Epstein feared that her mother might kill herself behind doors. But she would come out refreshed the next morning.
When Helen Fremont was a child, her mother started sleeping in her daughter, Lara’s room to calm her nocturnal fears. Her daughters could not comprehend this and every night she used to flick the lights on and off, drop to her knees, rummage under the bed, behind the curtain and furniture for hidden enemies. Her checking routine became so lengthy and strenuous, that after a while no one in the family got a proper sleep. In these ways the Second Generation are handed the trauma of the Holocaust in oblique ways through their parents’ behaviour.

Helen Fremont’s mother, who had hidden her past from her children, when she knew of their discovery, very condescendingly started begging them to tell her about it: “Tell me”, my mother cried. “What happened? I don’t even know what happened to my parents!” (ALS 38) After all those years of living with her reconstructed identity, by camouflaging her trauma, when she realized her daughter’s epiphany of it, she felt it crumbling by way of insomniac nights and sudden flashbacks:

She kept falling into holes, as she put it later. Without any warning she found herself back in the ghetto, under the Germans, making up stories to save her life…She had invented herself a hundred times over by the time the war was over; it was nothing to sew a new identity onto the old ones and present it to an unsuspecting America…But once Lara and I started chipping away at her façade, my mother was flooded with memories. Events she had wiped out for fifty years sprang back to life, she later told me. (ALS 43)

Even her childhood drifted back to her with painful clarity – her family’s poverty, their constant concern for food, their cramped living quarters, without running water,
electricity or heat. These subsumed memories and their corresponding responses like fear, insomnia, etc now became the holes – the quagmire which kept threatening her sane selfhood. Plagued by these incessant nightmares, she stopped eating and became tinier by the day: “My mother waved her hand in disgust… All the young people digging, digging for their roots – it’s just another American fad, and you girls are stupid enough to get swept up”. (ALS 41)

Despite Batya’s pleas to her daughters to forget about the past, they remained reluctant. So, the subsumed identity that Batya had safeguarded all those years was to get yet another reconfiguration when she ultimately told her daughters the story of her life. But they felt it to be incomplete or altered: “It seemed she had rehearsed it. She spoke smoothly, in full paragraphs, for nearly four hours”. (ALS 46)

Six years of hard labor in the gulag had wreaked havoc on Kovik’s person. Even though he had recuperated physically, his psyche was still bogged down by the gulag. He had earlier been warned of this by a fellow prisoner, that once a person enters the gulag, it stays on him forever. And it made its hideous appearance at unwary moments at the dining table or near the Christmas tree. Kovik “suffered from the realization that his life had been unbearable”. (ALS 9) So, Kovik’s repositioned identity too still remained a continuum, subject to continual creation and erasure of his dialogic self.

The raw overwhelming experiences of the Holocaust kept butting into the ordinary day-to-day living of Hoffman’s parents. In their small apartment, a chaos of emotions tumbled out in incoherent syllables. She refers to them as ‘emanations’ and not memories of war time experiences that kept erupting in abrupt, fragmentary phrases and
broken refrains. In their homes as in many others, the past broke in, in the form of evil screams following ghastly nightmares, irrepressible sighs, tears and aches that were all the legacy of the damp attic and their years in hiding.

In the midst of her routine, daily chores, Hoffman’s mother would suddenly be overcome by a terrifying image and a torrent of tears. She waxed eloquent an all subjects, but when it came to the subject of the war and her past, she would be cowed down by litanies of sorrow. Nerve-racking images, of her Holocaust days when she and her husband lived in sub human conditions kept haunting her often: “There were the images she returned to again and again, the dark amulets: how she and my father spent their days in a forest bunker and how she waited for him alone”. (ASK 10)

On the most painful matters, Hoffman’s father was silent: “Well we were just ordinary mass men”, my father once tells me in reply to some question, dismissing the significance of that chunk of their lives. Only sketchy outlines of a picture emerge”. (LIT 8)

But when it came to his moments of adventure and heroism he used to articulate them with pride, as the time when he had outsmarted two Ukrainian peasants who wanted to hand him over to the Gestapo station, as also the crucial night when he made his hairsbreadth escape from a German convoy truck, transporting their Jewish haul to a nearby concentration camp. One night on the way back to his hideout, Hoffman’s father “was grabbed by two Ukrainians – strong and drunk – who told him they were going to take him to the Gestapo. They each took him by the arm.

