CHAPTER THREE

Reconfiguring the Figured: A Second Generation Dilemma

*The guardianship of the Holocaust is being passed on to us. The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is transmuted; into history, or into myth.* –Eva Hoffman

This chapter traces the existential dilemma of the Second Generation in reconfiguring their own identities based on the figured identities of their parents. It examines the Second Generation’s quandary in negotiating their identities on their own world, the world of their parents and also the world outside. The oeuvre of the Second Generation memoirists enables this tracing and observing of the changes in the positionality of the Second Generation identity over time. Bakhtin’s Dialogism has been adopted to study the ontological processes whereby individuals develop an understanding of their self in relation to the other. This chapter thus reiterates that identities are not closed monologic systems, but rather processes of dialogic interplay posited in the living dynamics between the self and the other.

A shared past, especially a traumatic one, provides a sense of unity within communities and helps define their group identity. Each person or group remembers events in different ways, based on how these memories can better serve them. Past experiences embalmed in the mind as memories influence peoples futures and also shapes their identity. One’s identity and sense of self is formed primarily in relation to one’s past and to the past of those connected or related. This relative memory then leads to self
introspection and construction of a self’s identity. Barnett defines identity as the understanding of one’s self in relation to others.

Memory and identity are interdependent of each other and it is difficult to decide upon the primacy of either. Memory plays an important role in identity formation because it is through memory that people picture themselves. There is also a liminal nexus among trauma, memory and identity since remnants of traumatic memories keep intruding and disturbing an individual’s identity. Survivors of genocide situate their past, present, and future on these constructed traumatic memories. These shared constructed memories then become the means by which these victim groups come to define themselves as a community and also become the driving force behind a number of their common goals.

Following the Holocaust, Jewish identity underwent a complete change. The First Generation of direct survivors of the Holocaust is reaching the end of their lifespan, yet the repercussions of the Holocaust keep reverberating in the succeeding generations. The Second Generation children of survivors have also been vicariously traumatized because of their Holocaust legacy. The Holocaust victim tag remains an appendage of the Second Generation children of survivors as well and they find it impossible to carve a unique identity for them divested of this. In this sense, the memory of the succeeding generations is not just a record of a past occurrence, but a construct formed while bearing testimony to those events.

With the death and passing away of the First Generation and the emergence of the Second Generation, there has been a shift in Holocaust response from firsthand experience to secondary knowledge. This knowledge is constructed out of myriad
fragments of images, narrative etc. and is deeply ingrained into the Second Generation consciousness.

Events of the Holocaust’s atrocity and suffering create traumatic memories in individuals and these can be triggered time and again, even ages after the lapse of the trauma. Such traumatic memory attacks keep shattering and corroding the self chronically. Hirsch purports the concept that memory of the Holocaust may be transmitted almost directly into the minds of the children of survivors:

Post-memory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of stories, images, and behaviors. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to ‘seem’ to constitute memories in their own right…To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. …These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of post-memory. (Hirsch 106)

There is a plethora of research concerning the history of the Holocaust and its influence on the First Generation survivors’ identity, comprising accounts of their victimization, survival, assimilation and memories. A very few studies delve into how the Holocaust trauma affects the identity construction of the Second Generation. Tracing the
influence of the Holocaust on the Second Generation is fundamental for understanding the Second Generation’s identity.

The Second Generation feel that they need to reconnect to the Holocaust in order to directly connect with their Jewishness. To be Jewish today, is translated into a need to remember the Holocaust, and also to relate their own lives to this trauma of remembrance. Even though they were not direct victims of the concentration camps, its aftermath continues to influence their lives. They are considered to have acquired “the scars without the wounds”. (Albeck 106).

The Holocaust has also become the core of modern Jewish identity, since children of survivors first relate to their Jewish heritage through their parents’ Holocaust experiences. This feeling of personal connection with unlived experiences becomes a crucible for the birth of the new Jewish identity. Despite lack of firsthand knowledge of the genocide, these children of survivors felt the response and influence of the Holocaust throughout their childhoods. The Holocaust shaped and molded the ways in which these children interacted with their parents, with their peers, and ultimately shaped the way in which they saw and defined their own identity. Discovering the true history of parents' experiences during the Holocaust becomes the reason for a new trauma.

For Helen Fremont and her sister Lara, the Holocaust was a non-entity. They were raised Catholic in a small city in the Midwest. Soon after Helen Fremont was born, her parents changed their name to Bocard and settled into their new American identity. The siblings knew since childhood that their parents had emerged as the lone survivors of
their families, after a war. Their only other living relative was their maternal aunt, Zosia who lived in distant Italy.

What I didn’t realize was that all our names had been recently invented…

My parents had changed our name upon applying for citizenship in the United States. To this day I don’t even know what my mother’s real name is. (ALS 15)

The siblings Helen Fremont and Lara had grown up hearing the happily ending love story of their parents after being separated by the war for six years. But the news of the intervening six years during the war was completely shrouded in mystery:

And so my sister and I grew up between the trunks of these two old trees, twisted and tough, throwing enough shade to shelter three or four continents. Childhood was a strange place to find oneself after so much history. As the baby of the family, I was the tail end of the history, and by the time I would try to make sense of it, it had been erased by my elders.

(ALS 9)

For Eva Hoffman, who grew up with the knowledge of the Holocaust, right from an early age, the Holocaust was a deeply internalized but strangely unknown past. The Holocaust was the genesis of knowledge of herself, her family and the world. The Holocaust and its portfolio of deaths and losses seemed so ubiquitous in everyone she encountered. Her first knowledge of the Holocaust was about her parents’ tales of hiding, hairsbreadth escapades and deaths of their loved ones. She imbibed these repetitive live flashbacks as a sort of scary fairy tale.
Emanations of war time experiences kept erupting unexpectedly in her home in the form of chaotic emotions, incoherent interjections and refrains of abruptly fragmented phrases. She saw her parents’ past breaking through in the screams of her mother’s nightmares, her eerie sighs, sudden tears and unexplained outbursts. Only later did Hoffman understand these as the legacy of the damp attic and of the inhuman conditions that they had endured during their hiding at the time of the Holocaust. These “fragmentary phrases lodged themselves in my mind like shards, like the deadly needles I remember from certain fairy tales, which pricked your flesh and could never be extracted again”. (ASK 11)

Thus, despite ignorance of their Jewish and Holocaust identities, Fremont and her sister, Lara had a post memorial reckoning of these, through their parents’ gestures and attitudes.

Helen Epstein knew right since childhood that she had lost her grandparents and relatives in the war. And this in turn disturbed her childhood, because in her day dreams and nightmares, she saw things which she knew no little girl should see : “piles of skeletons and blackened barbed wire with bits of flesh stuck to it the way flies stick to walls after they are swatted dead.”(COH 9). Plagued by these horrific images, Epstein grew up feeling hounded that she too might be taken away and be kidnapped or killed. So, she and her brother armed themselves with so-called weapons from their mother’s kitchen – a potato masher, wooden spoons and knives, and waited behind doors at night till their scare paled away or till they were too tired to stand guard anymore.
The real plight of the Second Generation is in coming to terms with an incomprehensible identity which they create by positioning themselves in the post memory of their parents’ past. First Generation survivors, who had experienced the Holocaust, could understand and recuperate from its aftermath because of its actuality, a lived-in experience; whereas for the Second Generation, especially the children who internalized it with only childish levels of perception, the horror remained incomprehensible and inadmissible. The Second Generation children found it irrational to perceive the contents of what was passed on to them:

For Hoffman,
the attic in my imagination, to give only the most concrete example,
probably bore no resemblance to the actual attic in which my parents were hidden. In fact, I had almost no information to go on, nothing that would allow me to put together a real attic in my mind. (ASK 34)

