

Joseph Feldman

None of us can fully know the horrors my mother experienced, but at least we now have some awareness of these through all the books that have been published and all the facts that have been revealed about the Holocaust. We also know how our parents' sufferings in the Holocaust have affected the Second Generation.

One personal lesson I have learned is the importance of family. My mother lost virtually all of the family with whom she had grown up and shared the earliest years of her life. In one day nearly all of them disappeared, including my grandparents. I have learned from her experience to cherish my parents.

The Holocaust has taught me that one cannot know what will happen a year—or even a day—from now. So we must live every day to the fullest and take nothing for granted; above all, we must love and appreciate those closest to us while they are still here.

In high school I learned what it meant to be a member of a minority and to hear remarks about Jews. But I never flinched from expressing who I was, and I even got in trouble a few times when I fought back after being called names. In college I became friendly with a member of the Plainfield Country Club. By this time I was conspicuously wearing a Jewish star around my neck.

Once at the club I wore a shirt open at the neck, exposing the star. My friend advised me to conceal it while there. I responded by opening another button. Then I walked out, never to return.

But my feelings about being Jewish were positive as well as defensive. I belonged to Young Judea, went to Jewish camps during the summer, attended religious services, and maintained a proud Jewish identity.

One of my most vivid memories was of my trip to Hungary with my mother. I was not even bar mitzvah at that time. While visiting my paternal grandfather's synagogue, I ascended the *bimah* and began praying alongside the rabbi. I remember meeting my grandfather's brother Henrik, the only survivor of my mother's Hungarian family, and seeing the emotion and anguish in his eyes. I also remember my Israel trip with my mother in 1981, when I was twenty-one. At one point, I remember, people were struggling to get on one of the Israeli buses, and before me flashed an image of the suffocating struggle for breathing room in the railroad cars bound for Auschwitz.

I have had a great deal of trouble dealing with God. How could God have allowed what happened to happen to His children? I have never received a satisfactory answer, but the most unsatisfactory answer came from my teacher at Hebrew school, who responded by taking a pencil and breaking it in half, simply to indicate that God can do what God wishes. I will always be a proud Jew, but I will always have questions about God's role in the Holocaust.

As for my mother, as long as I have known her she has never lost her faith or her ability to care for others, whether the young or the elderly or the infirm, besides caring for her family. Her ability to talk plainly and eloquently about her experiences to all ages and all groups, including Germans, has never ceased to amaze me. I not only love her for what she does, but respect her commitment as well.