But as they were crossing the bridge of a local river, my father – “strong
as a bull” – threw them off violently, letting them fall against the bridge’s railings (he makes a violent gesture with his powerful arms as he tells me this), and then jumped into the river, though it was half iced over at this time of the year. He stayed in the freezing water, diving under the ice repeatedly for an hour or so, until he was quite sure that his pursuers had given up and gone away”. (LIT 24)

Work was another dialogic event that helped reconstruct the survivors’ shattered identity. Joseph Schwartz of Epstein’s peer group recalled that his parents worked seven days a week, eighteen hours a day!

“Work was the center of his life as it was for many survivors: it was his duty to his family, it was his passion, it was a discipline and a source of real pleasure. Talk was cheap. It accomplished nothing. “My parents don’t want leisure time… They want to keep busy. One of the reasons they work so hard is that it gives them no time to think”. (COH 176)

The physiognomy of the survivors of Holocaust trauma does not characterize them as overtly maimed or mad. It is only with intimate family members that the survivors exhibit symptoms of psychic injury. But unfortunately, they are passed off as behavioural stances rather than as symptoms of disturbance. The harrowing experiences of the shock splintered the identity of the survivors and left them perpetually anguished. Reminiscences of past humiliation and pain replayed intermittently in the psyche hindered the normal benign reality of the present. Unable to fully comprehend or accept their tragedy, they found it herculean to reconstruct their identities or to retrace their formal identities.
Epstein was ashamed of the volatility of her father’s behavior, his lack of etiquette at the dining table, his instability in jobs and his insane temper tantrums at the least instigation.

Almost every evening when he came home from work, he announced that he had severed relations with someone in the garment district. A waiter had served him lukewarm soup. A fellow cutter had made an insulting remark about refugees…There were times when his thoughts strayed from the blouse and apron pieces beneath him to the Olympic Games or to the small town where he was born, and the blade sheared off a piece of his skin and flesh with the cheap cloth. (COH 55)

However it was Epstein’s mother who convinced her daughters of her husband’s true pre-Holocaust personality: “Daddy didn’t always eat this way,” my mother sometimes told me. “His family had manners. They had a cook and servants”. (COH 56) He had come from a respectable family, but the disrespectful sense of self that had marked his Holocaust days, had reconstructed him and made him a symbol of insolence. He seemed to be a split self – alternately raging at unseen enemies and sinking into despair. His children’s childish misbehavior was just a trigger that released this rage which was simmering within him all the time: “Once unlocked, it spurted out of him lava like and furious, impossible to restrain”. (COH 57)

Now it was his over anxiousness regarding his children’s well-being that made him hateful. Because survivor parents like him considered their children as offshoots of their rebirth, they felt threatened even by the least semblance of suffering for their children:
Anything that endangered the health of his children was a personal threat and the fact that we were not eating was no exception. But I did not understand it then. I hated my father when he lost his temper. He spoiled dinner, he made my mother cry, he insulted us with ugly names. He was a bully. (COH 59)

Unlike Epstein’s father who directed his rage at others, her mother directed it towards herself:

My mother did not move from world to world so easily. Her exits and entrances were theatrical, jarring and full of suppressed feeling. All the rage my father spent on taxicab drivers, bank tellers and other people who did not treat him with appropriate respect, my mother turned inward. It festered inside her and came out only when she barricaded herself in the bathroom for hours, carrying on a broken conversation with me through the closed door. (COH 59)

These contradictory reactions by Epstein’s parents testify to the diverse ways in which survivors reacted to the singular traumatic event of the Shoah.

As a young woman before the war, Epstein’s mother Franci had been a frivolous person interested in dancing, skiing, boys and indulging in various sensual experiments. But her years in the camp had transformed her happy, carefree youth into something shameful. And it was this shame that silenced her from voicing her past. “Her judgement of her younger self was unforgiving and verged on contempt. She had been naïve, careless, unaware – the very opposite of what she was now.” (WSCF 164)
This was another repositioning of Epstein’s mother’s identity—yet another reaction to the traumatic event.