When Helen Fremont was told that her parents had been in concentration camp, her childhood conception or rather misconception of it was as a place of intensely focused mental activity. And she surmised it as the reason for her mother’s impenetrable silence about her past. To Fremont, a suburban child in the 1960s, her parents Holocaust travails were unimaginable. A food line during the war, which her mother had mentioned, could only be analogous to a food line at the supermarket, for Fremont. If her parents bemoaned the scarcity of food during the war, to her it only meant ‘no pop tarts’. It was only when she was in her twenties that Fremont really tried to understand what her parents had actually gone through.
Helen Epstein’s childhood self had been bogged down by the presence of an “iron box” (9), but she was never sure what it was. Sometimes Epstein felt that her iron box contained a tomb, since many of her relatives had just vanished: “Our family tree had been burnt to a stump”. (COH 15) Perpetually conscious of this unfathomable burden, only later did she realize that it was a liminal, post memorial manifestation of the horrors of the Holocaust, whose secondary witness she had become by inheriting its legacy in her subconscious. Desperate for a release, she set out on a quest to find other Second Generation survivors like her who would endorse her holocaust obsession:

There had to be I thought, an invisible silent family scattered about the world. I began to look for them, to watch and listen, to collect their stories… I set out to find a group of people who like me, were possessed by a history they had never lived. I wanted to ask them questions, so that I could reach the most elusive part of myself. (COH 21)

Starting from Toronto, Canada, Epstein spanned the globe connecting to her Second Generation peers. Each of them had their own unique perception of their Holocaust legacy.

For Deborah Schwartz, a Southern beauty queen from Toronto, her identity as a child of survivors was a matter of great pride and exuberance. Deborah never felt abnormal in any way, shape or form. In fact, she always felt very much the opposite. She was living a very typical, normal life, playing the role of wife and mother to the best of her ability. And she resented being talked about and being categorized by anyone, especially by psychiatrists who were making strong remarks about the survivors by hording them into a homogenous mass.
Deborah’s unequivocal identification of herself as a child of survivors stunned Epstein, who did not like acknowledging her child of survivor status by talking about it:

I did not like talking about my past or the war, because talk meant accepting that the war had happened and, more than anything else in the world I wished it had not. The idea that my mother and father had been forced out of their homes and made to live like animals – worse than animals – was too shameful to admit. (COH 19)

For Eli Rubinstein, a doctoral student in Philosophy and very strictly observant Jew, married to a daughter of survivors, his fatherhood was a way of responding to the Holocaust:

I really feel that my raising a family has cosmic significance. I feel I have a sacred duty to have children. I feel it’s the only way to respond to the evil of the Holocaust and to assure that the death of my family and the Six Million was not in vain. (COH 23)

For Rochelle, Eli Rubinstein’s sister, a young Canadian – the emphasis on her as a child of survivors to be happy at all costs, became a burden: “I had to be happy in order to make up for everything that happened…It was a tremendous responsibility. I didn’t know if I could do it. It was as if each of us was making up for a lost person.” (COH 42)

For Joseph Schwartz, Deborah’s younger brother and Sociology student, his Holocaust legacy made him a loner and misfit:

I always felt different… I always felt alone… Even in Hebrew school, I felt different from the Jews. They were nice boys. I liked them. But I felt
their Jewishness was a matter of rituals and traditions. I had those too, but more than that I felt that I was a Jew with suffering attached to my name.

(COH 181)

For Aviva, a highly renowned musician, the Holocaust was a non-entity: “I have an emotional reaction when people try to make it sensational, when they say that survivors or their children are disturbed. I don’t think I’m disturbed at all.” (COH 113)

For Sara, an Israeli teacher married to an American, her Holocaust legacy had procured for her a family life of tension and isolation: “There was never a happy moment that I can remember at home… I never felt that we were loved: I felt we were there to be used”. (COH 117)

For Gabriela Korda, who had grown up in South America, pretending to be a Protestant, being a child of survivors made her a master of camouflage with a double identity. Gabriela had attended a German School for eight years and she led a double identity since then: “I was aware that I was Jewish… But when people asked me what religion I was, I said I was Protestant. Somehow I didn’t feel I should say I was Jewish. I didn’t feel it would do me any good”. (COH 132)

For Frank Collin, who had been engaged in Nazi activities in the Chicago area since his early twenties, his identification was with the Nazis: “He had started a Nazi organization of his own and had posed for the press alongside a portrait of Adolf Hitler and denied that his father was a Jew”. (COH 137)
For Ruth Alexander, who grew up in New York, her parents’ association with fellow survivors was demeaning: “I always felt suffocated by the greeners. I hated the way they talked. I hated the heavy, look-what-I’ve been through atmosphere they carried around with them… I was very glad my parents didn’t have numbers, it embarrassed me”. (COH 191)

For Albert Singerman, a Vietnam War veteran, the Holocaust had deprived him of any solicitude from his parents: “Neither of my parents are really capable of showing love or affection. My mother especially. The camps had just screwed up her mind. She could never go to work. She was just too nervous a person to tolerate anything”. (COH 223)

For Yehudah Cohen, a research scientist with a penchant for humour, which he inherited from his humorous father who was able to give a lighter vein even to the horrors of the Holocaust, his own acceptance of the Holocaust legacy was child’s play. “I think you can tell a lot more through humour. I feel proud that my father can tell me humorous anecdotes about the war and feel sure that I can understand the rest”. (COH 240)

For Tomas, a young man who ultimately joined his father and step-sister in Jerusalem, after having grown up with his single mother in Czechoslovakia, his new identity made him feel estranged: “I was not raised as a Jew. This is not my country. These aren’t the people I know. I can’t speak the language. I don’t like the food. I tried for the first few months to like it here… But I can’t do it. I can’t make myself into something I’m not”. (COH 275)
For Tom Reed, a magna cum laude graduate from Yale, he felt bereft of form because of his Holocaust legacy: “The legacy may have given me energy and support but it had not really given me direction”. (COH 328)

All these children of survivors had absorbed their parents’ attitude towards the Holocaust “through a kind of wordless osmosis”. (COH 137) Those children of survivors whose parents had sealed off their past responded by sealing off their own. Those whose parents had talked openly about their experience were most at ease with the subject, while others whose parents had tried to forget had little to say themselves. These second generation children of survivors “had identified with their parents so closely that parental attitudes which had been forged during the war became their own”. (COH 137)

After the Holocaust, most survivors left their native lands and emigrated to various places like Israel, America and Australia, quickly entered into loveless marriages with fellow survivors and begot children immediately to rebuild their family life as early as possible. This was a reconstruction of the First Generation survivors’ identity from that of vulnerable victim to invincible survivor. However, this attempt at replacing murdered family members exacerbated the already strained milieu for raising children.

The Second Generation children, whose parents were still living with the scars of the Holocaust, felt themselves being deprived of nurturance and emotional intimacy. Constant exposure to their parents’ agony gave them the vicarious stress analogous to having confronted the cataclysm themselves. This inheritance of the Holocaust trauma is examined using Trauma Theory, which defines trauma as an extremely distressing or emotionally disturbing event, which could lead to the disruption of normal, everyday
activities. The traumatic responses of the Second Generation to their survivor parents’ Holocaust experiences are referred to in modern parlance as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Recent studies of mother-child relations have revealed that the mother’s mental, emotional states are transmitted to the newborn through discreet signals like eye contact, smiles, sneers and even a mother’s ways of holding the babe. These subtle parental gestures are the othering stimuli which create a dialogic response in the Second Generation self. Based on the interpretation of these stimuli, the self transfixes them into concrete symbols for life. This is the difficulty that the Second Generation faces - a frightening battle with shadows of experiences and not realities. Second Generation individuals are often unable to cope with this extreme trauma, thereby estranging their normal day to day living and functioning in society.

