

In 2020 at a “somatic experiencing” training, I was feeling curious about some neck pain. One of the practitioners, in a small practice session, suggested that I move my eyes towards the pain.

As I glanced slightly to my left, with a subtle micro-movement, I received an instant download – a “memory packet” of information, which brought tears through my left eye (my maternal side). All at once, I was immersed in a sense memory of being one or two years old, preverbal, pre-conceptual, looking straight into my mother’s eyes and absorbing *her* entire emotional state the way that babies and small children do before their cognitive filters and defenses are set. I palpably felt the hidden, hurting child in my mother -- her lostness, her fear, her anger and confusion.

And it was not just my mom I was feeling, but my grandmother too. They were both inside of me.

They came from the Polish town of Kalisz, where my grandmother, Stella, and her husband Yosef, my grandfather, ran a leather factory. When the Nazis invaded, my mother’s family and many other Jews were forced into a ghetto in Rzeszow. There they suffered many deprivations and degrading humiliations.

In the summer of 1942, the Nazis began to systematically destroy the Jewish population. My grandmother, a very savvy woman, somehow got word that the Rzeszow ghetto was to be liquidated. (The Jews of Rzeszow, including most of my mother’s family, were systematically murdered, sent to the terrible Belzec killing fields, to Treblinka concentration camp, or to forced labor camps).

My mother was four years old at the time. My grandmother sewed some money and jewels into her jacket and pushed her underneath the ghetto fence to a non-Jewish Polish woman who agreed to take her in exchange for the money. But my mother was so terrified and she screamed so hard after Stella walked away, that the Polish woman simply took the money and jewels and pushed her back under the fence. My mom ran home then. Her father was there. She ran into his arms and he held her tightly, crying “Oh Rosa, Rosa!”

That was her last memory of her father, my grandfather, Yosef.

My grandmother came back and saw her daughter in her husband’s arms and realized what had happened. She and my grandfather made a fateful plan then, a brave and necessary plan that would, tragically, leave Stella with crippling guilt for the rest of her life. They decided that they’d find a way for Stella and my mother to escape, but not my grandfather Yosef. He had dark hair and was clearly “Jewish-looking.” But my mom and her mom, with their light hair and less pronounced Semitic features, stood a reasonable chance of passing as non-Jews, if they could escape on time.

Somehow the plan worked. Before or during the liquidation of the ghetto, my mom and grandmother escaped through a cemetery, where the groundskeeper allowed them to hide overnight in the outhouse. They somehow made their way to Warsaw, where Stella became a “housekeeper” for a man named Adam-Jacque (and perhaps his lover – I don’t know) whose daughter, Hanka, six years older than my mom, pretended to be my mother’s sister. Mom hid in closets and at different farm houses, pretending not only to not be Jewish but also not to know her mother.

After the Russians liberated Poland, the Haganah – Jewish freedom fighters who eventually became the Israeli army – whisked Stella and my mom from the Russian to the American side. They ended up in Munich for several years, where my mother received an education and Stella – an extremely intelligent

and beautiful woman – wheeled and dealed, creating a crystal and jewelry business, surviving by instincts and wiles, as well as going out with various men. My mother, who had been abandoned by necessity by my grandmother when they lived underground in Poland, now felt abandoned again – and again and again. Stella had sharp survival instincts and was strong in business, but she was unable to provide loving attention to her daughter, likely because she herself was so traumatized.

They eventually moved to America, where Stella had a complete nervous breakdown. Trauma was neither understood nor treated in the 1950s medical culture. Doctors prescribed Librium and Valium but these medications didn't help Stella. In 1964, she was given electroshock therapy. I remember sitting on her lap; her voice tone was soft and loving, but there was a vacancy in her eyes. She died when I was 13 years old, shortly after my bar mitzvah.

The internationally esteemed author and psychotherapist Esther Perel, who is also the child of Holocaust survivors, makes a distinction between *survivors* and *revivers*. Survivors are those who, like my grandmother, got away alive but were destroyed in spirit. They never recovered their inner lives. By contrast, my mother and father were revivers. They not only survived the Holocaust, but also went on to live thriving, meaningful lives.

This is not to say that they carried no trauma. In contrast to her own mom, my mother's parenting style was the opposite extreme. She was "all over me," I was enmeshed in her orbit, an adored "mama's boy": she "did for me" and did not teach me to do for myself. I was groomed to be dependent, as she laundered, cooked, and cleaned for me, and even dressed me. My autonomy and boundaries were not respected. She was clearly overcompensating for the mothering she herself had not received, and yet she wasn't able to really see me as a separate person. In "smother-loving" me, she was unconsciously trying to fulfill deep-seated needs of her own, trying to heal her own pain through keeping me close in her orbit and staying intimately emotionally enmeshed with me. She became a professional mother, and had a very difficult time letting me go as I moved on into adulthood.

Naturally, as I grew older and came to understand what was going on, I had resentments and conflicts with her. My emotional development and maturity were delayed, which ultimately impacted my ability to self-regulate, maintain healthy boundaries, and be a capable parent myself.

But then this "information packet" moment occurred, this immensely powerful somatic memory, and suddenly *I was her* in an emotional sense. And my grandmother too. I was Stella and I was Rosa and I was Michael all at the same time. It would be an understatement to say I understood "viscerally" why they were as they were. Rather, I literally *experienced* their reality from the inside out.

Rosa, my mom, had absorbed her own mother's trauma, and had carried that trauma as well as her own. It had all been transmitted to me nonverbally, via my mother's eyes, the seat of her soul (and perhaps epigenetically as well). So a natural compassion and empathy arose in me when this came clear, and also gratitude, because it was not just trauma that had been conveyed to me. I realized now that I had also inherited their remarkable strengths. I was their generational beneficiary in both material and spiritual ways.