Sometimes, in order to survive, one had to shed one’s humanity for a while, to forget it and take on animalistic tendencies. Helen Fremont, whose father was sentenced to the Gulag by a sheer act of betrayal, could never regain trust of his fellow-beings and had in turn, developed a deep skepticism of human motives. The pre-Holocaust, soft gentle Kovik was replaced by a bitter being, determined to tell the world, the latent hypocrisy of Soviet Communism.

Amongst the myriad traumatic elements ingested venomously into the survivors’ self, the sense of utter ignominy for being hapless victims, not for what they had done, but just for who they were, embittered them towards themselves, who were supposed to be ironically the so-called ‘chosen people of God’. Holocaust survivors did not lose just their families and loved ones, but also their religious, social and cultural lineages. This disjunction with their past selves created a vacuum in their sense of security, belonging and identity.

Gabriela Korda, a second generation survivor confided to Helen Epstein that her parents were avid believers before the Holocaust. But, post-survival, they raised their children as un-Jewish as possible, so that what they had suffered would not happen to their children.

Gabriela’s mother, a tall, distinguished-looking blond woman, had her Auschwitz tattoo cut out of her forearm shortly after the war was over. She told Gabriela that her war
experience had taught her to assimilate. Her concerns were now dominated by a need for security, and that need led her to raise her children in as un-Jewish a fashion as possible, so that what had happened to her would not happen to them.

When Helen Fremont’s family survived the war, they became Catholics and changed their name to Bocard. When Helen was a small kid, her mother who used to come to her bedside, every night, taught her to recite the Sign of the Cross in six languages: Polish, Russian, German, Italian, French and English. And every night, Helen selected a language and they recited the Sign of the Cross in that language. She also taught her daughter the Lord’s Prayer in the same manner. Unwilling to take chances once more, she was equipping her child with the means of survival: proof of her Catholicism to anyone in a dozen countries. In this way they erased their Jewish identity by superimposing a Christian one, that too in six languages.

After her First Communion, when Fremont started skipping church and instead remained at home watching TV, her mother who felt that one’s relationship with God was personal, did not compel her daughter to go against her wishes. Her mother paid no attention to that:

She was under the spell of America, and everything American, she believed, must be good for me… My mother always emphasized that one’s relationship with God was personal. She had private tete-a-tetes with God from time to time, I later discovered; my mother and God would bargain a little, and she would extract from Him a promise of our well-being in exchange for her vow to go to Catholic Church each week. (ALS 10)
Fremont knew that her mother’s churchgoing was a tribulation to her. Her irate fault-finding with the Catholic priest’s lack of grammar was in fact a surrogate reaction for her hidden anger for having to forsake her Jewish identity. Her anger was not so much against the priest but rather towards the religion he preached.

“It’s a sin the way that priest speaks English!”… “Jesus died for you and I!” she would exclaim. “For you and I!” She would shake her head in a rage. “An idiot he is!” … “A waste of time!” she’d mutter. “I have better things to do than listen to someone who doesn’t even know basic grammar!” (ALS 11)

However the following week, she would dutifully get dressed and go to church as usual: “She’d made a vow, she told me later, a deal with God, and she did not dare back down.” (ALS 11) It was a shock years later, when Fremont’s father told her that her mother who was indifferent to religion now, was before the Shoah, a staunch believer – an active Zionist! This indeed was an absolute reconstruction of her identity.

Unlike Fremont’s parents, Epstein’s parents had not given up their Jewish faith; but neither were they staunch practitioners of their faith. Epstein’s father too rallied against American rabbis who tried to explain the Holocaust in their sermons as the “will of God”… “An idiot,” he would mutter. “He talks about starvation! What does he know about the gas chambers? Americans! They think they know everything and they know nothing!” (COH 148-149) Epstein’s mother was a Jew who did not practice Judaism. She drew spiritual sustenance not from the Hebrew liturgy, but from the realm of secular European art, particularly music.
In the case of Hoffman’s family, their Jewish faith was foremost. Hoffman’s mother, who saw her daughter crossing herself in front of churches, forbade her doing it, as Jews didn’t do that. However, she did not prevent her from going to church with the other kids; because they weren’t staunch believers themselves and they did not want to deprive her of an innocent pastime: “My family goes to the synagogue only once a year, on the High Holidays.” (LIT 36) And every Christmas, her parents gave them gifts, so that Hoffman and her sister might not feel left out of the surrounding festivities. So, despite being observant Jews, Hoffman’s parents displayed assimilationist tendencies towards their faith, which was a sure signifier of their reconfiguration of the orthodox Jewish faith.

