

Poetry and the Second Generation

Marty Herskovitz

I am a child of Holocaust survivors and a poet.

I am interested in presenting a workshop in the use of poetry for the Second Generation.

The Second Generation has encountered a number of problems in expressing their feeling toward the past both in the relation to the dead of the Holocaust and toward their parents.

They are also encountering problems in the day to day function in the role of building their life in the present and often display feeling of dissatisfaction, depression and problem in raising a family.

In order to deal better with the past and problems of functioning in the present, poetry writing and reading can help deal with these issues and clarify them. In my workshop I will survey some problematic aspects of the second generation, how poetry can aid in alleviating these problems using examples of my and other 2nd generation poetry.

The second part of the workshop can be an experiential workshop in which educators can try to write poetry or prose about the Holocaust

Herewith is an outline of the workshop – the name of the poem used is mentioned after the subject:

Background – Paradoxes of Second Generation

Memory amid the silence

Negative Feelings that cannot be expressed

Second Generation Poetry as Expression and Resolution of Paradoxes

Memory Amid the Silence

Silence and lack of History -Poem Photographs

Protest at no mourning – Unknown, Unowned

History as Taboo – Speaking of the Dead

Lack of Family – Wanna Go Out Tonight

Prevalence despite the Silence – Birthright, Eclipse

Commemoration by names – Children of the Shoah

Ambiguity of identity - Berries

Role of memorial candle yet unable to mourn – Unmourned

Second generation reaction to role - Four Sons

Details instead of Memory – I keep forgetting.

Reanimation and creation of narrative – Ergo Sum, Names, Mints

Creation of identity – Taking My Name

Negative Feelings towards Survivor Parent and Catharsis

Unreadiness for Parenthood – Renewal

Searching for Love – Missing Persons

Intimacy in Present 2 Gen Family – A Love Poem

Intergenerational transmission to 3 gen – I wound

Healing
Setting Boundary – Leaving You
Catharsis and Communication- Ineffable
 Finding Love– Farewells
 Optimism toward the future – When I get Older
Possibility of Blessing after Auschwitz- Curses and Blessings

Poetry and Children of Holocaust Survivors

In this workshop I would like to speak about the use of poetry in understanding the Second Generation experience. Most of the articles in this area have focused on the Second Generation artistic response to the Holocaust itself – how the trauma filtered to our generation and how we interpret and synthesize the knowledge and emotions that are engendered by the Holocaust. An excellent book in this area is *Breaking Crystal* by Ephraim Sicher. I would like to focus rather on the Second Generation response to the Post-Holocaust world into which we were born. Beyond the role of providing collective voice to respond to the Holocaust, the Holocaust affected our parents and us on a personal level. It is on this personal level that poetry is most effective and that one can understand and explain the world of the Second Generation. A few months ago I helped arrange a poetry reading by Second Generation poets in Amcha (National Israeli Center for Psychosocial Support of Survivors of the Holocaust and the Second Generation) on Holocaust Memorial Day. When we first discussed the evening we hoped that 20 or 25 people would show up. In the end, over 70 people showed up wanting to read their poetry or to hear poetry read about the Second Generation. The use of poetry in the children of Survivors to express their feelings seems to have touched a nerve.

For me it was no surprise that so many came. Like Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams* I knew that “if you build it, they will come,” that many Second Generation would need on that day to express the emotions engendered by remembrance of the Holocaust and that poetry would be a good way to do so. And that is basically what this workshop is about, to understand the affinity between the Second Generation and the expression via poetry. Most of the workshop will use examples of my poetry because, as regards my poetry, I can speak freely about meanings and motivations. I am more reluctant to ascribe meanings to the poetry of others.

Please Note: In this presentation I am discussing my own personal experience as a child of Survivors and, although this experience is shared by many, it is only one of a myriad of Second Generation experiences.

