

“WE STARTED OVER AGAIN, WE WERE YOUNG.”

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Argument: “Survivors established spaces... not only as a means of asserting their independence... but also to help them fulfill [the] obligation of recreating family, whether or not that family was biological.”



The Survivors

- The basis of this article is interviews with child/youth survivors of the Holocaust who immigrated to Montreal between 1947-1952 as children.
- The survivors come from very different backgrounds – different countries of origin, had different mother tongues, different family situations – but they share the common traumatic experience of the Holocaust.
- Once in Montreal, the survivors of this study shared several common goals. Primarily, as young people in a new country, they desired independence.
- Another goal described was the continuation of the Jewish people. This meant fulfilment of marital, filial, and financial goals.

Independence

One means of becoming independent was quitting school in favour of working. Many survivors didn't want to live on “handouts” and wanted the freedom of having their own money.

“Two Obligations”

“Surviving the Holocaust was a kind of a gift which came with two obligations. One was to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people. So I came here, I got married, two children, six grandchildren, this is done! The other part is . . . not to let the world to forget the Holocaust.” -Ted Bolgar.

Most of the survivors focused first on this goal and married within 2-3 years of arriving.

Integration



- Survivors struggled to integrate into Montreal society after their arrival.
- While their age was an advantage because they didn't have the emotional baggage of lost wives or children, survivor youth still faced antisemitism from Canadians as well as prejudice from the mainstream Jewish community.
 - At the time, Jews who had arrived in Montreal in the beginning of the twentieth century.
- In the more immediate post-war years, there was no one willing to hear the stories of young survivors. Canadians found the stories too challenging, too unbelievable, and too guilt-inducing, whereas older survivors brushed off the experiences of youths as less important than their own.
- One hurdle in integration was the presence of gatekeepers, such as social workers, doctors, dentists, psychologists, and vocational guidance counselors who largely determined integration through professional assessments.
 - The two most prominent examples are the councilors who determined whether survivors should return to school or join the workforce and the doctors who diagnosed many survivors with vaguely defined “Concentration-camp survivor syndrome.”
- The difficulty surrounding integration into Canadian society led to the need for social spaces. Young Holocaust survivors made these spaces for themselves “to enable social networking, to disprove the community's depressing diagnoses, and to create spaces where they could feel like people, rather than survivors.”

Social Worlds

- The difficulty of integration necessitated social worlds in which survivors could “[network], disprove the community’s depressing diagnoses, and... feel like people, rather than survivors.”
- Social worlds can be defined as “physical and temporal spaces in which survivors socialized and networked.”
- Social worlds could be formal or informal, though they were often interconnected regardless.
 - Informal spaces, however, are proved to be the most integral to the survivors in the study.
- Social worlds were often “transient” and “existed only as long as they had a purpose.”

YM-YWHA

The Young Men and Young Women’s Hebrew Association was a communal space for survivors and encouraged membership for child and adult survivors alike, though it attracted many children through free membership for war orphans. The YM-YWHA programs offered a “diverse yet still controlled” space that gatekeepers hoped would aid survivors in integrating into the mainstream Jewish community. Its major flaw was the failed intermingling between survivor youths and Jewish Canadian youths, as survivors remember the Jewish Canadian children “scrutiniz[ing] them and treat[ing] them differently; instead they often stuck to groups of other newcomers. Survivors remember YM-YWHA as a frequent spot of their early years in Montreal, but not much later.

Jewish Public Library

The Jewish Public Library was an extremely accessible social networking site for both child and adult survivors as it required no membership fee. Additionally, the JPL was appealing as it had no gatekeepers. The JPL, while also a site for socializing, was largely educational, offering organized courses on Yiddish literature, Bible studies, Jewish history, and world history through the library’s folks universitae (YIFO). Many survivors remember the JPL as primarily a place to learn English, but it is also regarded as a social site to some.



Jeanne Mance House

The Jeanne Mance House was a reception centre for orphaned Holocaust survivors under the age of 18 who had immigrated from 1947-1949. It could comfortably house 30-50 survivors, free of charge, although gatekeepers were present. JMH offered many educational activities (accelerated English language courses, field trips, introduction to Canada classes) that children were encouraged to attend, but not required. Survivors recall Jeanne Mance house as busy, “wild and lively,” and recount feeling like “window pieces” on open nights, when prospective families would come to visit. One of its appeals to survivors was the ability to socialize and bond with other young survivors. It is remembered as “an effective starting point for survivors to begin to remake their lives.”

Why This Study Matters: Survivors’ Agency

The importance of this article lies in the prioritization of survivor’s voices and survivor agency. The historical record overrepresents gatekeepers and other similar officials in most contexts, the lives of child survivors included. In this study, survivors had the chance to tell their own histories, offering an alternative perspective to the official documents generally studied. Further, while the Holocaust was a traumatic event these survivors endured, it does not define them. They carried on their lives in the wake of the Holocaust, leading rich and full lives that are no less deserving of representation. They are survivors, but cannot be reduced to only survivors; “nightmares and parties are parts of the same story.”

New Canadian Club

Within YM-YWHA, there were several newcomer clubs, including the New Canadian Club, which was open to all newcomers. The club had weekly meetings, which were largely intended for social networking. Additional opportunities to socialize included “socials” and dances. The club also published *New Life*, a bi weekly bulletin, printed in English and phonetic Yiddish. The New Canadian Club “struggled to garner interest” and was disbanded in 1948, only a year after its formation.

New World Club

The New World Club was an informal social space as well as an immigrant aid organization. While it accepted membership from all survivors, children (ages 19-26) and adults participated in different activities offered by the Club: adults attended largely for the lectures, speeches, and other academic opportunities; the children attended for the dances. Both groups were charged a small membership fee and generally did not mix. Further, the two grouping were informally divided based on language. As an aid organization, the club provided employment opportunities, “education and housing options and day-to-day necessities.” In this space, survivors didn’t need to relive their experiences in order to make space for themselves; “We all knew what had happened. We didn’t have to tell anyone about it. We just wanted to have fun.” The NWC disbanded in 1951, when it was no longer needed as members had mostly integrated into society.