Trauma is transmitted intergenerationally in a latent manner, analogous to the transmission of heat and light. Many Second Generation survivors imagine themselves to be mediums into which the Holocaust memories transmitted themselves and they took upon themselves a sacred duty to transfer the legacy of their memory to posterity. The knowledge of these traumatic memories caused irreversible setbacks to their psychological growth and development.

The Second Generation survivors struggled to evolve a unique identity of their own, but the First Generation, those who died and those who survived complicated that process. Survivor parents who were over protective of their children, even to the point of suffocation, in turn transmitted their distrust of others to their children. Consequently,
these children became hyper-sensitive or found it difficult to become independent and trust others outside their families.

At times, there were bonds and transactions between survivor parents and children that sometimes took lifetimes to unravel. This transmission of unlived trauma, which Hirsch refers to as post memory, baffled the ratiocinative capacities of the Second Generation, because these traumatic memories were not of their own personal experiences, but rather mediated through imagination from their parents’ behaviour, which in turn made them doubly jeopardized – “For who, after all, wants to think of oneself as traumatized by one’s very parentage, as having drunk victimhood, so to speak, with one’s mother’s milk?” (ASK 60)

An identity separate from the First Generation seemed impossible to achieve, by these Second Generation authors, when the past constantly situated itself for the Second Generation as present. Between the past and the present these children of survivors struggled to find their own place within the context of a new Holocaust-centric environment. They did not share their parents’ experiences and knowledge of genocide, yet their lives have continued to be shaped and molded by these events.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, every person is influenced by others in an inescapably intertwined way and consequently no one can be said to be isolated. Existence is never completed, but is forever evolving through constant dialogic encounters with the other in the familiar, the social, the cultural and racial arenas. Bakhtin proposed a triadic, architectonic model of the human self, comprising three components – ‘I-for-myself’, ‘I-for-the-other’ and ‘other-for-me’. Bakhtin’s standpoint is
that, that it is through the I-for-the –other that human beings primarily evolve a sense of identity, because it encompasses others’ views of the self. This axiom can be seconded by the renowned German psychoanalyst Erik Erikson’s proposition that the environment that young people grow in, helps to shape their identities. These environmental attributes coupled with inherited parental traits shape the identity of an individual.

Bakhtin always subsumes identity construction into dialogic episodes. For Bakhtin, the world is an event and people are always dialogic, not only with other people, but also with everything else in the world. There are various types of stimuli like the utterances, gestures and attitudes of the First Generation others which could initiate this dialogism. The self incorporates words, phrases, texts and discourses of these others and transforms them into its own words, populated with its own intentions and meanings in a new context of use. A single consciousness does not generate a sense of its self, only the awareness of the other’s consciousness, situated outside the self, which can produce that perspective. Bakhtin hence expounds:

This other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something, that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze, the world behind his back … are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes… To annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person. (AHAA 23)

Bakhtin hence asserts that any true understanding of the self is dialogic in nature, as it is the active and creative other which gives a shape to the self. Hence, Bakhtin’s
dialogic principle can be applied to the study of trans generational identity among 
Holocaust survivors.

Most First Generation parents who were eager to resurge from their traumatic 
past, kept it hidden from their children as they felt that their children were a literal and 
symbolic rebirth- a physical representation of their survival and even more a negation of 
the Holocaust. They were a reawakening of a new chapter not only in their lives, but also 
in Jewish history—one that very well may never have existed. Yet, this weight that fell 
upon the shoulders of the Second Generation was both an honor, as they were given a 
venerable place within this new post-Holocaust Jewish community, and a burden, as 
these expectations were nearly impossible to fulfill.

Epstein’s parents looked upon her as a miracle, but Epstein just wanted to be 
normal, free of all parental expectations. They wanted her to be special, but she felt that it 
deprived her of the carefree pleasures of growing up. This First Generation past which 
worked its way through the Second Generation self caused severe hindrances like 
difficulties in establishing relationships, pervasive sense of guilt for no cause, an 
exacerbated desire for perfectionism and fear of losses.

Children of Holocaust survivors grew up in a contradictory state of the presence 
and absence of Holocaust memory in their lives. Exhumation of this traumatic post 
memory is essential for coping with the trauma. For some, these intrusive memories fade 
with the passing years, whereas for others these may become a dead weight for a lifetime, 
interfering with their mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.
Inherent contradictions began to arise that further confused the Second Generation’s search for identity. Many Second Generation children found themselves to be a bundle of contradictions, with regard to the faith component of their identity. They define themselves as Jewish without participating in the tenets of Judaism. This is a repositioning of the Second Generation’s identity as these children of survivors are born into the Jewish faith, but do not adhere to any strict or regular religious practice.

Hoffman knew that her family was Jewish, but the formal religious education that she received in school was Catholic. Moreover the Catholic servants at home also tried their best to infuse some Catholic feeling in her by teaching her Catholic prayers. But when this came to Hoffman’s mother’s knowledge, she confronted her: “You’re grown up enough now to understand this,” she says. “It’s time you stopped crossing yourself in front of churches. We’re Jewish and Jews don’t do that.” (LIT 29) So, henceforth during prayer time in school, when the other kids recited Christian prayers, Hoffman used to stand silently because her parents had instructed her to show respect but not to compromise by actually saying the words.

In Hoffman’s house, they had a Christmas tree every year and Hoffman and her sister were given gifts on St. Nicholas’ Day. Hoffman only later understood that this was not a sign of assimilation, but an act of generosity of her parents, so that Hoffman and her sister would not feel left out of the surrounding festivities. However this continual shift in Hoffman’s parents’ attitude to her faith only seemed to addle her already confused sense of identity.
Joseph Schwartz, a member of Epstein’s peer group was sent to a Catholic school. When the other kids used to recite the Lord’s Prayer, Joseph used to mumble the Jewish ‘Shma Yisrael’ so that it could block the Catholic incantation. During her childhood, Epstein too dreaded going to Sunday school, where her parents sent her for a formal Jewish upbringing. Epstein did not believe in God more than she believed in Santa Claus. She found it unjust to worship this God who had become incognito when her parents suffered. She could not worship this God who had let her mother suffer:

He had brought his people out of Egypt three thousand years ago, and every year we commemorated it, as if we too had been slaves in the land of Pharaoh. But my parents had been slaves in Europe just fifteen years before. Where had he been? (COH IX)

So, Sunday school and its activities seemed a humbug to Epstein. Her parents had sent her there to help her learn about her roots. But for Epstein, it was “like trying to graft a foreign branch to a native tree. The graft did not take.” (COH IX)

For Fremont, who grew up as a Catholic, her compulsive faith exercises were an ordeal. Every night, before going to bed, compelled by her mother, Fremont had to mechanically mumble the Sign of the Cross in any one of the six languages she knew:

She was sending me into a night of sleep, protected by a God who would respond to me in any language, under any sky. What I didn’t understand was that my mother was equipping me with the means of survival: proof of my Catholicism to anyone in a dozen countries. (ALS 9)
When she was nine, Fremont was exempted from attending church: “I don’t have to go to chu-urch,” I sang gleefully, over and over. It was my most delicious religious experience.” (ALS 13) So, while her parents and sister were at church, Fremont sat at home, watching her favourite TV shows:

This is how I worshipped my Catholic God each Sunday at noon through the miracle of television… It occurs to me now that my parents were not keen on organized religion or orthodoxy of any sort. It was as if they had read the Cliff Notes on Catholicism. (ALS 11)

Fremont could not understand why her mother who was so strict with bedtime prayers, allowed her to skip Sunday church-going – a Christian obligation! This was a continual repositioning of Fremont’s identity – as an observant worshipper in her home at bedtime and as an unobservant Catholic on the Sabbath.

