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Ilana

by Christina Villa

(Honors Anthropology 1130 and Honors Psychology 2237)

Six million people disappear—this was the result of genocide of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Thousands of people died in the concentration camps and yet some survived through the generosity of those willing to risk their lives to hide them. Ilana's parents are among two of the lucky few who outlived the war.

Her mother, Esther, stayed with several families in Italy until she had the opportunity to escape to Switzerland. Ilana's father, Rudy Reisel, was a Zionist preparing to immigrate to Palestine in order to farm. The war broke out and he was forced to quit his apprenticeship with a gentile farmer in Holland. He was lucky enough to find the head of the underground resistance, who found Rudy a place to hide.

During the middle of the war this man approached Rudy, explaining that he was hiding so many people and they were starving to death. Food was scarce enough already. At that point Rudy suggested he ask the farmer he had apprenticed under. During the war this man had become very rich selling his produce on the Black Market and to the Germans. However, when the resistance headman approached the farmer, he laughed in his face and turned him away. Rudy then insisted upon leaving his hiding place to visit the farmer personally. He was able to convince the farmer by telling him the war would not last forever, and, when it was over, if he donated his produce, he would have hundred of people to vouch for his character, even though he was supporting the Germans. Rudy won over the farmer, and, thanks to Rudy's courage, hundreds of people survived while hiding during the occupation.

After the war, Rudy and Esther had three children, Paula, Eldad, and Ilana. Ilana was born on March 21, 1955 in Israel's sixth year of existence as a country. Her family lived in the town of Udim, a half hour away from the coast. They were small farmers who grew flowers and strawberries. They made a living by selling them to hotels and restaurants for their centerpieces.

As a young child, she recalled living very freely in her community. This is something she stressed—the community. When asked how safe she felt as a child, she replied, "What was there to worry about? You just get up and go. All of my friends would walk to the beach. It takes an hour and then you have a campfire. If it were late we would just sleep there. Nothing would happen; we were all part of the neighborhood and we watched out for each other."

Her favorite memory of her father was of him during the Six Day War. Her father was attending the Hebrew University on Mt. Scopus. Geographically, Mt. Scopus was a little Israeli island in the midst of Arabic neighborhoods, just outside Jerusalem. Rudy was a watchman at the university to make sure the roads leading to the college were safe for students and staff to travel. He noticed one afternoon a mob gathering along the roads and radioed his supervisor to cancel the bus convoy scheduled to arrive. For whatever reason, his dispatch was ignored and the buses filled with students and staff were massacred. A decision was made to evacuate the university, with the exception of a group of about 20 students (including Rudy) who stayed to protect the college. Between them they had one rifle, one Molotov cocktail, and the radios. A few days later Jordanian tanks and soldiers began heading up to the university. As soon as one of the tanks was in throwing distance, a student threw the Molotov cocktail. His aim was perfect and the tank exploded. The students braced themselves for the worst and were overjoyed that the convoy was turning around. Their little stand kept the University in Israeli occupation for the remainder of the conflict.

During the interview Ilana explained how, after high school, nobody thinks about going to college. Every citizen is required to go into the army. As this is not our custom in the U.S., she explained her sentiments about being forced into army service: “Being part of an elite group is a point of pride for Israelis. We want to join and have that prestige.” Although the army requirement is only 2½ - 3 years, Ilana stayed on for four years. She was a computer operator, and, as this was what she wanted to do career-wise, she stayed because it was on-the-job training. Currently, Israelis have an option of entering in the army or performing public service for their nation. Either way, they are still required to fulfill their duty to their country.

After the army Ilana got a job locally in Udim, where she later met her husband, Ezra Goldman. In 1981 she moved to Chicago with him. They have four children: Yeron, Gideon, Abigail, and Rebecca. When Ilana first moved to America, the biggest adjustment for her was the lack of community. She states, “People are just more closed here. They don’t share their feelings—you almost have to join a support group if you want to be connected to someone. People just don’t open up here. I have lived in this house for many years and still don’t even know all my neighbors. Growing up I knew everyone on our block.” As a result, she spends most of her time in her own home. Occasionally, her best friend, who lives in Israel, comes to visit. Like other members of her age group, her social network is confined to a few friends with very close relationships.

Since her youngest is a junior in high school, Ilana doesn’t have to worry about intensive childcare. However, she is still very involved with the emotional well being of her children as they embark through life. Additionally, she travels to Israel regularly to care for her aging mother. This makes her a part of the Sandwich Generation because she is still caring for her kids and also caring for her mother. This is common of people in her age group. She says the situation is sometimes stressful, especially because her mother lives out of the country. If she takes care of her mother well, she isn’t available to care for her children’s need well, and vice versa.

As a way of Coping with Stress, she spends many hours writing. Her writing consists of personal compilations regarding how to effectively deal with the emotions in other people’s lives, how to live happily, and how to be empowered and in control of our lives. She explained that when her children or other family members need advice, she sends them some of her thoughts about how to better their situation. This gives her a feeling of Generativity. Generativity is the feeling of needing to leave something behind for the next generation. Taking on a mentor role fulfills this need.

Despite her close connection with her children, Ilana doesn’t have a strong Sibling Connection. The quality of relationship one has with his/her siblings is a Sibling Connection. Being the youngest of her family, she was never close with her brother and sister. There was a huge age gap between them and she recalls living a life similar to that of an only child. Even now their bonds are not close. However, as their children have wanted to be closer to their cousins, Ilana has grown a little closer to her brother and sister again. She relates some of her lost opportunities with her siblings to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Ilana began “Yes, I believed the lies they were telling us. I see it now not as much as this group and that group. I just see people on both sides feeling inferior. This feeling, we learn it and pass it to our children. Our siblings, thank goodness we have them—they are such an opportunity for us to practice equality and good human virtue.” She comments with a laugh, “perhaps we, [my siblings and I], could have practiced this a little more.”

Realizing during the interview that some of the stories about her youth weren’t really about her, but about her family, she apologizes. “Its okay,” she exclaims, “my family together has an interesting history, me by myself, I am not so exciting.” Attempting to prod her memory more, she was asked about other aspects of her childhood, such as, “How close was the grocery store to your home?” Dodging some of these by telling a story about her parents, she told me, “It’s not that I forgot; I’m just not remember in this moment.” This is an example of a change in her Episodic Memory. This is memory related to events. As one ages, Semantic Memory or Crystallized Intelligence, is memory related to facts; this stays at a similar level while episodic memory decreases.

Events that are not forgotten are those that are a part of the Flashbulb Memory—events that impacted an individual immensely and are very important to him/her. The stories about her parents must have been told to her hundreds of times as a child, especially since her parents were survivors of the Holocaust. Ilana developed an immense pride in her family heritage. She defends herself saying that as long as she writes important times and dates on her calendar, she remembers them.

Aside from her slight decline in memory, common to her age group, Ilana is in relatively good health. She does have some nearsightedness and wears glasses when reading. She complains a little about arthritis but is in good physical shape. Walking her dog regularly and eating natural and organic foods has kept her fit.

Overall, Ilana's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical developments appear to be right on target with those of the average person in her age group. My impression is that she is a happy woman, which heightens her health and can be attributed to the relationships she has with her family. This is also a sign that in her previous age group she achieved a sound level of Intimacy—Erikson's stage about finding out who you are through a bond with another person or people. Ilana was successful in this manner because of her cultural roots. Togetherness is a crucial cultural value of the Middle East through which she was taught to find that level of trust in one's family and close friends.