Background

To understand the phenomenon of poetry in expression of the Second Generation experience, one must first understand the paradoxes of being raised as a child of Survivors. The first paradox is that, on the one hand, most of the Second Generation

has been raised with little direct knowledge of the Holocaust. Our parents, in order to spare us the misery, hid from us the story of their suffering. But, despite this silence, we were also brought up as “Memorial Candles,” as the psychologist Dina Wardi termed it, as children who were supposed to memorialize those who died even though they were never spoken of. This is a paradox of memory within the silence.

The second paradox regards our relationship with the Survivor parent. The Survivor parent after the Holocaust was emotionally distant, unable to bond properly with their child, and minimized physical contact with the infant and child. Many of us grew up with feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, and lack of basic trust. On the other hand, we were often valued and cherished as our parent’s victory over Hitler and so we were subject to doting, parental worry and to extreme concern for our physical well-being. To add to this confusion we, as children were all too aware of our parent’s sensitivities and tenuous emotional state, so we limited as much as possible the expression of negative feeling toward the survivor parent. This is a paradox of needing to express feelings that cannot be expressed.

This is the environment in which the Second Generation is raised, a jumble of conflicting emotions. It is hard to create a single continuous narrative out of such a jumble. And this is where I feel the poetry plays an important role, because poetry which relies on sounds and images and not so much on well-ordered thought processes is better suited to the disordered jumble of emotions that has resulted from the paradoxes of the Second Generation’s life. In this workshop I will survey in depth the various aspects I have noted above and show how they are expressed mostly in my poetry but in the poetry of other Second Generation poets’ also.

Poetry As an Expression of the Second Generation Experience

A. Memory Amidst the Silence

I started to write poetry about four years ago when I came to the realization that being a child of Survivors was a very significant aspect in the shaping of my personality. One of the first poems I wrote was “Photographs” (All the poems will be handed out to the participants.)

Photographs

1.

My cousin Haim Stern returned to Serechnye after the war

Took the key from the neighbor

To return shortly, a shoebox under his arm

And he strode toward the tree grove.

The bonfire in the grove burnt the photographs well

as he stood over the curling pictures, prodding them deeper into the flames

the nitrate smoke burnt his eyes.

He sat in the clearing till the embers died down, then freed, left for America

his spare set of shoes now in the shoebox.

2.

My father has put away the pictures from before the war and he can't find them.

But I think that he put away the pictures so he won't find them.

What good are those pictures, he says, they were all blurry

and in the posed pictures they all look like statues

Better we should take pictures of our wonderful grandchildren, not blurry and in color.

Let's finish the roll and in an hour we'll have new pictures. Much better

3.

I don't have any pictures of my uncles who died in Auschwitz

not that it would help much.

My Uncle Meshulam died when he was 4 years old.

I would feel pretty silly holding a picture of a four year old

and saying this is my uncle.

It is hard for me to imagine that I had a family at all.

I'm not a god that can create a family out of motes of dust.

4.

Whenever I would ask about the Holocaust my parents changed the subject saying

"You have to put the past behind if you want to go forward"

After 45 years of all sorts of directions, I am beginning to doubt their words.

Martin Herskovitz

Faced with the silence surrounding the Holocaust my first response was to protest the silence. For me the silence after the Holocaust only added to the cruelty of the destruction of my family.

Unknown/Unowned

If, as the Rabbis say,

Each life has a meaning,

Then each death should have its meaning too.

A tear, a shiver

A murmur

Of Blessed Memory

After a name.

Even just a glimpse of a memory

Like the flicker of a lamp.

But a death unmourned,

Unnoted

Is a cruelty that never should have been created,

It is a cruelty beyond flames,

Beyond dust.