As it is traditional in Judaism to name children after deceased relatives, some of the Second Generation children were so named as a means to recognize and honour those who died during the Holocaust. Frequently, these children of survivors were looked upon as new avatars or substitutes for lost spouses, for murdered children or other perished relatives. The second generation who had no inkling whatsoever of who they were supposed to represent found it difficult to evolve a clear identity of their own.

Since Hoffman’s parents had no lack of dead relatives to be honoured, Hoffman was named Ewa Alfreda after her two dead grandmothers, but she did not have even a dim impression of them: “I did not have even the most shadowy images of these grandmothers, nor a sense that I had lost something with their deaths”. (ASK 64)
When Epstein did not conform to the feminine model of her grandmother after whom she was named, her father became perplexed and sad: “How can you whistle before breakfast?” he would ask me. “Grandmother Helena never did that”. (COH 56) This innocent gesture of a little child was looked upon as an outrage by the First Generation parent, who saw in his little daughter the solemn image of his mother. However to the Second Generation child, this accusation that she never lived up to her namesake, made her feel belittled and guilty.

Eli Rubinstein, Epstein’s peer too had originally been named Eliahu Mordechai in Hebrew after both his grandparents who were murdered by the Germans: “Although it’s a weak substitute for not having grandparents, I’ve always felt that having their name enables something to live on in me”. (COH 24) Unlike Epstein and Hoffman who were not comfortable with their names, Eli Rubinstein felt comforted that his name served to be a surrogate for his missing grandparents.

Thus, the very event of having a name was dialogic to the Second Generation, as it kept altering the perceptions of their selves, relative to the othering of their namesakes.

Even without a clear verbal picture from their parents about their past, the Second Generation seem to have imbibed it by a kind of wordless osmosis. Unexpected torrents of tears, sighs, groans and similar nightmarish outbreaks were covert revelations of the past traumatic memories simmering deep within the First Generation selves. And it was through this covert medium that these post memories were transmitted to the Second Generation.
Hoffman had often stood as a helpless spectator to her mother’s sudden traumatic outbursts about her murdered younger sister:

It’s the middle of a sun-filled day, but suddenly, while she’s kneading some dough, or perhaps sewing up a hole in my sweater’s elbow, my mother begins to weep softly. “This is the day when she died,” she says, looking at me with pity, as if I too were included in her sorrow. (LIT 6)

Epstein too could recall her mother reliving her Holocaust experiences: “Like my mother and Deborah and Joseph’s mother … would often drift into a memory of the war as she stood in the kitchen preparing dinner, or sat at the kitchen afterwards.” (COH 26)

Fremont’s repetitive queries to her parents about their past only led to evasive replies or emotional outbursts: “My mother didn’t answer right away. “They died”, she said slowly, “in a bomb”. Her eyes looked so dark and full of memories, Lara and I grew quiet… My discovery that my father’s mother too had died in a bomb was much less horrifying”. (ALS 2)

Hoffman’s parents too weren’t elaborate about their pre-Holocaust life: “My parents tell me little about their pre-war life in Zalosce, a small town near Lvov, as if the war erased not only the internal world in which they lived but also its relevance to their new conditions. “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)

Epstein underscores the ambiguity of the past that she and her peers felt regarding their former relatives and family members. In *Children of the Holocaust*, Eli Rubinstein
who missed not having grandparents was just told that bad people had killed them: “I didn’t understand who these bad people were or why they would want to kill my grandparents. I wasn’t aware of any connection between them being killed and their being Jewish.” (COH 25)

With the passing away of the childhood phase and the emergence of the adolescent phase, the Second Generation found it difficult to balance the pressures of their Holocaust legacy and that of growing up. In normal adolescent homes in the Western world, a drive for autonomy and freedom made the fledgling individual to move away from parental bonds, towards an independent living. But for the Second Generation Holocaust survivors, this innate urge to get away is underplayed by a feeling of guilt of betrayal of their vulnerable, victimized parents. This continual tug of war between freedom and loyalty very often results in the Second Generation being sapped of their identity, by subjugating their needs and wishes for those of their parents. This is a repositioning of the Second Generation identity from being carefree, independent youth to compelled caretakers responsible for their vulnerable parents.

The exact realization and understanding of their Holocaust legacy occurred at different stages and via different means for the Second Generation:

It never occurred to Fremont that someone in her family might actually be Jewish, until she was in her thirties working as a public defender in Boston. During a party for lawyers in Boston, a young Jewish woman accosted Fremont that she must be Jewish: “Of course”, she interrupted, “but if they were Catholic, they wouldn’t have had to
escape and emigrate to the States. I bet your parents were Jewish. Or at least your mother”. (ALS 18)

Fremont grew very fond of this idea of being Jewish as she felt that it would explain so much of all those mysteries of childhood and her endless tiptoeing around a jigsaw puzzle past in which all the pieces were missing except her parents. As a child her questions about her family had always elicited strange, winding soliloquies. Now, Fremont understood the key to all those mysteries.

An erstwhile postcard from their grandmother and subsequent information from Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Israel convinced Fremont that their parents were definitely Jewish:

“Dad’s mom was Jewish… She didn’t die in a bomb as Mom and Dad always said. She was killed at Auschwitz. Or on the way to Auschwitz. Or somewhere. She was killed by the Nazis, I’m sure… That’s why Dad never found her grave. She wasn’t bombed in Buczacz”. I was right and I was wrong. All I knew was Auschwitz. I had a lot to learn…Excitement flushed my face, and something else – a sense of horror slowly seeped through. (ALS 26)

The Fremont siblings also established contacts with Mendel Goldberg, their mother’s cousin, who had survived the Holocaust. He explicated to them the travails of the Holocaust and also confirmed that their mother’s parents had been gassed at a concentration camp called Belzec.
Fremont and her sister Lara were overwhelmed with this newly acquired knowledge. So, Lara and Helen Fremont became detectives overnight, calling and writing across the globe for a trace of their past. They found out that they had uncles and aunts they had never heard of before. They got in touch with their parents’ former friends, the elderly Janiczeks, who bespoke for their friends’ secrecy regarding their past:

“No one has a right to judge them. They did this to protect you. You must understand this”, he said solemnly. “They did this for your sake, to protect you.” … maybe your mother can’t tell you because she had a very very tough time. That’s why. But I’m touched that you’re doing this. Roots, roots the tree, sure I know. What else can you do?” (ALS 35)

Thus, this knowledge of being Jewish suddenly altered and reconfigured the identities of the Fremont siblings.

While her Holocaust legacy had remained anonymous for Fremont, in the case of Hoffman, it was the very knowledge of her origin. Hoffman’s parents had let their daughter know subtly about their past. But its incomprehensive nature made her to pretend that it was made-up. However, try as much as she could, she had to acknowledge that this pain was the point of her origin and it was useless to try to get away from that.

When I am much older, I try to get away more. Surely there is no point in duplicating suffering, in adding mine to hers. And surely there are no useful lessons I can derive from my parents’ experience: it does not apply to my life, it is in fact misleading, making me into a knee-jerk pessimist. This is what I tell myself, and for a while I have a policy of keeping my mother’s stories at a long arm’s length. (ALS 25)
But then a chance meeting with one of her mother’s former friends reveals many hitherto unheard of facts about her parents. She is shocked to know that during the war, her mother who had suffered a miscarriage was so weak that she had to be carried on her husband’s back for kilometer after kilometer across the harsh snow. “As I listen, I lower my head in acknowledgement that this – the pain of this is where I come from, and that its useless to try to get away”. (ALS 25) So, however much Hoffman tried to reposition herself from her Holocaust identity, it always proved futile, that ultimately she had to acknowledge its presence as part of her dialogic self.

