

“In My Own Sweet Time”: Exercising Survivor Agency in Postwar Montreal

A Summary of Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki’s “‘We Started Over Again, We Were Young’: Postwar Social Worlds of Child Holocaust Survivors in Montreal”



Marianne and Ted Bolgar, June 1954

Introduction

- From 1947 to 1952, thousands of child Holocaust survivors came to Montreal
- Growing up in a tumultuous political era in Quebec (the premiership of Maurice Duplessis) survivors struggled to integrate into Montreal’s pre-existing Jewish community and the city more generally
 - Duplessis campaigned on antisemitic rhetoric but both francophones and anglophones in Montreal held antisemitic views
 - Montreal itself was religiously, ethnically, and linguistically divided, consisting of “three solitudes”: French Catholics, English Catholics, and English Protestants
 - These divisions made the city a complex space for survivors to navigate
- Canadian Jews (those who belonged to the prewar community) provided considerable supports, but **survivors also established their own organizations and communities to create new social worlds** in Montreal
 - “Social worlds” are the places, both physical and immaterial, where survivors socialized and networked
- Socializing took place both formally and informally, i.e., inside and outside of “official” venues like clubs
- Understanding and appreciating the accounts of survivors post-Holocaust shows how they reconstructed their lives in spite of their traumatic pasts
- In creating these new social worlds for themselves, **survivors asserted their agency** as individuals and members of a broader community

Political and Social Context

- At the time of the survivors’ arrivals, Quebec was governed by Maurice Duplessis’s *Union Nationale*, **a nationalist, socially-conservative** political party
- Antisemitism was rampant amongst both francophones and anglophones
- The preexisting Jewish community in Montreal (consisting of many who had fled European pogroms during the turn of the century) was just starting to achieve affluence and social mobility by WWII
 - The Holocaust Encyclopedia defines pogroms as “violent attacks on Jews by local non-Jewish populations”
- Nevertheless, Jewish Canadians in Montreal were responsible for many initiatives that sought to help survivors, **though efforts varied in terms of “success”**

About the Article

- **Sheftel and Zembrycki conducted interviews with survivors as part of Concordia University’s Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and other Human Rights Violations project**
- The survivors featured in the article shared their testimonies publicly, representing approximately eighteen of the thirty individuals engaged in this work in Montreal
 - Interviewees/survivors were all of Ashkenazi descent, affiliated with the mainstream Montreal Jewish community, **and arrived between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four**
 - **A number of the survivors came to Montreal through the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) war orphans project**
- One survivor, Ted Bolgar, describes the two motivations that guided his postwar life:
 - **To rebuild—or build new—families;**
 - **And to ensure the remembrance of the Holocaust**
 - While Bolgar’s view represents his perspective, it nonetheless sheds light on how survivors approached their new realities

Oral Histories

- Oral accounts from survivors allow for “**bottom-up” view of history**, one that **centres the narratives of ordinary people**
- The social clubs and communities examined in the article left few traces of their existence, disbanding just as quickly as they were created
- Given the lack of documentary evidence and the advanced age of survivors, **oral histories represent the best avenue for reconstructing the social worlds created and inhabited by survivors**

Child Survivors

- **Child survivors of the Holocaust had unique experiences as they navigated multiple life transitions**, such as the move to adulthood and the challenges associated with being an immigrant in a new city
- **Survivors came from diverse backgrounds and encountered new living conditions**
 - Some came independently, while others arrived with their families
 - Some survivors settled with relatives already in the city; others came as orphans
- **Young survivors grappled with a constellation of challenges:** their youth, immigrant status, and exclusion from two worlds: the broader Montreal Jewish community, as well as the survivor community, which was adult-centred
 - Survivors recalled others’ discomfort with their stories, assumptions they behaved unethically to survive, as well as more overt hatred
 - A survivor known as “Krysia” recalls an incident where her boss claimed she survived by war by “flirt[ing] with the Germans”
 - Another, Ben Younger, speaks of an instance at the diner where he worked in which a customer repeatedly berated him with epithets
 - In response, Younger jumped over the counter and confronted the customer physically
- Non-survivors were also discouraged from dating survivors on account of their lower social and economic status

Survivor Interviewees

- **Ted Bolgar**, a Hungarian survivor who immigrated in 1948 at age twenty-three
- **Sidney Zoltak**, a Polish survivor who immigrated in 1948 at age sixteen/seventeen
- **Mayer Schondorf**, a Czechoslovakian survivor who immigrated in 1948 at age nineteen/twenty
- **Rena Schondorf**, a Polish survivor who immigrated in 1948 at age nineteen
- **Krysia**, (pseudonym), a survivor who arrived in 1948
- **Musia Schwartz**, a Polish survivor who immigrated in 1948 at age seventeen/eighteen
- **Olga Sher**, a Polish survivor who immigrated in 1949 at age twenty-six
- **Ben Younger**, a Romanian survivor who immigrated in 1948 at age twenty/twenty-one