Thus, every survivor family’s reaction was in a unique manner to the event of faith when they raised their kids. In Helen Epstein’s family, Jewishness was an unimportant though acknowledged attribute. In Fremont’s family, it was an erasure of their Jewish faith, by daunting a Catholic one, whereas in Hoffman’s home, their Jewishness was a vital signifier of their identity.

A reversal of conventional gender roles, characteristic of women Holocaust survivors is yet another constituent of authoring dialogic identities. Attuned to social interactions and local grapevine, women frequently became aware of danger before their husbands and devised ways to feed, protect or rescue their families. When Fremont’s father and her uncle were out of work, it was her mother, who, as the sole breadwinner sustained their family, just as her sister Zosia had sustained them during the Holocaust.
In Epstein’s family, it was the women who were the backbones; and this matriarchal trait had been handed down through generations. When her husband, engaged in all kinds of illicit affairs, neglected his family, Epstein’s grandmother Pepi, very bravely, took charge of the situation and steered her family and business from recession.

In concentration camps, women who had never worked outside their homes, in order to survive, adapted themselves to handling even masculine jobs with élan. Helen Fremont’s mother, in a desperate attempt to escape Dr. Mengele’s selection, declared that she was an electrician, with no inkling whatsoever of that job. However, it was this spontaneous declaration that saved her from the gas chambers. And when on one particular occasion, her assistance as an electrician was demanded, she was able to perform the job remarkably well. Bent on surviving the odds, women outsmarted men in their adaptability to crisis and thus saved not only themselves, but also those dependent on them.

In the gender-segregated labour camps, women relied on themselves and on one another for survival. The Holocaust trauma had woven an inexplicable bond of sisterhood among many camp women and though they were strangers earlier, their suffering made them cling together as one family. When Epstein’s mother, Franci was imprisoned at Pankrac, she was put in a cell along with two other women prisoners, Ludmilla and Marianne. It was they who convinced Franci of the precariousness of her condition and urged her to leave the Protectorate. Franci always remembered Pankrac as her first classroom in the University of the War and Ludmilla and Marianne as her first professors.
The survivors shared their traumatic experiences and memories with fellow camp-mates and survivors, but they remained mute among strangers who had no idea of the camp atrocities. When Epstein’s mother and aunt went to their native Prague after their liberation, they were received with total astonishment. After being initially pampered with food and enquiries, the friendliness gradually started to disappear, replaced by a suspicion and fear for their coming. Their acquaintances blamed the hard times for not being able to safeguard Franci’s property given to them for safekeeping. Others new and unfamiliar to them were impertinent enough to voice their skepticisms regarding the cousins’ survival when so many others had perished. The euphoria with which the cousins left for their dear native land, gave place to an utter dread that, they only wanted to see people they had been in prison with, or those who were totally strangers to them.

By the end of 1947, thousands of Holocaust survivors had given birth to their children. And when they made their way back to their former homes in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia and Romania, they were met with shocking inhospitality. Their possessions had been stolen, confiscated or lost and they had no place to live or work. The plight of these homeless survivors became known in the press as the ‘refugee question’. It was the reaction of the indifferent other to the traumatized Holocaust self – which in turn made the survivors reposition themselves away from their original homelands.

Many survivors experienced multiple repositioning until they finally settled in a permanent home in Canada, South America, Australia, Israel or the United States. These emigrants were often perceived with suspicion or as a threat in the emigrant countries.
Others regarded them with ambivalence as to their survival. In the United States, where survivors flocked, allured by presumptions of the American Dream, they encountered a volley of negative reactions and attitudes. Relatives who agreed to sponsor their emigration, very soon started grudging them as a financial burden. No one wanted to empathize with their horrifying war accounts. Moreover they felt that the survivors were pointing an accusing finger at them for not having helped them to escape the calamity. This ultimately became double jeopardy – a recurrent test to selfhood both in their native and emigrant lands.

Most Canadians, who had emigrated before the Holocaust, viewed the survivors’ stories with skepticism and incredulity. This was unbearable to survivors like Hoffman’s parents, who had endured aggressive anti-Semitism in Poland, where no one would have doubted their plight. But in Canada, they were looked upon with awe, as if they were aliens from another planet. One Jewish friend asked Hoffman’s mother sheepishly, whether the concentration camps really were so awful, or whether people were exaggerating.