Unlike Fremont’s ignorance of her Holocaust legacy and Hoffman’s staunch avowal of it, Epstein’s attitude to her legacy was one of nonchalance. However, the iron box of her childhood self still continued to goad her at times, even after she entered adulthood. Desperate for a release, she set out on a quest to find other second generation survivors like her who would endorse her Holocaust obsession:

There had to be I thought, an invisible silent family scattered about the world. I began to look for them, to watch and listen, to collect their stories… I set out to find a group of people who like me, were possessed by a history they had never lived. I wanted to ask them questions, so that I could reach the most elusive part of myself. (COH21)

After her mother’s death, Epstein set out to Czechoslovakia, Austria and Israel, searching out for clues and people who had known her own family. Despite Epstein’s nonchalance towards the Holocaust, its liminal presence kept reconfiguring her identity, which in turn spearheaded her Second Generation quest.
The Holocaust not only defines the second generation’s identity, it also becomes catalytic to the change in their attitude to their parents and siblings. The confrontation about the Holocaust alters the dynamics between children and parents.

Fremont was skeptical about confronting her parents with her new knowledge:

I hadn’t realized it would be so hard to tell my parents that we knew… It seemed like an accusation. I hadn’t meant to be so blunt, so harsh… I was consumed by and excruciating sense of guilt that I had just shattered my mother’s world… My mother was taken over by nightmares… Her daughters were playing with fire... Hot on the track of our discovery, we were dragging her back across then burning coals. (ALS 43)

Unlike Fremont who had the terrible task of confronting her parents about their past, which ultimately resulted in an estrangement between them, Hoffman who had grown up on the foundation of the Holocaust knew since childhood that her legacy was an undeniable part of her being. However she had qualms about discussing it with her parents, for fear she might hurt them. But after the death of her parents, she felt herself compelled to re-search their past:

I knew more because I was a close witness to my parents’ pain... But I could not begin to grasp the tortuous complexities of the sadness, or inquire into its unconscious causes. I could only stay near the sadness and accompany my parents to some extent on it. (ASK 56)

So, she wanted to address frontally the profound effects of her traumatic history, its paradoxical richness and the kind of knowledge it had bequeathed to her.
Epstein too had grown up with the knowledge of the Holocaust right from childhood. But it was only as a matter of embarrassment to her:

I did not want to know that my father had been in prison, that other men had spit on him, kicked him, beat him. He did not mention these things but we knew them nonetheless. The way his feet looked, the toes yellowing, the nails deformed; the way he ate meals; the way he reacted to demands on him – all said more than words. How could my father, so tall, so strong, let that happen? And how could he tell people about it? (COH 62)

For Epstein, her parents and the ones who had come to America after the war were eccentric in her eyes, because she felt that they were not like Americans and they children too were not like other American children. Although they all knew that a great deal of pain pervaded their households, they never addressed it by name. But at twenty-nine, Epstein decided to address it.

Increasing number of Second Generation members report problems of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, characterized by symptoms like re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive memories, emotional numbing, depression and inhibition, thereby firmly testifying to social pathology being passed on to the next generation. Disturbances in the parent-child relationship in survivor families contributed to this. In *Children of the Holocaust*, Sara, who Epstein interviewed, was one such victim. Sara had had a very devastated childhood:

My mother didn’t teach me to love myself… I didn’t want to be at home. When I stayed away, they used to call me a prostitute, a thief... The only thing I had heard from my parents was that the world was a jungle and
there are no friends. It affected my relationships with people. I created walls…It’s something I live with now, all the time. I’m afraid of my husband being taken away from me, even if he goes on a fishing trip.

(COH 125)

Thus these Second Generation individuals like Sara try to reposition themselves from others by creating walls of distrust, fear, anger or cold detachment. Being irked by their parents’ putative vulnerability, they try to assert their own rights over their parents’ and ignore the subsequent hurts ensued. Nevertheless their guilt and sense of responsibility resurfaces and they find themselves being tortured by these see-saws of detachment and guilt. Thus, these changing walls reconfigure the Second Generation self and direct it towards abnormality.

Epstein’s other peers like Ruth Alexander and Eli Rubinstein felt dejected to think of their parents past. Ruth felt that “it was horrible, very upsetting to them. It was also upsetting to me. It was my responsibility not to ask. I knew that they didn’t want me to know but I did know. So, I pretended not to”. (COH 193)

Eli Rubinstein too had a great difficulty recalling the Holocaust tales of his mother: “It was very painful to listen to. These were things that had happened to my mother and who’s closer to me than my mother? Sometimes I cried but I was embarrassed to have her see me do that. I certainly didn’t want to hurt my mother further by upsetting her” (COH 26)

Rochelle, unlike her brother, Eli Rubinstein the protégé of their parents, felt rebellious towards her parents for being very vulnerable:
I thought a lot about my parents. It was not as if they were the parents and we were the children. We became the parents sometimes and I didn’t like that. I would throw tantrums and rebel against the idea of protecting them, unlike my brother, who was always their protector”. (COH 37)

Aviva too was particular not to hurt her parents: “I think my parents and I have a very close relationship, certainly closer than most families I see in America. I never rebelled against them. I would not want to do anything that might hurt them.” (COH 120)

Joseph Schwartz who was an absolute parents-child during his childhood, started becoming defiant as he grew up: “I was angered easily. I wanted my voice to be heard and I thought my parents never responded. They didn’t listen to me the way they listened to a business partner”. (COH 182)

Anger, either towards the Nazi perpetrators or towards their victim selves was another powerful event among the Second Generation that kept authoring the abnormality of the self. In *Children of the Holocaust*, Eli Rubinstein felt an impotent rage every time he thought about the Holocaust:

When you live after the fact you feel an impotent rage. One of my fantasies today, something I still have at the age of twenty-nine, is getting my hands on a Nazi. I think of all of them as one person who killed my family. I would like to torture him and mutilate him. It scares me when I have thoughts like that. It shocks me because I am not a violent person. In normal circumstances I can’t imagine myself doing violence to any other human being. (COH 31)
Epstein too could empathize with this murderous trait of Rubinstein and she felt throttled by suppressing it. This repressed emotion in turn caused psychosomatic aches and pains in her.

While Epstein and Rubinstein’s anger were directed towards the Nazis, Albert Singerman’s anger was towards his Jewish counterparts – he was enraged at the apathy of the Jews in submitting to the Nazi genocide: “I was enraged by the idea that in the war, Jews didn’t fight, that they were passive. At least, that’s all I knew at the time. I wasn’t going to be that kind of a Jew. I was going to fight”. (COH 229)

There were also other eccentric behavioural patterns among some children of survivors like disowning their faith or identifying themselves with their perpetrators-the Germans! This was an absolute reconstruction of the Second Generation identity from that of victim to empathizing with the perpetrator.

Gabriela Korda, one of Epstein’s peers had grown up as a Protestant in South America, after her parents emigrated and recast their identities by totally assimilating into the new culture. Gabriela too was not ready to acknowledge her ‘child of survivors’ identity, and she felt that her parents too were not much affected by the Holocaust. As a child, she was sent to a German school in South America, where she was looked upon as an Aryan. This evoked in her a pro-German stance, which in turn made her hostile among Epstein’s peer group for having embraced a culture that was responsible for killing off most of her family. Only later did Epstein realize that there were many others of the Second Generation like Gabriela who had similar German affinities. Frank Collin
was another such atypical child of survivors, who engaged in Nazi activities since his early youth and denied his Jewish lineage.