Martin Herskovitz

I felt the need to protest but I really didn't know how because I understood the traumatic nature of these memories and thus understood my parents' repression of

such memories. As Jason Sommer writes:

Speaking of the lost

*...I cannot look at Lilly as I ask
my father about his younger brother Shmuel,
whom she knew only a little,
the brother also of her husband Harry
sitting on my left. Of these
survivors of slave-labor and war,
her history may be the worst,
and she never speaks of it, not of Auschwitz
or the brothers of her own she lost there,
so it's her eyes I avoid as I break the etiquette
forbidding anyone to ask for speech
when speech is memory and memory is pain...*

Jason Sommer

Writing the Photographs poem was for me the only way I felt that I could really express my pain and my protest against this silence. A protest against the silence, that we did not mourn or try to remember, that I did not feel that I had a family. Together with the protest the Second Generation expresses its powerlessness trying to create a family out of the silence.

Wanna hang out tonight?

*I call my new friend on her mobile
She's in the car
Going to the Dead Sea
To see grandparents and cousins
Here to visit her
And I wonder
About driving a nice car
Grandparents
Cousins
And what that might be like*

Dina Pinner

So the first role of poetry is to speak about the silence and the absence of memory while giving expression to pain and emotion. The mode of poetry is an indirect way but also a very intense way to express the pain and thus a very useful vehicle for the Second Generation who was taught to repress the pain and leave the memories in the past. Yet despite the silence, the Holocaust is omnipresent in the Survivors' home. Elizabeth Rossner of paradox of silence yet presence also using the image of no photographs:

Birthright

*there are no portraits
of ancestors
hanging on my walls*

*no heirlooms in velvet-lined boxes
my legacy is in my bones
in the grief I wear beneath my skin
a secret that never
goes away but is passed
through the coded messages
of blood and that other
substance we have no name for.*
Elizabeth Rossner

As we see in her poem, despite the silence, there is an overwhelming prevalence of the Holocaust in Survivor families:

Eclipse

*How did I know about the Holocaust
Amidst the silence.
Or was the knowing encrypted on my soul
Trickling, in time, to my consciousness.
An awareness that is never taught,
Can never be unlearned,
Can never be forgotten....*
Martin Herskovitz

The poem can describe this paradox, the contrast of absence of the Holocaust and its continuous presence at the same time, an absence yet a total domination of the Second Generation reality as a child.

The presence of the Holocaust filled our homes without even being spoken about. A part of this holocaust prevalence is due to the fact that we were named after the dead relatives. For us the name is the only connection to the dead As Ruth Tenenholtz writes in her poem

Children of the Shoah

*...I have three names.
All my sisters have three names,
So many relatives clamoring for memorials....*

My poem "Berries" on this very same theme was written after I heard the educator Moshe Shner speak about the memorial service in Kibbutz Lochamei Hagetaot. In his talk he related the shock that he felt at the Memorial service as a child hearing his name being read at the service and only afterwards realizing that the name was being read in memory of the deceased of the same name. Just a name, so innocuous, but at the same time it sends so many messages to the child, the strongest one being the feeling that somehow one's life is not his own:

Berries

*I remember the ceremony, as a child,
In the lengthening shade of the Mulberry tree,
As the Kibbutz elders read the names.
Their names,
Names that were now ours.
Names like a breeze
That wafted upwards through the tendriled
Green mulberries.
Names like the shadow that grew long
with day's end.
Late that summer I would return to the tree
To pick these Mulberries from the ground
Their sweetness bittered with dust
Unaware of the names that had lodged in my soul
Like the tiny hard seeds of a mulberry.*

Martin Herskovitz

The child of the survivor, being named after the dead relative is aware of the terrible burden of having to mourn this person, to serve as his remembrance, his memorial candle. But the Second Generation is in a quandary: how does one mourn a person amidst the silence, how do you mourn a person that you know nothing about excepting a name?

Unmourned

*It is a time of mourning in Israel
Grandparents mourn their grandchildren
And children their parents.
An entire country versed in mourning
Except for me.
Amid the mourners' wails
my grandparents hold their faces earthbound
To catch some of the tears deemed for others.
Tears they have never known for all died with them,
except a few.
And those feared to not cease crying,
So they never started..
They long to be mourned
But I who have never known their embrace, cannot.
I cry not rivulets,
but meager tears,
which can rinse no sorrow.
But I know their pain.
This too is a link*

and it will have to suffice, as yet.

