

ANZJP Book review July 2003

A Wolf in the Attic. The Legacy of a Hidden Child of the Holocaust. S Richman. New York: Hawthorn Press, 2002. ISBN 0-7890 1549-8. pp240.

Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* concludes: 'The passing on of the child's words transmit not simply a reality that can be grasped in these words' representation, but the ethical imperative of an awakening that has yet to occur.' Not surprisingly, as a child psychiatrist son of Holocaust survivors, Dr Sophia Richman's memoir, the story of a child emerging from a life of hiding, touched me on many personal and professional levels. Richman's childhood emerged from attics, physical and psychological, her child's mind exiled from ordinary children's experiences.

What makes Richman's memoir so original is the brutal honesty with which she details mind-numbing experiences from Poland, Paris to New York; survive emotional abuse in her family of origin; spouse abuse in her first marriage; grow through relationships including psychotherapies; become a psychologist and psychoanalyst; to eventually reclaim and, despite the odds, restore an inner balance combined in a full life as an inspiring mother, wife and professional with unique insights. After September 11, 2001, many questions that are raised in this book demand urgent responses.

How do we calculate the psychological effects of surviving massive trauma, like the Holocaust, on the surviving families and children? Who can calculate such effects for us? How do we reconcile these effects on our human rights for freedom from fear, despair, and amnesia? Is denial of the intergeneration transmission of trauma, handing down the unintegrated and the inaccessible feeling states from parents to children a legitimate way for a culture to cope?

I savored this book on many levels, the stories within stories unfolding, with Richman providing generous excerpts from her mother's Holocaust testimony and passages from her father's book. I was reminded of Dori Laub's account of the delicate process by which survivor's come to psychic life, transforming their 'not knowing' through 'fragments' and 'fugues' to eventually arrive at 'witnessed narratives' and 'metaphors', here of two generations.

As a mental health professional, Richman acknowledges the ethical dilemma she faced in writing, the self-disclosure and its ‘complicated consequences’, becoming transparent to her readers, some her patients. She knows ‘we have no way of gauging the impact of revelations disclosed in a published book.’ So why did she take the risk, I wondered? Perhaps the process of writing provided what I have previously termed a second-chance at a special form of self-care: the recovery of that elusive part of the self, paradoxically beyond language, of ‘the ‘exiled self’, the self that was exiled because she experienced too much, too soon.’

If, as Irving Yalom reflects after a lifetime as therapist, therapy is a gift, the vocation a privilege, then Dr Sophia Richman’s final words offer a clue to why she risked so much self-disclosure. ‘Freedom of choice is in our attitude. Whether we see ourselves as damaged or as special because of the mark we bear is up to us. In the final analysis, our image of ourselves influences our decisions, our actions, and, ultimately, the person we become.’ Dr Richman’s book, borne of an ethical imperative, gives us a unique gift, which we should receive with grace.

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534 words