All children of survivors were neither uniformly sensitive nor sensational about the Holocaust. There were a few who were indifferent towards the Holocaust. When talk of the Holocaust made everyone emotional, Rochelle a member of Epstein’s second generation, felt guilty for not feeling anything at all: “Here was I a child of survivors and I didn’t feel anything. I also felt resentful towards my parents for having imposed a burden on me and I felt that I had a right to feel a little resentful.” (COH 45)

When people told Rochelle that she didn’t look Jewish, she felt happy. Of all the children of survivors whom Epstein met, Rochelle struck the most responsive chord of sisterhood in her, because she too felt numbness when spoken to about the Holocaust:

I too had never been able to feel what I imagined other people felt when they spoke of the war. I, too, had watched other people cry at memorial services and at films about the Holocaust. I never could. All I felt was a numbness, a cold, deadening blanket which covered me like a fog.

(COH 45)

Once the Second Generation become aware of their Holocaust legacy, they feel an inordinate urge to share it with someone. Once Fremont attempted to reveal a little about her father’s past to her friend: “Suddenly I was fighting back tears, alarmed and ashamed of my inexplicable need to tell someone… I was amazed and embarrassed by my emotion, and I realized that I must never speak of our family, that our story must be kept a secret.” (ALS 13-14)
Epstein too wanted to find others like her who would endorse the presence of her “iron box”: “There had to be other people like me, who shared what I carried, who had their own version of my iron box. There had to be, I thought, an invisible, silent family scattered about the world”. (COH 13) Deborah Schwartz easily responded to this: “It’s like your iron box”, she told me. “I have a rock in my closet”. (COH 305) Eli Rubinstein too wanted to talk about his Holocaust legacy: “Talking about your experience legitimizes it in a way. It lets you know you are normal”. (COH 29)

Sara of *Children of the Holocaust* too felt liberated after sharing her Holocaust angst: “The more I talk, the more I realize how preoccupied I was with all of this when I was younger. But I never talked about it. I kept it all inside. I’m very glad to begin. I want my son to be free of this. I see how its being passed”. (COH 125) However Aviva was very complacent:

> The only way the Holocaust has influenced me is my identity as a Jew…
> The whole history of the Jewish people fascinates me. It took such a fantastic amount of determination to come out of determination to come out of all those miserable things that happened relatively unscarred. It’s just not possible to wipe this people off the face of the earth and that makes me feel good. (COH 126)

The common quest for identity also strengthened the fraternity among the second generation, whether they belonged to the same family as in the case of Helen Fremont and her sister Lara and also Eva Hoffman and her sister Alina or of becoming siblings by way of their common Holocaust heritage as in the case of Helen Epstein and her second generation peers. Lara and Helen Fremont’s quest for their parents’ past strengthened
their own siblinghood – the discovery of their selves through the otherness of their mother and their aunt: “We found ourselves drawn together by similar glue. Like my mother and aunt’s, ours was a bond of mutual need. Lara and I became tied together, mast and sail, on a voyage of discovery”. (ALS 98)

Hoffman and her sister Alina too found themselves becoming more intimate:

We need to reassure each other like this from time to time, need to get a fix on our slightly anomalous condition. And we need each other for these periodic summaries: I trust Alina’s appraisal of me: for all of our divergences, there’s some common standard of measurement we have. We situate “the normal” in a similar place, we feel the pull of the ground’s gravity a bit more strongly than our American peers. (LIT 249)

This strong sense of siblinghood, hitherto unacknowledged was the driving force behind Hoffman and her sister, Alina to embark on the quest for their roots, after their parents’ death.

Epstein was also able to establish a strong filial bond among her second generation community. Whenever any member of their group spoke, the others were able to experience its resonances in themselves. When Deborah spoke about her childhood, Epstein felt at times that hers was being described. Rochelle too struck a highly responsive chord in Epstein:

That night as I sat bent over my type writer, listening to Rochelle’s soft, hesitant voice coming out of my tape recorder, I began to cry. I typed with tears blurring my view of the paper on which I was transcribing her words,
and I began to remember things I had never allowed myself to remember before. (COH 45)

Ultimately, Epstein was able to surmise:

Something basic, something I still did not understand, had made us familiar to one another, something that overrode differences in temperament, religious belief, lifestyle, ambition and personal priorities. I felt excited. Eli had not articulated some of his own feelings for the first time, but some of mine as well. A stranger in a strange city had confirmed the reality of my own experience. (COH 33)

Thus, the problem of the meaning of their Holocaust self is one of the most complex problems of the Second Generation. According to Bakhtin, this meaning is not entombed in a single self; rather, it is the outcome of interaction between the self and the other in a particular social context. To understand the self entails one’s orienting oneself with the other. So, these aforementioned interactions between the Second Generation selves and their significant others, makes their identity comprehensible.

The Second Generation often saw their parents as superhuman for having resurged from the evil incarnate. And as they themselves had grown up with only stories and imagination of their parents ordeals, they felt belittled to realize that they would never have the strength, will or endurance of their parents. They also felt guilty for not being able to share their parents’ suffering. At the same time they knew that these feelings were not legitimate since they had not suffered in the actual sense like their parents. This feeling of illegitimacy often makes them schizophrenic as they try to
position and reposition themselves by mimicking their parents’ sufferings and also by distancing themselves from them.

It was only when she was in her twenties that Fremont really understood what her parents had actually gone through and she wanted to test if she too could survive what they had been through. However she knew that nothing she could ever do would be enough. And this corroded her sense of self. In 1982, Fremont joined the Peace Corps in Africa and started teaching English and Science in a remote mountain village in South Africa:

What was the lure that had drawn me here, I was twenty –five years old and I had come to Africa to test myself, to prove my endurance, my ability to withstand privation. I tried to imagine what my parents had experienced – the bombings of buildings and random killings, the desperate conditions of the Gulag, the loss of friends and family. I was trying to re-enact, in some strange way, their lives under the duress of war and also their adjustment to a new country as refugees. (ALS 270 – 271)

Ironically, Fremont’s Peace Corps stint ended when she met with an accident, which forced her return home. However she was elated that she had managed to do with her injured knee the equivalent of what her father’s fellow prisoners had done to his elbow.

For Epstein, it was Israel that lured her for a taste of adversity:

I felt as surely as I felt my parent’s reluctance that Israel would give me another piece of the puzzle, that living there would help explain no matter
how successful and accepted I was in school and with my friends, I felt somehow apart. (COH 253) Each time I rode the road to Jerusalem, I was flooded with inchoate feelings of pride, wonder and a strange comfort. History came to life for me on the road to Jerusalem. (COH 263)

Epstein spent three years in Israel as an experiment with adversity. She wanted to testify that she too could survive any catastrophe, just like her parents. She even got into a shocking relationship as the mistress of an orphaned slum dweller, Marc, feeling that she could thereby vicariously connect to her parents’ hardships: “My acquiescence had little to do with love or sexual attraction. It was a test, a test of my endurance and a crash course in living on the underside of society”. (COH 290)

Living in the rock bottom of penury in Marc’s refuse-ridden shack, Epstein felt that she was reliving her parents’ camp experience. Israel had given her a Jewish education far better than any Sunday school or what her parents and their friends had given her. Living there had shown her that she too could, if necessary, endure hardship. However this authoring of her identity was not ontological but rather mediated through the past and borrowed experiences of her parents.

Wanting to place himself in an extremely dangerous situation like that of his parents, Albert Singerman, in Children of the Holocaust, enlisted as a volunteer in the Vietnam War and wanted to prove that he too could be a survivor in the real sense. This abnormal Second Generation behaviour of wanting to be victimized just like their parents were is not because they want to be victims, but because they want to understand familial
history and thereby anchor their Holocaust survivor identity. This was also a reaffirmation of their inherited post memory of the Holocaust.

In order for the Second Generation traumatized self to become reparative, it needs to substitute abstract memories with concrete visuals of past people and places. So, many Second Generation survivors undertake trips to Holocaust sites in a desperate attempt to get firsthand knowledge of their parents past, in order to reposition their own Holocaust identity, by giving it a sensory stamp of authenticity. Seeing those sites with their own eyes gives them a vicarious pleasure of having virtually experienced the trauma. However the past cannot be relived and this later results in disappointment and frustration. Nevertheless coming to terms with one’s past is essential and cannot be avoided.

