

Portraits of Survival – Volume 1: The Holocaust

South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation (2021)

Reviewed by

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The recent online publication by the South African Holocaust and Genocide Foundation (SAHGF), *Portraits of Survival Volume 1: The Holocaust* is a digital record of the experiences of thirty-four of Holocaust survivors who found refuge in South Africa. It documents their lives prior to the Holocaust, their experiences during the Holocaust, and their struggles and triumphs in rebuilding their lives in South Africa in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

For those readers who may be unfamiliar with Holocaust history, the Holocaust took place between 1933 and 1945 when the Nazis under Adolf Hitler and their collaborators co-ordinated and systematically carried out the state-sponsored murder of six million European Jews, as well as the Roma and Sinti, Black people, Jehovah's Witnesses, political prisoners, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and ill or disabled people. However, the Jews were the primary target. The Nazis wished to annihilate them and came up with a plan that they called the Final Solution. The Holocaust wrought fear, trauma and havoc on European Jewry and many Jewish communities were decimated. Those people who survived faced further trauma as they tried to navigate their way forward after liberation, with many having lost their homes, families and friends, assets, and even the countries of their birth. Their plight also culminated in health issues to which many of them succumbed. One of the options to begin life anew was to travel abroad and this volume relates the stories of Jewish Holocaust survivors who came and settled in South Africa.

As the book reveals, from the depths of this tragedy have come lessons, reflection and connection and this is, in part, the purpose of *Portraits of Survival Volume 1: The Holocaust*. Peering back into the not-so-distant past through the lens personal stories of these South African Holocaust survivors, future generations of all races and religions are encouraged to move beyond the number six million and to understand that this number is not unitary. It is made up of ones – single people, single families and single communities. Also, as Stephen Smith, Executive Director of the University of Southern California's (USC) Shoah

Foundation notes in the foreword, ‘each story in this volume is also a story of survival that was enabled through connection and friendship’ (p. 6). The power of community and family to sustain the survivors, both then and now, is attested to in many of the personal stories. The book’s other purpose is to serve as a store of memory.

Portraits of Survival Volume 1: The Holocaust was released online in early 2021 in three formats: as an interactive e-book; as an epub for Apple users; and as a .pdf. A hardcover version is to follow. The advantage of reading the book online is that the technology used enables the reader to take advantage of the magic of digital manipulation, which I will discuss later in the review. Also, the book being available on the websites of the three South African Holocaust centres, provides access to a wider audience. Shortly after the release of Volume 1, *Portraits of Survival Volume 11: The genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda* was also released – again online – and I will cover this book in a separate review.

Before delving into the aims, assumptions, insights and conclusions that the book offers, I will briefly examine the structure of the book and why it is presented this way.

There are numerous ways in which narratives and testimonies of survivors have been chronicled, such as books, podcasts, videos and on websites. For example, individual survivor stories are told as part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s (USHMM) ‘Behind Every Name there’s a Story’ project on their website. However, this format was not an option for the SAHGF as it does not have its own website; rather, each museum has its own website. The stories of the survivors from each region were therefore brought together in this publication. The format of the narratives is, nonetheless, similar to the USHMM’s with the narrative texts enhanced by images.

In terms of its place in the broader body of similar works, *Portraits of Survival Volume 1: The Holocaust* (2021) is produced in the tradition of books such as *Survivor: A portrait of the survivors of the Holocaust* (Borden, 2017) and *Written in memory: Portraits of the Holocaust* (Wolin, 1997). Borden’s (2017) book focuses on contemporary photographs of survivors, accompanied by a few written thoughts or memories. At the end of the book, there is a short biography of each of the photographed survivors. *Written in memory: Portraits of the Holocaust* (Wolin, 1997) also focuses on the visual, with the words of Holocaust survivors being imprinted on the images. Written narratives of Holocaust survivors can be found in *We must not forget: Holocaust stories of survival and resistance* (Hopkinson, 2021). In the latter, the stories of Holocaust survivors are first presented in the form of very short vignettes and then more broadly integrated into the wider history of the Holocaust as a historical text.

Portraits of Survival Volume 1: The Holocaust (2021) opens with a poignant foreword

by Stephen Smith which sets a reverential but informal tone. To contextualise the stories, the foreword is followed by a precis of events of the Holocaust for readers who might not be familiar with it. The stories, which comprise the body of the book, are divided into four themes and neatly echo the layout of the local Holocaust museums.