It is a time of mourning and I sit among the unmourned.

Martin Herskovitz

The first feeling that the Second Generation has when faced with the task of being a memorial candle is the powerlessness in trying to satisfy the dead who long to be mourned. This is the first quandary of the Second Generation – how does one fill this role without any knowledge of the family. It is the quandary that I have posed in the poem – Four Sons:

Four Sons

After the redemption there were four sons,

So too after the destruction.

The wise son pores over tractates of names,

And lists of towns, too small, it would seem,

to bear the burden of its dead.

The simple son stares at photographs on museum walls,

And is visited at night by the visages of the dead,

Who awaken him with tears.

The son who knows not to ask,

Awaits the day the silence will end,

So his question may be asked.

The evil son...

After the destruction there is no evil son,

Just a son who longs to be normal,

And believes that by forgetting the past,

He might be like others.

Martin Herskovitz

The wise son, in the absence of memory, fills the void with details such as genealogy and historical information about the area in which his family was born. But it is an effort that seems doomed to failure because facts cannot form a narrative. And so Lily Brett soon forgets the facts even though blessed with the best of memories:

I keep forgetting

I keep forgetting

the facts and statistics

and each time

I need to know them

I look up books

these books line

twelve shelves

in my room

I know where to go

to confirm the fact

*that in the Warsaw Ghetto
there were 7.2 people per room
and in Lodz
they allocated
5.8 people
to each room
I forget
over and over again
that one third of Warsaw
was Jewish
and in the ghetto
they crammed 500,000 Jews
into 2.4 per cent
of the area of the city
and how many
bodies were they burning
in Auschwitz
at the peak of their production
twelve thousand a day
I have to check
and re-check
and did I dream
that at 4pm on the 19th January
58,000 emaciated inmates
were marched out of Auschwitz
was I right
to remember that in Bergen Belsen
from the 4th-13th of April 1945
28,000 Jews arrived from other camps
I can remember
hundreds and hundreds
of phone numbers
phone numbers
I haven't phoned
for twenty years
are readily accessible
and I can remember
people's conversations
and what someone's wife
said to someone else's husband
what a good memory
you have,
people tell me.*

So, if facts cannot replace memory and cannot lead to mourning, then, how can the Second Generation resolve the quandary? And herein is the most important role of poetry for the Second Generation amidst the silence against the powerlessness. For poetry can serve not only to express the pain and longing, poetry can empower the Second Generation to fill this silence. Poetry as a literary fiction can create the narrative that is missing from the Second Generation life and reanimate the dead:

Ergo Sum

*The relatives who died "in the war"
have faded in and out of our lives.
Not alive,
But then not dead,
Gone or lost in the war,
Maybe once or twice mentioned as dead or killed,
but this is stated
With such dispassion
That it seems not true.
So I am going to Auschwitz
To give them life,
To find them within the ledgers and the Lagers
Within the piles of shoes,
Within the ashes.
For you cannot be destroyed unless you were once alive
So amongst the destruction I will prove their existence,
Like a latter-day Descartes,
"You were killed
therefore you were"
And I will grieve.
Martin Herskovitz*

The poetic imagination can create an image of those who died out of what is given often only a name:

Names

*My mother's father was named Mordechai Kleinbart
But maybe, because he was the eldest son,
His mother called him Tateleh,
And his father probably called him Mordkhe
like my father calls me.
His sister and brothers called him, perhaps, Moti
Except for the baby sister who called him Momo
Even after she grew up.
His wife's cousins at the winery may have called him Kleiny*