The phase of pseudo memories and subconscious surges gets replaced by a phase of travels to past homelands These therapeutic journeys are an endeavour to examine the authenticity of their memories, to trace the families those had provided refuge to their parents and to locate the whereabouts of their ancestral homes. This quest for roots results in an epiphany of their own selves or identities and the phantasmagoric visions of childhood get concretized. They feel that physically seeing these places authenticates the post memory of their parents’ pre-Holocaust life, of which they have no understanding. Returning to where their parents had lived provides them a sort of missing link to their parents’ pre-Holocaust life and survival.

The lifting of the Iron Curtain has made it possible to enter Eastern Europe with new ease, and ever since, people who have not set foot in countries of their origin for decades have been coming back in numbers, to see, to
remember, to reconnect parts of life severed by the war, to test their
fantasized images of the “Old Country” or confirm their prejudices. (ASK 203)

This quest for knowledge to supplement sentiment and fictitious preconceptions
with factual visualizing has diverse results for different individuals. For some of these
Second Generation visitors, these journeys abound in surprises, discoveries and
establishment of new vistas in relationships and identities. For yet some others, crippled
by language and culture, the so-called therapeutic journeys become additionally
traumatic. But whatsoever the consequences these journeys have, the Second Generation
feel an irrepressible, compulsive urge to embark on such journeys to unearth their
parents’ past identities in order to reconstruct their own muddled identities.

For Helen Fremont letting her parents know that she had discovered that they
were Jewish was foremost a herculean task. Ever since the end of the Holocaust, her
parents had guarded their new Catholic identity very fiercely and this prying open by
their Second Generation daughters was retraumatizing for them. They did not understand
her urge to connect to the most traumatic experience of their lives and dismissed it as just
another American fad:

“What difference does the past make?” she cried. “You are what you are
today, that’s all that matters! Forget about the past... “All these 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)
Ultimately after a lot of groundwork and revelatory communication about hitherto unknown uncles and aunts, Helen Fremont and Lara booked their reservations for a trip which was to take them to their native Ukraine. Their group consisted of eight families comprising three generations of survivors. Once they reached their destination, they were led to various places, all with some Holocaust history – sites of mass slaughter, anonymous graves and desecrated cemeteries. Sites of death pervaded their travel itinerary and the entourage was immersed in agonized silence. The sisters were then taken to their parents’ hometown where they witnessed sites of Nazi destruction:

We cleared a spot and laid three gladiolus at the point where the Jews were killed – which of course was not where our grandmother Helen Rosenbaum was killed. Nevertheless, we allowed our grief to mix and let history be general and geography generous. This was after all, the site of death of our family, and we commemorated it with our flowers and stinging flesh. (ALS 50).

Eva Hoffman and her sister Alina too decided to visit their ancestral town of Zalosce after their parents’ deaths. Having been nurtured since childhood on the mythical wonders of their native town, they wanted to see for themselves the marvelous places those remained deeply inscribed in their subconscious. However the sisters had to wait till their parents’ demise for embarking on this tryst into their past as their parents had strictly forbidden it. But after their parents’ deaths, they undertook this trip as an act of mourning and homage to them.
And so, after my parents’ deaths, I respond to my sister’s urging that we visit that mythical village of Zalosce – a word that came with my first consciousness, the place where my parents had spent their childhoods and early adulthoods; where they had arrived That Time. In my attempt to supplement memory with history, to locate my family’s story within the broader events, it was that longer past I needed to know. (ASK 205)

However, this tryst into the past town of Zalosce with no clear topographical markings was nerve racking for the sisters. After a lot of misadventure, they finally set foot in Zalosce and meet eighty year old Olga, who rolls out anecdotes about their parents. They also meet Hryczko, the righteous gentile, whose family had sheltered their parents during the Holocaust. Hoffman is engulfed in shame to know that these Good Samaritan acts of nobility were left unacknowledged by her parents. This epic meeting with Hryczko ends in a tumultuous breakdown for both parties.

Eva Hoffman and her sister are then shown a site of massacre of Jews, of which their maternal aunt had also been a part. Their emotions build up as they witness their past history taking shape in the dilapidated remains of the Jewish cemetery, their parents’ houses, the shed and also the place where the bunker where their parents had hidden during the Holocaust: “This was where the bunker was, the one my father and his brothers had dug out as the Nazi persecutions stepped up…I stare down in a state of incredulity. So this was where It started, this cavity in the ground from which my life and the world had emerged.” (ASK218)
This journey into the past becomes therapeutic – the sisters are overwhelmed and consoled by the abundance of goodwill and concern on the part of everyone whom they meet:

I am also more unexpectedly consoled by the thought that my parents had nearly thirty years of life here, in this pastoral if impoverished village and among these lively, spontaneous people. This thought made livid by what I have now seen, alters my vision of the horror years. It makes them both more palpably frightening and less infinite in magnitude. (ASK 219)

This visit also helped in bridging the distance between the past and present and in replacing their childhood fantasies with solid actualities.

Helen Epstein’s nostalgic tryst with her family’s past happened in Prague, where her history hunting expeditions helped her to glean information regarding her lineage – that her grandfather belonged to one of the best documented families in the Czech lands, which had given the Jewish community of Kolin, several of its mayors. She was also able to get connected to two of her cousins who provided her valuable clues to the missing links in her story.

Epstein’s real cathartic moment appeared when she stood transfixed in her grandmother’s grave: “There in the first row, directly facing us, were two tall marble tombstones which, in bold letters read FURCHT and FURCHT. I stood rooted in place, a weight lifted from my head, my blood at rest”. (WSCF 45)

In *Children of the Holocaust*, Epstein recounts how Eli Rubinstein decided to go to Hungary to visit the town in which his family had lived, as he wanted to establish some
sort of contact with his past: “It was a pilgrimage”, Eli told us. “I wanted to stand in the place where all the lost people I never knew had lived. By standing there, by being among the people they had lived with, I thought I could come as close as possible. Otherwise, they would be just phantoms, names my parents mentioned”. (COH 30)

However, when he landed in Hungary, Rubinstein was accosted by suspicious and displeased spectators who made him feel very uncomfortable: “It was one of the lousiest feelings I had ever had in my life. It was as if I were a phoenix risen from the ashes and that I should not be there: I should be dead”. (COH 30). All during his stay in Hungary, Eli had the feeling of being among ghosts.

Epstein recalled how she too had felt such a presence of ghosts, when she had made a similar pilgrimage to her native Prague:

I had wandered for hours in the cobblestoned streets, looking for the house in which my parents had lived, the hospital in which I was born, the grocery store where my mother bought food and the parks in which I had played as a child. Everything was gray in Prague, infused with a great brooding melancholy. I too had felt the presence of ghosts. (COH 31)

These trips by the Second Generation survivors, travelling miles across the globe on harsh, unruly terrain is because of their unquenchable drive to find the truth about their past and witness it with their own eyes. And this is not because they doubted it, but because they wanted to gain the full knowledge to make the Holocaust post memory their own memory. Thus at the end of an arduous quest for traces of memory across Europe, these Second Generation survivors are able to reposition their relationship to the
Holocaust by making their historical knowledge and inherited memory their own experiential memory.

After hazy, fuzzy bits of imagination get a firm visual imprint by way of these journeys, the Second Generation are bent on revealing to posterity the legacy of their hetero-dimensional identity. And life writing becomes the best medium for transforming this burdensome memory into a comprehensive, holistic record. Moreover they do not want to sustain an emotionally charged attitude to the Holocaust forever. So, as a cathartic exercise to exorcise their Holocaust memories, they resort to create their own poetics of witnessing through life writing which synthesizes the firsthand experiential accounts of their parents and their own vicarious experiences of the aftermath of the Holocaust. From a Bakhtinian perspective, these life writing narratives are externalized, multi voiced utterances that originate from the author’s internalization of past and imagined dialogues and encounters in the social world, which become a primary site for analysis of the constructions of self and the social world as well as identity at the individual and social levels.