The first seven stories in the section titled 'Seeking Refuge' detail the experiences of survivors who sought refuge in South Africa during the early stages of the Holocaust when escape was difficult and dangerous but still possible, albeit limited by immigration quotas for Jews worldwide. The editorial on page 12 notes that in 1930, prior to the outbreak of World War II, 3 621 German Jews were allowed to enter South Africa but, by 1937, during the height of the Final Solution and transports to the death camps, only 220 Jewish immigrants were able to enter the country. Claire Lampel (p. 13) and Martha Levi (p. 19) were amongst the group of travellers who arrived on the liner, the *SS Stuttgart*. Gerde Goedecke (p. 34), on the other hand, undertook a circuitous journey through various European countries before settling in South Africa. While the stories are all very different in texture, the narratives in this section speak particularly to the trauma that the survivors faced when leaving their families behind and how they established new lives in South Africa.

In the challenging second section, 'Life & Death in the Shadow of the Holocaust', which consists of ten vignettes, the survivors describe their harrowing experiences in ghettos, concentration camps and killing centres such as Auschwitz. For Ella Blumenthal (p. 63), life in the Warsaw Ghetto was marked by starvation, malnutrition and disease. She describes how she and her sister, Roma, 'endured horrific experiences in Majdanek while working as "human horses"' (p. 67), being sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau to build roads, and finally being taken to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where they were ultimately liberated. The survivors share their memories of the traumatic experiences. They do so in a factual and un-sensationalised manner, yet their horrifying accounts expose the reality of their situations – starvation, disease, terror, and trauma. The writer of Judy Diamond (nee Riff)'s story (p. 83), for example, relates:

Judy remembered the children's dormitory rooms filled with three-tier bunk beds so as to squeeze 32 children into a single room. She endured terrible suffering in the children's home. Illness was rampant, in particular typhus, and she was sick much of the time; their food rations were almost inedible and wholly insufficient. (p. 88).

Judy was 13 years old when she arrived at Theresienstadt ghetto.

Those living under these circumstances realised that there was no escape from this world in which Jews were dehumanised, tortured, and murdered on a daily basis and denied basic human rights. Even today, the telling of their experiences remains a difficult

task for many, such as Ervin Schlesinger (p. 90) who confessed that he remained silent for many years after the Holocaust as he found it very difficult to tell even his children about what he had endured. But as guides at the various Holocaust centres, some of the South African Holocaust survivors, share their stories with thousands of learners annually. For these guides, contributing to furthering an understanding of racism, discrimination and ultimately genocide provides meaning for them. Unfortunately, stories of pain, trauma, and loss through the horror of genocide are not unique to the Holocaust, a fact shown all too clearly in Volume II about the post-Holocaust genocide in Rwanda.

Changing the theme from death, darkness and destruction to that of hope and resilience are the next sections, 'Kindness and Courage' (nine stories) and 'Honouring the Past' (eight stories). 'Kindness and Courage' chronicles the survivors' encounters with people from various nationalities and religions who reached out to them, enabling them to survive. The rescuers hid or adopted Jewish children, smuggled people across dangerous borders with forged documents, defied the Nazis by producing anti-Nazi newspapers, bombed railway lines, generally exhibited civil disobedience at the risk of their own lives, or committed acts of bravery, such as taking part in acts of resistance. Illustrating one such instance is the story of Irene Groll (nee Kayem) (p. 126). She was rescued by a French family and her narrative account details how she found herself transformed from a Jewish German girl to a non-Jewish French one by her rescuers and the consequences of that decision on the rest of her life.

Finally, the fourth section, Honouring the Past, directs the reader to examine themes of renewal, perseverance and bearing witness, themes that document the manner in which many of the survivors chose to define their post-war lives. Giuseppe Cone, for example, despite his traumatic experiences, chose not to live the rest of his life as a victim, instead choosing 'optimism and resilience' (p. 189), thereby honouring his past. This is also true of Irene Klaas (p. 191), who did not to speak of her personal experiences during the Holocaust for forty years because she did not want people to pity her – she simply wanted to be 'like everybody else' (p. 196) while Pinchas Gutter (p. 229) found meaning in sharing his story for the purpose of 'improving humanity' (p. 230). Revenge was not on the minds of the survivors in this volume. They were too busy forging new lives and building new families in their post-war endeavours. Yet the past lingers and for some survivors, regret, longing, pain and unfinished business is also part of their ongoing Holocaust journeys, as Carmela Heilbron's story (p. 223) illustrates.