*And his children surely called him Tati
As did his wife,
Except late at night, alone in the bedroom
She would maybe call to him with Yiddish familiars
In a soft erotic lilt.
Or maybe not,
Because Mordechai Kleinbart is the single name I have
So it is the one printed on paper laminated in plastic
And it alone is carved into stone
and molded in bronze.
All the other names are exist only in memories long interred
Or on pages yet unwritten.
Martin Herskovitz*

Or a simple fact:

Mints

*When I asked about her grandfather,
My mother said he gave his grandchildren mints,
Then silence.
Not if the mints were azure blue or white,
Not the peppery scent of their breaths,
Not of the toddler's cries because he would not get,
Just mints.
It is left for me to imagine my uncles crunching impatiently
the hard candy when they tired of letting it dissolve
as I would, a generation on.
For children know not to garner memories.
By the time my mother had realized that what she had
Would be what would stay,
Reality had turned opaque,
And the shards of memory effaced.
So from the rubble of oblivion
I conjure the image
of my uncles racing home
along cobbled streets
Candies clutched tightly in their fists.
Martin Herskovitz*

If in my initial poem “Photographs“ I felt powerless in the face of the silence: I am not a god who can create a family out of “motes of dust,” the poetic imagination has allowed me to create a family and mourn. Moreover the artistic element of the poetry adds additional depth to the narrative created and finally, the publication of this poetry becomes a elegy, a testament to the dead, who have no grave and who have not been well-remembered as they deserve to be.

On the other hand, many had a narrative but realized that their names do not fit the narrative, such as Jason Sommer whose father changed his name at liberation for a more German-sounding one:

Taking My Name

*...Last year a river flooded through a graveyard.
The bodies, washed away from their stones, recovered
one by one, massed in an unrecoverable*

*anonymity. The body can shift past its name
or be shifted as mine was. If it happens
it happens to anyone, and I think now I was fortunate*

*to discover that my name was not mine
as an absolute possession,
to be refreshed in the knowledge*

*that what has been given me is given
in the grant of other people's survival,
hard won and conferring on them*

*the power of occasional contempt,
and if the syllables I thought meant me did not,
I can declare them to be me again—as good as any,*

*mine to make mine for now, can consider
myself sufficiently blessed
that the places of my exile are so close to home...*
Jason Sommer

Thus, poetry can also help the Second Generation deal with reclaiming a new identity. I would like to review the first part of this workshop – the use of poetry by the Second Generation amidst the silence.

The first aspect of poetry is its effectiveness in expressing the pain and the protest of the silence, to bemoan the absence of family. But even as we protest the seeming silence we note the irony of the overwhelming prevalence of the Holocaust amidst the silence. The second aspect we spoke of is the use of poetry to describe the Second Generation reaction to this role placed upon him by this prevalence, the role of a Memorial Candle. In this role we are expected to mourn those who have died and in some way also to substitute for those who died. With this expectation comes also a feeling of powerlessness in adequately filling this role. The final part that we discussed was the use of poetry to resolve the lack of family. Using poetry, the Second Generation is able to give substance to the smattering of information. By reanimating the dead and creating a family narrative the Second Generation is able to overcome the lack of history, to mourn and to commemorate the dead. The artistic aspect of poetry adds another dimension to this commemoration. Thus, we see how in dealing with this aspect of the Second Generation experience, poetry becomes an

ideal solution and, conversely, in trying to understand this, the Second Generation phenomenon, this poetry can be used to better understand and explicate these aspects.

B. Catharsis Despite the Censor

The second role of poetry for the Second Generation is the ability of poetry to serve as a catharsis for emotions that have difficulty being raised. As I spoke about in the Background, being raised in a Survivor family has no lack of emotional issues. But overriding all these emotions is the feeling that these emotions cannot be expressed because our parents have suffered enough and no amount of emotional abuse that we may experience comes even close to what our parents endured in Auschwitz.

