

About the Group

Deborah Knowles explains what it means to be a member of the Second Generation. Her personal view first appeared in the book, "Mixed Blessings: New Zealand children of Holocaust survivors remember" published by Tandem Press in 2003.

In our Auckland Second Generation Group, we are all children of survivors and refugees from the Holocaust and we try to make sense of our unique family backgrounds.

The idea for the book Mixed Blessings came about during one of the meetings of our Second Generation group. We had all brought along a favourite family recipe, and a memory that went with it. As the evening progressed, it seemed that the schnitzels and schmaltz were just the starting point; quite soon it was the memories that took over.

Making sense of it all

The recipes, the sharing of our growing-up-in-New Zealand-stories, the constant reading, and the trips to Europe, all help us to make sense of our background. However, most of all I've loved hearing the stories of the survivors themselves. Every time I'm told an escape story or hear about the difficulties of settling into such an alien land and language, I am reminded of these people's tenacity, their presence of mind, their energy, their resourcefulness, and their belief that despite the humiliations and loss, life was precious and the future was a gift. I have felt privileged to listen.

Who can belong?

If one or both of your parents lived in Europe in the 1930s and Hitler decided they were Jewish, they were persecuted, hunted down and robbed of their assets and citizenship. Either they were forced into hiding, sent to concentration camps to be murdered or if they were lucky enough to get away, they had to leave their homes and families to become refugees. If some or all of these things happened to your parents, you are a child of a Holocaust survivor and therefore may wish to identify yourself as a member of the 'second generation'.

Your choice

Of course, you can choose whether or not you acknowledge that you belong to the Second Generation Group, or whether you feel the need to share the experience, but the criteria for your membership were set in place in Germany in the early 1930s and, as such, were nothing to do with you as an individual. Nor is it anything to do with your religious affiliation. It doesn't matter if you or your parents were Orthodox Jews, Liberal Jews, completely or partially assimilated Jews, communists, atheists, or converts to Christianity or Lutheranism, or any combination of these.

An international club

Second Generation groups have been formed all over the world. I'm sure there are several in New York alone, as well as in many other large American cities. The London group is extremely active and articulate, and even produces a regular magazine. Groups also exist in the larger English cities, as well as in Canada, and in Melbourne and Sydney. In fact they have appeared wherever there are enough people who share this same background. Their purpose is to provide a place where members can listen to each other's family stories, to see the connections with their own and then, when they feel ready, to talk. If you have grown up outside the Jewish community, as I did, the group is also a great opportunity to make a few connections with all the things you missed out on.

Our European inheritance

We all grew up with a hazy knowledge of the country which had been 'home' to our parents, whether it was Hungary, Germany, Russia, Czechoslovakia or Poland. Some of our parents had escaped from these countries to New Zealand during the thirties, others came just after the war, and a further group immigrated at the time of the Hungarian Revolution.

Our parents were refugees in New Zealand

All were grateful for refuge in New Zealand because at that time it was hard to gain an entry permit to come here. The government was mostly interested in attracting British immigrants and it was felt that Jewish Europeans, despite their difficulties, did not have the right qualifications and would not be easily absorbed into New Zealand society. Consequently, between 1933 and

1945 New Zealand accepted only about 1000 refugees from Europe – a rather paltry few considering the serious nature of the problem. This time, to be among “the chosen,” Jews needed to have had a combination of luck, money and good contacts.

The majority of refugees eventually settled in Auckland or Wellington and most of them made a living (according to the official statistics) in manufacturing, trade or business. All had to make adjustments to the different way of life here; it was such a long way from the cultural liveliness they had been used to, but on the other hand, it was also a long way from the danger.

Our parents seemed different

New Zealand society of the 1950s and 1960s appeared to be very mono-cultural. As children, we couldn't help noticing that everybody else's school lunches were very different from our own. They all seemed to have white bread and peanut butter, and their parents seemed so much more circumspect – they didn't wave their arms in the air, argue loudly in a foreign language in public, or kiss and hug each other vigorously when they met. We all remember feeling, with varying degrees of sensitivity, that our parents were different.

Painful family memories

Growing up with European parents meant that we grew up not only with a penchant for European food and culture, but also with extremely powerful family memories. Some parents spoke of their memories, but most tried to protect their children from them. Ironically, whether they were spoken or unspoken, these memories were part of the family atmosphere – we breathed them in.

The Czech psychologist Helena Klimova used another metaphor to describe the enduring quality of these second-hand memories: “It's as though the experience of the Holocaust was so unbearable that it has taken more than one generation to digest it.”

“Possessed by a history they never lived”

Helen Epstein, writer and researcher on the Second Generation experience, published her first book, *Children of the Holocaust* in 1979. In it she sets out to “find a group of people who, like me, were possessed by a history they had never lived.” Most of them were not told any details of the terrifying and humiliating experiences of their parents and yet they were still affected by them in one way or another.

One interviewee, who was brought up in Canada, put it like this: “I always had a feeling of something different in our house, but I could never pin it down. I sensed there was something mysterious, something peculiar about the past.” His mother had chosen to tell him nothing, saying, “Why should they find out? It has nothing to do with them.”

Family silences

Despite the family silences, the children, as they grew up, were compelled to find out more about their parents' past. They wanted to know what it was that could not be spoken about, and they also wanted to know about their grandparents, and the aunts and the uncles – the family they didn't have, the unknowable people whose names they bore, whose faces looked out from those precious old photos. They wanted to know what had happened to them all and yet they didn't want to ask because they knew it was painful for their parents to remember.

Breaking the silence

I recognise many of these feelings, and I know that other people in our group would, too, because these are the things that we have talked about. I can still remember the relief I felt when I listened to the family stories of other group members. Suddenly I could see that my family was not the only one to be propelled towards misunderstandings of each other and eventual tragedy. I could see now that it wasn't because we were careless or crazy but because we couldn't talk about or 'digest' the events of the past.

The lack of extended family

Another thing that we all have in common is a lack of extended family. Many of us have felt the absence of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins and their accompanying stories. For example, I am fascinated by the fact that my mother-in-law, a fourth-generation New Zealander, has 99 cousins; my husband, on the other hand, couldn't be less impressed by the abundance of his family. Curiously, he understands my interest and he was more than happy to explore Slovakia in search of the remnants of my family.

Our need to go back to Europe

Of course, there is very little left of the world that our parents knew – Hitler made sure of that – but still the old buildings and graveyards are better than nothing, and occasionally there is even an elderly local who remembers a detail or two about our parent or grandparent. They did exist, because they live on in an 80-year-old memory, and in finding this person, the owner of the memory, we have found a little bit of our absent relatives. We have made a connection with our missing families.

It is important for us to try to understand what Jewish life had been like before Hitler, so that it becomes possible to build a bridge over the void that divides the time before the war from the time after the war. Maybe then we can establish a feeling of continuity and see ourselves as part of a group of people who lived before the Holocaust, who kept themselves alive during it and came out on the other side. It has been called by some academics the creation of “a usable past.”

And what could be more “usable” for us than our families’ recipes? They are the perfect link between the time before the Holocaust and the present. These useful little bits of home proved to be wonderfully portable, easily recreated and shared in the new land. The essential foods that didn’t exist here (like yoghurt, brown bread or salami) were soon produced with a bit of refugee know-how, and New Zealand cuisine has never looked back.