For many readers, their first instinct on opening the book might be to navigate the stories of people that they know personally or about whom they have heard, as I did. Some

portraits are relatively short and succinct, while others offer an in-depth exploration of the survivors' lived experiences.

The four category headings provide thematic guidelines as to the nature of the stories in each section. Furthermore, to assist readers to find key words or phrases, an editorial device is used whereby some of the text is highlighted in bold and in colour. This is attention-grabbing, which is useful for a reader browsing through the book, but ultimately, I found them somewhat distracting when I was trying to scan for other themes.

Also, while the four category headings certainly describe one aspect of the stories, because of the complex, diverse nature of the survivors' personal experiences, even when they experienced the same event, results in a great deal of cross-pollination of themes, making classification difficult. For example, Giuseppe Cone's story relates his traumatic experiences at Auschwitz (p. 186). Yet his story has been placed under the heading 'Honouring the Past' because of his 'huge propensity for positivity' (p. 189). This web of interconnected, cross-story themes makes categorisation difficult, so an index at the end of the book might assist researchers or students looking for particular themes. Also, there could be a final rounding off chapter as, for me, the book ended quite abruptly.

For me, some of the other themes that resonated throughout the book included: the advantage of having family members, friends or fellow travellers as a means of survival; the power of the desire to live; the sense of a lucky escape; and the deep insight gained by the survivors into the meaning of the lives in the shadow of the Holocaust.

The narrative of each story is supported by photographs illustrating events from the storytellers' lives. Many of the vignettes begin with a childhood photograph of the protagonists and end with a present-day one, often with the survivor surrounded by family, which almost serves as a moment of triumph. As in the museum experience, the accompanying photographs are linked to the theme of the text, but the book's portraits allow the reader to delve into the survivors' personal lived experiences in greater depth.

In addition to the interesting narrative text, the book is visually engaging. Original black and white images often appear to be frozen in time but some of the photographs are given a special colour treatment to bring the narrative to 'life' and draw them into the present. Readers of the digital version can switch between the treated and untreated images. This juxtaposition of past and present, digital versus old-school images, adds further depth to the texture of the narratives. Instructions on how to work with the images are clear, as are the narrative explanations in the images, captions and credits.

Through these deeply personal narratives, this volume draws together themes and images that highlight the complexity of Jewish experience during the Holocaust and are

part of the greater body of recorded Holocaust survivor narratives that contribute to teaching and learning about the Holocaust. For many of the narrators, the goal of revealing their intimate and painful experiences is not simply to relate what happened to them but to seek catharsis (Kearney, 2007:61), record their stories for posterity, honour those who perished or give greater social meaning to their experiences. As Donald Kraus's portrait reveals:

Don believed that, as a survivor, he was obligated not to forget, to bear witness, and to testify to what he saw and experienced. 'We and we alone know what really happened; it is we who must speak for those millions of men, women and children who are no more and whose voices will never be heard again.' (p. 202)

On this and many other levels, the book succeeds. The narratives, intertwined with historical first-hand accounts, peel back the layers of the personal lived experiences of the Holocaust survivors who came to live in South Africa.

However, despite my deep interest in the topic, fatigue eventually set in and the weight of the stories sometimes became overwhelming the further I delved into the book. This is not a book to be read from cover to cover as you would with a novel. While the reader wants nothing more than to linger and empathise with each storyteller, simply reading from story to story can be challenging. With thirty-four portraits to choose from, reading a few vignettes at a time might be easier than trying to read through the book from cover to cover as I did. It is understandable that the editors wanted to include as many stories as possible – each is a unique record of the Holocaust survivors' experiences from across South Africa – and which could be omitted?

Portraits of Survival Volume 1: The Holocaust provides a South African perspective of Holocaust history through the lens of the wide-ranging, personal lived experiences of Holocaust survivors who came to South Africa. As I ventured through the book, it felt like I was turning the pages of a family album with the storyteller standing next to me and guiding me through what had happened to them during Holocaust and beyond. This volume is like a family or community album of shared memories rather than an academic, historical text. Yet it provides a rich primary source for learners, teachers and researchers and is a valuable addition to the libraries of the local Holocaust museums as well as contributing to the now vast collection of Holocaust personal stories and testimonies worldwide.

References

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