

6.3. “Nothing Makes You Free” by Melvin Jules Bukiet

Melvin Jules Bukiet is a member of the so-called Second Generation—the children of survivors. This excerpt from his essay discusses what his life was like as a child.

*Source: Melvin Jules Bukiet, ed. *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002. Used by permission of the author.*

Concentration camps were “liberated,” and approximately one hundred thousand Jews were released from Hell. Many more emerged from years of hiding in terror.

What a strange world they inhabited. Their homes were burnt, their culture destroyed, their God silent. It was a world without very young or very old people, because most of those who survived were between twenty and thirty and had been deemed fit for work, temporarily. Perhaps most bizarrely, the survivors’ world was a world without parents, a world of orphans. Like their literal mothers, their *mameloshen* [mother tongue], Yiddish, was now as dead as Sanskrit. That was appropriate, because the survivors were ghosts floating across the devastated landscape. Much congratulatory celebration is made these days of their vigor, their character and their mere existence, but let’s keep one terrible truth on the table. In fact, Hitler won.

“Oh, no!” people say. “He’s dead and we’re here.” But *we* are not here. An infinitesimal portion of *us* are here. Most of *us* are ash floating over Eastern Europe. The Jews lost, badly. The continent is morally, culturally, essentially *Judenrein*. Thus, the survivors were expected to remain unobtrusive supernatural phenomena, not disturbing the living with the clanking of their chains and their alarming stories. In return, a guilty world tried to salvage its conscience with passports to the United States and other nations too that had barred entry to Jews a decade earlier.

For the most part, the survivors obliged. They pretended to live normal lives, to work, pay rent, eat dinner. A few like Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi chronicled their individual and communal catastrophe in print, but most lived as privately abroad as they had in their destroyed homes. This was the 1950s and the Holocaust had not entered the public consciousness as it would thirty years later. But the survivors could not wait to be discovered, so the tailor in Borough Park, the builder in New Jersey, the housewife in Miami and their co-equals in Tel Aviv and London and Melbourne told their stories to each other over games of gin. They also told them to the only others who had no choice but to listen, their children.

Despite every possible attempt to obliterate them from the face of the earth, these phantoms had returned to the land of the living, and that meant meeting and mating and bearing squawling infants who wouldn't have stood a chance one single decade earlier. Whether they remained in Europe as 18th generation Germans or were born in the United States as first generation Americans, within Holocaust circles the children are known as the Second Generation.

In a way, life has been even stranger— though infinitely less perilous—for the children than the parents. If a chasm opened in the lives of the First Generation, they could nonetheless sigh on the far side and recall the life Before, but for the Second Generation there is no Before. In the beginning was Auschwitz. On the most literal level, their fathers would not have met their mothers if not for the huge dislocations that thrust the few remnants of European Jewry into contact with spouses they would never have otherwise encountered except for DP camps or in the 20th century Diaspora. The Second Generation's very existence is dependent on the whirlwind their parents barely escaped.

No one who hasn't grown up in such a household can conceive it while every 2G has something in common. Every one of these happy or unhappy families knows a variation of the same unhappy story. Of course, some survivors spoke incessantly of the Holocaust while others never mentioned it. Of those who didn't speak, some were traumatized while others hoped to protect their offspring from knowledge of the tree of evil. The Second Generation will never know what the First Generation does in its bones, but what the Second Generation knows better than anyone else is the First Generation. Other kids' parents didn't have numbers on their arms. Other kids' parents didn't talk about massacres as easily as baseball. Other kids' parents had parents.