Through language the cultural heritage of the past is received, reshaped and bequeathed to succeeding generations. By explicating what happened in the past, the author is able to express to the reader the process of the evolution of the self. Bakhtin’s theory of speech genres is relevant for the understanding of these trauma narratives. Bakhtin’s distinction between primary and secondary speech genres reiterates that many spoken and seemingly spontaneous utterances are already built out of simpler building blocks and do not have direct relatedness to the reality of plain perceptual experiences,
because secondary speech genres lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others. The Second Generation narratives, as secondary speech genres draw on the primary speech genres of narratives or experiences of the First Generation survivors.

For Bakhtin, this gaining of meaning from others shows that not just utterance, but life itself can be dialogic, as a shared event. One can find in the person in extremity, the experience of a bonding with an other, rather than finding the self as a singularity. This pedagogical experience of life writing about the Holocaust blends narrative memory and the historical reality in an ongoing process of self-discovery. Their rewriting of history is a paradigm shift from the universal portrayal of the Holocaust victim to an elaborate focus on own intimate personal experiences. The experience of writing heightens awareness and evokes empathetic or sympathetic responses. The written word actualizes the unbelievable atrocities of the Holocaust and highlights its permissible pain to succeeding generations of survivors.

Many Second Generation survivors like Fremont, Hoffman and Epstein tried to record the continual repositioning and reconstructing of identities by revealing characters’ intentions, thoughts and actions and by evaluating past events to express to the readers the process of the evaluation of the Second Generation self. These Second Generation narratives are not just reconstruction of their parents’ identity; but are in fact a recreation of their own identities. They bear a secondary witnessing to the Holocaust and also explore the ways in which succeeding generations are affected.
After Helen Fremont and her sister Lara stumbled upon their Jewish heritage, they became detectives overnight, calling and writing around the world for a trace of their past. They tried to find witnesses, living people who had known their parents before or during the war. All this research enlightened them about their parents’ native places and also provided them links to other members of their extended family. This newly acquired knowledge regarding their parents’ past gave new meaning to the innumerable queries that had been haunting them:

Things are definitely starting to make more sense to me… Mom and Dad are trauma victims. No wonder it was so confusing when we were kids. Remember how mom used to collapse to her knees … And then she’d lose her breath, and I thought she’d die or something. I used to think I’d killed her just because I’d had a fight with you or because I refused to practice the piano or something. It was nuts!” (ALS 149)

Armed with this knowledge, Helen Fremont took a sabbatical from her job as a lawyer in Boston and settled down in Rome in her aunt, Zosia’s apartment to “trace the outline of silence into a story”. (ALS 281)

As Helen Epstein talked to more of her peers, she too discovered that they all had their own versions of her iron box. And they too had left it undisturbed, lest it explode. But once she had set out on her quest for her roots, it snowballed into a rapid Second Generation movement and produced thousands of pages of invaluable survivor testimonies. Equipped with this raw material, Epstein spent an entire summer by a lakeside in the mountains of Massachusetts-reading and constructing her research “to
create a community, to make visible the peer group that had remained invisible and silent for so long”. (COH 335)

Epstein also got a glimpse into her mother’s world through a twelve-page chronicle that her mother, Frances wrote at her behest. This proved as a map to her mother’s world. Egged on by this, Epstein set about retracing her family’s history:

Long ago, I had read, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when Czech Jews were and observant and important community, some of its members wrote autobiographical family narratives called megillot mishpachah, or family scrolls. I liked the idea of taking my mother’s twelve page chronicle and bringing three generations of increasingly secular women to life in an old Jewish form. (WSCF 18)

Pained by the paucity of Jewish women autobiographers, Epstein considered it her vocation to produce and preserve her family narratives.

For Hoffman, it was not until she started writing her first book, *Lost in Translation*, that she began acknowledging publicly the Holocaust strand of her history:

I had carried this part of my psychic past within me all my life, but it was only now, as I began pondering it from a larger distance and through the clarifying process of writing, that what had been an inchoate, obscure knowledge appeared to me as a powerful theme and influence in my life… In a sense, I needed to address frontally what I had thought about obliquely: the profound effects of a traumatic history, and its paradoxical richness”. (ASK xi)
Moreover the proliferating generalization of the Holocaust memory cult irked Hoffman and she felt compelled to reveal its pulsing complexity. So she has used her own family’s story to probe and convey the subjective aftereffects of the Holocaust and its later vicissitudes. She felt that it was high time the Second Generation disentangled the spectral memories that have barred them from the realities they inhabit. Now feeling relieved with this epiphany, she opines, “sixty years later and after all that can be done has been done, it may also be time to turn away, gently, to let this go”. She has understood that memory is also about letting go about waking to the present without forever wallowing about the past: “And yet unless we want to fall into permanent melancholia or nihilistic despair, we cannot take the Holocaust as the norm that governs human lives. That is why it is necessary to separate the past from the present and to judge the present in its own light”. (Hoffman, 278-279)

Hoffman also warns others like her not to wallow in self indulgence and narcissism regarding their survivor status. She implores them to reconstruct a new identity for themselves that frees them from the overbearing shadow identity of their parents. But this is not an easy task. For the inheritors of a trauma of such magnitude, separating the past form the present and accepting the past per se is difficult but essential.

Thus, writing by children of Holocaust survivors forms a tangible record of their quest for an identity entwined with the Holocaust. It is a literature of displacement, dominated by an event which occurred before their birth, yet which continues to influence their lives. In a Bakhtinian sense, the Holocaust as the other becomes an
epistemological and ontological necessity for the understanding and evolving of the
Second Generation self.

The Second Generation’s verbalization of their trauma as distinct from that of
their parents is a distancing that is essential for them to address their splintered identity.
Their narratives each detail diverse experiences of the Second Generation in exorcising
their vicariously traumatic past and in moving forward by healing the amnesiac rift in
their personal identities. And through the telling and retelling of these narratives, the
Second Generation create a springboard from which they and other children of survivors
could congregate and celebrate their filial identity construction and thus could also
become the torchbearers of the Holocaust legacy for future generations.

The Second Generation Holocaust memory is a vicarious memory or post
memory in that it is constructed or reconstructed out of images that lack a duplicate in
experience and are rather inherited from the real-life experiences of their parents. So, the
Second Generation’s remembering of the Holocaust is not a mere recall of occurrences
but rather a re-remembering or reconstructing of the past.

This reconstructed identity is analogous to a virtual reality which creates a sense
of alienation and estrangement of the self. These therapeutic journeys allow the Second
Generation to construct their own perception of past events after having seen the
historical sites with their own eyes. However, even when they visit the actual locations of
the Holocaust, they cannot relive the past that occurred there.
So, they resort to writing as a secondary witnessing to fill the lacunae created by this incomprehensible void. This reconstruction of Second Generation Holocaust identity is a psychic journey from pre-awareness and ignorance of their Holocaust legacy to their post-recognition and acceptance of it.

The Second Generation quest narratives heal an amnesiac rift in the Second Generation’s personal identity. Second Generation Holocaust survivors try to suppress their post memories, but fail. The result is a split personality – during their conscious hours they try to go ahead and reestablish their lives devoid of these post memories. But subconsciously the post memories keep racking their brains. They have been sentenced to a life with the ruins. But this identity built on catastrophe and trauma has not turned the Jew into an eternal victim. They have risen with resilience from the ashes of the Holocaust and their lives highlight the failure of Hitler’s Final Solution.