Poetry is an emotional more than rational form of literature. Through its imagery and emotion, poems connect both subconsciously. yet very directly to these emotions. At the same time the artistic credibility that the poems have can justify the expression of these emotions, emotions that we heretofore have avoided expressing in order not to injure our parents more. For example, many Survivors married and became pregnant immediately after the Holocaust even though they may not have been psychologically ready to raise a family. This is one of my themes in a poem I wrote inspired by the almond trees blooming in the midst of a Jerusalem snowstorm.

Renewal – Jerusalem 2004/Buchenwald 1946

In Jerusalem the day after the snowstorm

The blossoming almond trees were blanketed with snow.

I watched the branches swirl in the wind,

And the shower of petals that knew not to hold on.

It is cruel to bloom in the winter, I thought,

While one's sap is still turgid and sour,

Exposing translucent blossoms to the shivering rain and sleet.

What fruits can be brought forth from these,

Thick husked and bitter no doubt.

And when stillness comes, of what do these blossoms dream?

Of late evening sunshine, fragrant red flowers

And hummingbirds craning their shimmering necks

To drink of their nectar, perhaps.

But theirs is to bloom while the hummingbirds sleep,

Impelled by some impassive force of nature,

bent on renewal,

To put forth these tiny, pale flowers

in the midst of the maelstrom.

Martin Herskovitz

Using the metaphor of the almond tree I have tried to express three different feelings: the first, as I mentioned before, is the anger of being raised in a Survivor family in

which the parents' ability to raise a family was affected by the trauma of the Holocaust. The second theme that I have tried to express is the courage of renewal in the midst of an emotional storm. The final theme that I have tried to convey is the conclusion that the decision to have children amidst emotional turmoil is not due to malice nor to courage but to a basic natural need for renewal as a response to the destruction. All these themes are complex and rife with emotion. I do not feel that I could possibly have expressed these emotions except via poetry. Also the subtlety of the poem using the symbol of a tree frees me from the censor of expressing criticism. The poem works as catharsis, first of all because of its indirectness, it can circumvent the internal censor that tells us never to cause any hurt to our parent. Secondly, because of its artistic content, it gives added credibility to the expression of this emotion, it is not mere ranting. Because I believe the road to healing is to express these emotions, both negative and positive, I feel that my own personal development is furthered by my ability to express my feelings via poetry.

Moreover the poem is an effective way to express these feelings because it can contain the jumble of emotions, the varying, often conflicting emotions that are raised in the Second Generation when attempting to deal with a single topic, such as the marrying and giving birth soon after liberation.

Another poem of mine that deals with a problematic topic in its varying aspects is the poem "Missing Persons." A friend of mine told me that she used to wander the streets looking for her sister whom her mother said was lost. On my way home I realized I'd neglected to ask her how she as a child had hoped to recognize the sister. The poem posits an answer:

Missing Persons

She would sit alone in her room

Practicing her alphabet until her mother came home

From cooking all day for the Yeshiva

And wait for her to lay on the couch

A damp towel draped over her eyes.

I'm going outside,

She'd announce

And go out in the neighborhood

To find her sister who Mother said

Was lost in the war.

"It doesn't matter,

If I'll know who she is,"

she'd tell herself,

As she looked expectantly at the faces of strangers,

waiting to be found,

"She'll recognize me."

Martin Herskovitz

This poem first of all deals with the emotional neglect many Second Generation felt being raised by a parent preoccupied with the traumas past. Another aspect expressed is the desire of the child to find favor in the parent's eyes by finding the lost child and perhaps reviving the parent's love. The third aspect is the belief of the child that she is worthy of love and that love can be found if not from the parent then from some surrogate.

A review of almost all Second Generation poets will find allusion to various negative factors of the Survivor parent because poetry is so well suited to this type of catharsis. This is poetry that I would prefer not to read now, first of all because of the lack of time and secondly because of the negative aspect that I would prefer not to expand on the subject. But it is central in the Second Generation experience because the issues that existed in his childhood home are translated into issues in his adult home:

A Love Poem

You say I don't love you

*I love you no different than my parents
loved me.*

Isn't that love?

