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## Coming to Terms With the Holocaust

August 29, 1986 | MANFRED WOLF | *Wolf lives in San Francisco. and*

When World War II ended, I was 10 years old. Before me lay the promise of adolescence; behind me was a horror so vast and incalculable that it warded off all comprehension.

If I thought about the war at all during my adolescence, it was with a kind of nameless shame. We Jews had been the victims of an unprecedented massacre, and our powerlessness was almost obscene.

True, there was cause for pride in my immediate family's escape from Occupied Europe. Almost two years after the Nazi takeover, we fled Holland, making our way slowly across Western Europe. In December 1942, we left Portugal for South America.

But to think even about this victory over circumstance was to invite pain, for the thought of escape led irresistibly to the millions who did not escape.

And it was easy in those years after the war to think about other things. We lived comfortably enough on the Dutch island of Curacao, off the coast of Venezuela. I went to school there and had a normal schoolboy's interests.

When I came to an American college in 1951, the subject of the past rarely came up. Though I went to an essentially Jewish university (Brandeis), the Holocaust was mentioned in those years only in courses on fascism and other totalitarianisms. That suited my mood of avoidance perfectly.

### Rarely Dwelled on Past

During the ensuing years, as a young husband and father, a college teacher in San Francisco, an aspiring literary critic, I rarely dwelled on my past, except in moments and hours of unspeakable pain that welled up unbidden, inappropriate and unwelcome.

I was still preoccupied with family, career, the future, when my father settled in San Francisco in the '70s. But his own obsessive dwelling on the tragedy that struck his people and his family—he lost his parents and six brothers in the Holocaust—reached down inside of me to what had so long been shut away. After his death, it was as if I took over his mourning and his grief.

Not that I was a great believer in the personal benefits of "bearing witness." The events of those wartime years are so huge, so devastating, that to think about them and to feel them fully, is certainly to be destroyed. They simply cannot be assimilated, and the psychological truism which holds that traumas must be faced and confronted before they can be healed withers in the face of their enormity.

My unwilling return to the past, quickened by my father's death, was accelerated by a trip to Israel. I did the tourist rounds of that sad and beautiful country, but could not bring myself to visit Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. It was difficult enough to face the shards and splinters that were everywhere: the account in the Jewish Historical Museum of the mother whose blood-curdling scream unsettled even the SS when they shot her children before her eyes; the living memories of the people I met who referred in unfinished sentences to parents, friends, relatives, "lost in the war . . ." "disappeared . . ." "never came back again . . ."

### Prodded by an Editor

Some inevitable process of acutely painful, personal reminiscence had begun. It was further prodded by a sympathetic editor who wanted me to write the story of my family's escape for the Reader's Digest. I set down the events of our flight as plainly as I could: how a young Dutch cop tipped us off before we were to be deported; how a farmer walked us across the border into Belgium; how we met my uncle—later to perish in Auschwitz—in Brussels; how we ended up in Besancon and crossed illegally into unoccupied France with a refugee-smuggler; how we lived almost euphorically in Nice in the summer of 1942 and scurried to Monaco when its prince declared that no one would come to harm there; how we were promptly arrested for deportation by the Vichy French police who had swept into Monaco; how we were released only because my mother's excellent French persuaded the officer in charge that he had overlooked a technicality; how we fled hysterically to Perpignan and scrambled for all sorts of papers and documents and visas for Spain; and how we finally sailed from Portugal to freedom in South America.

I could never understand where we got the documents that allowed us to flee to Spain three days before the Nazis swallowed up unoccupied France as well. Now, in a relentless pursuit for the article, I was reminded by my older brother that a mysterious figure, a young Jewish Dutchman named Sally Noach, had given us the papers.

Noach was an extraordinary and heroic man. Somehow he was able to act as a kind of unofficial Dutch consul in Lyon and gave documents and all manner of papers to practically all comers. He even supplied documents to refugees of newly set up internment camps and then persuaded the Vichy French authorities, who worked closely with the Gestapo, that they had mistakenly arrested non-Jews. Finally, Noach himself had to run for his life, escaping to Spain and then to England.

In hearing from family friends and reading about Sally Noach's life, I found some relief for the gloom that had swept over me. It had always seemed to me that our own escape to freedom had been accidental, a fluke, a combination of several strokes of luck. And of course it was. But I now saw that it was also due to the courage of that man—and the generosity of the cop who had warned us, and the ingenuity and persistence of my parents. Some effort, some initiative, could evidently, sometimes, ward off disaster.

### The Gloom Continued

But my gloom continued. Suddenly, belatedly, now in the early '80s, a movie here, a TV documentary there, retold, discussed, analyzed, some bit of horror about the Holocaust. Surely I could not rejoice at *our* escape or permit myself any ease in thinking that *my* children would never experience a similar

catastrophe, for the children I just happened to read about, in yet another magazine or newspaper article, on whom grisly medical experiments had been conducted and who were hanged in Hamburg just before the Allies came, were as deserving of life and happiness as I, a survivor, had been and as my children are. Nothing could lessen the pain of those children's deaths--no words spoken, no consolation uttered. And no hopeful lesson drawn from the courage of some could equal the despair I felt for those children's senseless suffering.

I knew their lives to have been as real as mine is, even if I could conveniently push aside that knowledge in the busy absorption of day-to-day living. And to compound the horror of that thought: If the children of others were as real as mine, what about the children who were dying right now, at the torturers' hands, in Cambodia, in Paraguay, in Iran--almost everywhere. Was that to be accepted?

Yet from that thought came a circuitous comfort. Those children were here now, still--some of them--subject to our help. If somehow their suffering could be lessened, through some word or deed, through money, food, the writing of one letter or a thousand letters--from the easiest volunteer work to the ultimate sacrifice of one's own health and liberty and life--then something could still be wrested from the forces of chaos and evil. It was, after all, what Sally Noach had done. It was what Raoul Wallenberg had done on a much more massive scale. And it was what thousands had done--and are doing now.

That thought, more than any other, has the power to make the past a little less my enemy.