Socializing and Networking – “Mainstream” Supports

- The mainstream Jewish community established a number of organizations designed for survivors
 - The **Jeanne-Mance House** was designed for orphaned survivors under the age of eighteen
 - It hosted social events, in addition to providing adoption opportunities, education, and career counseling services
 - While some child survivors used the House to meet and interact with their peers, the establishment represented **a mere starting point for those seeking to rebuild their social and professional lives**
 - The **Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YM-YWHA)** created child and adult survivor programs that sought to “integrate” survivors into the non-survivor Jewish community, though they were not particularly successful
 - Nonetheless, some eleven newcomer clubs were formed within the YM-YWHA
 - One subgroup, the New Canadian Club, was open to all newcomers; it published a bimonthly bulletin in English and phonetic Yiddish, though the Club itself attracted only minimal interest
 - Other activities like dances also provided social opportunities
 - For example, Musia Schwartz met her best friend, Lucy, at one such event
 - The YM-YWHA served as a general gathering place where groups could coalesce before taking to other venues
 - The **Jewish Public Library (JPL)** provided English lessons to adult and child survivors, representing another prominent venue for networking and socializing
 - Krysia recalls taking English lessons at the JPL to improve her job prospects
 - Other survivors, Olga Sher and Schwartz, remember the JPL’s English lessons as helping them integrate into society as well as providing opportunities for cultural enrichment
 - The latter remembers the poet Irving Layton’s classes at the JPL as a forum for both education and story sharing: “He was the only person I met who wouldn’t trivialize or leave any story unfinished until he thoroughly understood it.”

Navigating Gatekeeping

- Survivors’ efforts at building and rebuilding their lives were **complicated by the actions of various actors**, including social workers, doctors, counsellors, and psychologists
- Many “experts” believed the survivors were incapable of integrating into normal life**
 - The diagnosis *Concentration–camp survivor syndrome* named a long list of symptoms said to be experienced by survivors
 - Some examples include sleep disturbances, depression, and repressed mourning
- Ted Bolgar and Musia Schwartz recall being encouraged to continue their studies to secure long–term employment, but both opted to chart their own courses instead
 - In the words of Schwartz: “I didn’t want it. I wanted to earn my own money and not live on handouts. **I knew I’d go to university, in my own sweet time.**”



Rena and Mayer Schondorf, December 1952

Survivor Spaces: The New World Club

- Though many of the mainstream organizations provided valuable supports, **they had their own shortcomings, not limited to the presence/influence of gatekeepers and their emphasis on “formal” socializing**
- Alongside these supports, independent ones run by and for survivors were also established
- The New World Club (NWC) was one such example
 - Little documentary evidence of the NWC survives, but according to Rena Schondorf, it was founded by two German Jews, doctors Reichman and Pfeifer
 - Both men were interned upon arrival in Canada as the government’s policy did not make distinctions based on the ethnicities of internees**
- Information about the Club’s history and goings–on come from survivors, many of whom share fond reminiscences
- Survivors had little disposable income, but the Club cost them little to nothing to organize or participate in
 - However, it is unclear whether the NWC had any mainstream affiliations or received outside funds

“A Help Club”

- The NWC, like other grassroots survivor initiatives, operated in rented spaces in downtown Montreal
 - It was officially an immigrant aid organization
- The Club comprised about 200 members and included both adults and children, with both groups mostly keeping to themselves
 - Child members ranged between nineteen and twenty–six years old
- The NWC served different needs for different members**
 - For some, like Bolgar, the club was primarily a social venue**
 - Ted met his wife, Marianne, at the NWC
 - For others, the club provided assistance to survivors**
 - Mayer Schondorf recalls the NWC as a help club, providing information about job opportunities, housing, education, and shopping
 - He also notes that it served a social function, enabling friendships and relationships
 - Like Bolgar, he met his wife (Rena) at the NWC
- The NWC, like many of the other organizations surveyed, disbanded in 1951 as many of its members no longer had use for it**

Conclusion

- The spaces described by survivors left profound impacts on their lives
 - These spaces provided professional opportunities, like language lessons, job networking, and information about renting, **but they also served as social outlets**
 - Interviewees describe the many friendships and relationships they established through these various clubs and organizations
 - Their role as social venues was further necessitated by the social climate**, which was characterized by antisemitism and alienation from the mainstream Jewish community
- According to Sheftel and Zembrzycki, survivors organized their lives with two motivations in mind:
 - To assert their independence;**
 - And to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people**
- Perhaps most notably, these clubs and organizations presented opportunities for survivors to exercise their agency
 - Access to jobs, networking, and skills allowed survivors the means to live independently, but agency was pursued in other ways as well; that is, survivors asserted themselves by:
 - Challenging the assumptions of gatekeepers who worked with “official” support providers;
 - And constructing survivor–centred social networks outside of the “mainstream” Jewish and Montreal communities
- Survivors were not only othered by their experiences in the Holocaust: they had to contend with differences of language, culture, and upbringing upon arrival in Montreal
 - The social worlds they constructed, both formal and informal, allowed them to exercise their agency in the company of those who, in the words of Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “**just understood**”

Bibliography

Sheftel, Anna, and Stacey Zembrzycki. ““We Started Over Again, We Were Young’: Postwar Social Worlds of Child Holocaust Survivors in Montreal.” *Urban History Review* 39, no. 1 (2010): 20–30.