Reactions such as ‘let bygones be bygones’, ‘be grateful and happy for getting to America’ and such self-justifying epithets strangulated the survivors into silence. However, this imposed silence proved detrimental to the recuperation of the survivors’ emigrant selves and also to their repositioning and adaptation to their new cultures. It isolated them and stifled them from voicing out their agony. Learning the language and culture of the new country introduced additional challenges. Caught in a no-man’s land between the native and the emigrant cultures, survivors became victims of acculturation.
Franci invariably replied that the trip had taken twenty-six hours, that the temperature was over 100 degrees that she was sweating under all those clothes and that out of the ten dollars Franci and Kurt had each been allowed to take out of the country, the New York Port Authority had taken eight. (WSCF 305)

Helen Epstein’s father, Kurt Epstein felt lost in New York. He could not acclimatize himself to the dizzying speeds and sounds of New York. So it was his wife, Franci who got them established in the new country:

Beneath her outer layer of feminine well-put togetherness, Frances saw herself as a soldier. She had forged that persona in camp, held on to it in the difficult postwar years that followed, and arrived in America disciplined, authoritarian, and rarely carefree…It was a persona that gave her the illusion of control over a life that had been buffeted by forces well beyond her control. (WSCF 5)

Helen Fremont’s parents gained passage to the States under Batya’s assumed name of Maria, as head of the household. For Batya, who had switched identities so many times in her life, her name was immaterial. It was just like a label that could be peeled off and reapplied as per the demands of survival. And Giulio suggested their family name of Bocard, because it sounded the least bit Jewish. They were reconstructing new emigrant identities: “To this day, I don’t even know what my mother’s real name is”. (ALS 96). So even after their family had established themselves in the foreign land, they still did not want to relocate to their former faith.
When Fremont and her sister Lara started questioning their mother about their past, their mother became a bundle of emotions: “What difference does it make whether you’re Jewish or Catholic or Protestant or Buddhist?!” she screamed. (ALS 21-23) When Fremont said that she cared to know about her true self, her mother exploded emotionally: “Then I’ve failed as a mother!” she cried. “I’ve failed! I brought you up to be tolerant, not to size everyone up by their religion or color or -” Her voice broke and she exploded with emotion, tears streaming. (ALS 23)

Every century has its massive slaughter of the Jewish people and after what we had been through, we decided that it would be irresponsible to be Jewish and have children. If we wanted children, we could not be Jewish.

(ALS 317)

When Fremont contacted Saul Rosenfeld, an elderly survivor from her father’s hometown of Buczacz, he warned her about talking to her father regarding his past: “Your father will cry when you tell him”, he said. But what does it matter? He has been crying inside all these years”. (ALS 35) Zosia, Fremont’s aunt who had cleverly buried her Holocaust identity and made it impenetrable to others, finally broke down when confronted openly by her niece:

One needs to remember. One needs one’s roots. For me – I have nothing. I have no roots… I’ve been living in Italy for nearly sixty years, but I’m not Italian, I don’t feel Italian. And I come from Poland… but I’m not Polish…. I live from day to day… I wish I did remember my past. But what can I do? Some people in the war lost and arm, or a leg. It’s like that. I lost my past. (ALS 299-300)
The First Generation in Fremont’s family had reconfigured themselves to their newly constructed identity and raised their children too as Catholics, as insurance against disaster. Fremont could not initially see though the American camouflage of her parents identity, but her friends - native Americans told her that her “parents spoke funny English”. (ALS 5) From the time Fremont’s family moved to the United States, her mother used to write to her sister Zosia in Italy, nearly three to four times a week: “They wrote of the same thing day after day: the weather, their bridge games, the children , books, movies, opera – or so my mother claimed whenever I asked her to translate the letters”. (ALS 8) This routine communication was a reinforcement of their reconstructed American identities.

Hoffman’s family emigrated in 1959 to Vancouver, Canada, a place so distant from Cracow that they considered it to be their native city’s earthly antipode. Their cultural shocks started the very moment they boarded the train to Vancouver. They, who could buy a bicycle or several pairs of shoes in Poland with just two dollars, found it a great deal to pay for just four bowls of soup. Ewa and Alina were admitted to a school run by the Canadian government to teach English to newcomers. And the sisters were at once given English names – Eva and Elaine – names that made them strangers to themselves.

Hoffman’s parents rented a store and expanded their business in a year, but it did not land them in the lap of luxury as they had hoped. However Hoffman’s optimistic mother readily accepted her lot and persuaded clients to come to their store, soothing, bargaining and persuading with them. But her husband who could never accept his failure
to realize the American Dream, got incensed at the least provocation and fought with his customers.

Whenever he was free, he started reading the English – Polish Dictionary and also a thickset novel by Faulkner. By this laborious method, he acquired the new language, but he could never adapt himself to the new culture. A tough man used to battling fate, he found the unresisting amorphousness of Canadian civility monotonous. This othering of contrastive cultures also authors reconstruction of identities.

Alina, Hoffman’s sister, then eleven years old, started shaving her legs and applying large amounts of makeup. When her mother saw this for the first time, she was shocked and wept, for, in Poland, only loose girls might have done this at Alina’s age. She could not understand that her daughter was striving for a normal American adolescence. So Alina was sent to a Jewish school, to be educated in Jewishness. She did not know how to rebuke Alina whenever she came home at late hours after her vague evening encounters. She fretted that, in Poland, she would have known how to bring up her children, but here in Canada, she had lost her sureness and authority. Familial bonds seemed precariously loose in Canada. This otherness of the emigrant American culture which was absolutely normal to the Second Generation child was atrociously shocking to the First Generation native European mother.

Even though Hoffman’s mother too had crossed the ocean into the New World, she could not outlive the habits of her small town life. Going downtown was a remarkable outing for her. And she had never learned to drive a car, swim, ski, run, and
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skate or take a trip entirely on her own. Such neoteric pursuits did not belong to the female side of the equation among the traditional Jews of Zalosce.

Helen Epstein reiterates the condition of the First Generation Holocaust survivor thus:

All seemed to have double identities: the person they had been in Europe and the person they had become in the United States. Money seemed to have lost its power to exalt among them. They had all lost so much of it, along with property, profession and place in community, that the lines which normally position people in a given class had been broken and blurred. Emigration had cut them loose from the social hierarchy of their home countries and created a new community. (COH 162)

Hence, emigration despite its setbacks was the most preferred option to Holocaust survivors, as it held the promise of a new beginning, of improved living conditions and of hope in abundance. Whatever the travails they might have endured, because of this uprooting, it did not compare to their hellish past. Yet, despite this solace, emigration involved a lot of stakes, of wholesale losses of one’s familiar landscapes, friends, jobs and also their sense of a psychic home which had been woven inseparably with the language and cultural habits of their past.

As explicated in this chapter, the First Generation survivors’ pre-Holocaust identity is transformed and a new post Holocaust identity gets authored by changes in language, space and culture, which in Bakhtin’s parlance constitute significant others. Thus, Helen Fremont’s mother, Batya, a simple tailor gets transformed into an adept
electrician. Her father, Kovik Buchman, a poor medical student in Poland, later becomes a much sought after physician in the United States.

Helen Epstein’s mother, Franci who was an amateur dressmaker at first, later becomes a sophisticated couturier in Prague, but finally finds her trade atrophying in America. As for Helen Epstein’s father, there was not much of a reconfiguring of identity. From being a water polo champion in Czechoslovakia, he transformed himself into a simple cutter in the garment industry in the new world.

Eva Hoffman’s mother, Maria Wydra who was an ordinary home maker in Prague, started aiding and improvising her husband’s business in Canada. Hoffman’s father, Boris Wydra who was a thrifty gambler and shtetl trader, ultimately became a disillusioned hustler and trader of second hand furniture in Canada.

Thus, in accordance with the aforementioned findings, this chapter concludes reiterating Bakhtin’s precept of the indeterminate and unfinalizable self. And in the unhappy typology of large-scale genocidal violence, the Holocaust is the most unique and incomparable dehumanizing and repugnant atrocity of man’s inhumanity to man, which can never be undone or resolved even aeons and miles afar from it. Nevertheless, the almost adamantine will of the survivors to resurge from the cataclysm and their achievements in reconstructing their lives and identities, reduce to absurdity the effrontery to stigmatize them.
And their narratives are strong critiques of how people can reconstruct and reposition their identities and their lives and move forward successfully despite traumatic and negative experiences.