Neither of us knows.

Love has no formula

That can be held to the light.

I have what I felt

*When my parents cared for me,
as they could.*

Is that love?

Or are they impaired

Am I impaired

So that what I grasped

*was too full of holes
to be anything real.*

You say I don't hug you.

I will hold you.

You say I don't care enough or care too much.

I will care more or less.

You say I shout

From now on I will whisper.

The problem isn't proving to you that I am able to love

But believing it myself.

Martin Herskovitz

And upon realizing the transgenerational transmission of the trauma from my parents, I become fixated on perhaps the transmissions of the same trauma to my children:

I wound

I was wounded,

I am wounded,

I wound.

It need not be inevitable, I suppose.

For the fortunate, there is healing-

I was wounded but am no longer.

But even in the absence of healing,

One can choose to not cause pain,

I am wounded but will not wound.

Or in the words of Hillel the Elder

“What is hateful to you,

refrain from doing to another.”

Painfully simple,

Facile like a third grader’s scrawled

I will not disturb in class,

50 times,

For what is hateful is closest

What is hateful is too familiar

What is hateful rises to the fore.

Martin Herskovitz

The first step is cathartic, the expression of the anger, the perceived pathology of growing up in a survivor family and in being a Second Generation. Catharsis is itself therapeutic, but poetry, once it is written or spoken is no longer a mere expression of the inner world of the Second Generation, it becomes a medium of communication between the generations. As part of the intergenerational dialogue, Second Generation poetry engenders the possibility of resolution of problems that never were discussed previously. Thus the poetry becomes a venue of fleshing out issues between the Second Generation and the Survivor. This dialogue also aids in the separation between the Survivor and Second Generation, delineating the boundaries between the two.

Leaving you

...It has taken me

a long time to know

that it was your war

not mine...

Lily Brett

Thus poetry, in expressing and communicating the Second Generation’s most intimate and hurtful emotions, can lead to healing:

Ineffable

In the face of the ineffable

*There can be no words, they say,
Only silence.
But my life has been measured by decades of silence,
Not mere kilometers.
So the crunch of flagstones,
The swirl of winds,
Even the tears
are no stead.
In Auschwitz silence will not suffice.
For when words return,
they return as they were,
Like seeds scattered on the frozen ground.
But if I find the language of destruction,
To parse therewith a syntax of the pain.
Then words entombed shall resurgent flow
Words whose tears may heal the soul again*
Martin Herskovitz

By providing catharsis of the negative emotions and of the distance needed from the Survivor parent, the Second Generation can now go beyond his fear and anger to touch the warmth and love in the peculiar ways in which they may exist:

Farewells

*I went to say goodbye to my parents
when they left the country.
My mother was busy the entire visit
packing up the leftovers
so I hardly had a chance to say goodbye.
“Hurry home before the dairy products spoil”
was the last thing she said as she closed the door.
I stood in the parking lot
laden with Tupperware,
feeling alone.
The next day I sat hunched over her reheated soup,
my hands encircled the bowl,
warming my fingers,
steam rising about my face,
as I waited for the soup to cool.
It has taken too much of a lifetime
to learn to live in a family
where you eat soup
instead of saying goodbye.*
Martin Herskovitz

The process of catharsis, dialogue, and reconciliation leads to a glimmer of hope and renewal in the Second Generation.

When I Get Older

*When I get older
I will start to try to remember
What my mother has forgotten.
But in the meantime
Leave me to glean fragments of words and glances
And set them aside.*

*When I get older
I will start to build a legacy
Out of the grey mists of the past.
But in the meantime
Leave me the museums and commemorations
And the nod to my son, amid,
As if to say - That is us also.*

*When I get older
I will start to embrace my wife
With all the words that end with -inity or -ence
Like the magazines say.
But in the meantime
Leave me to cling to her desperately
even as I wish to run away.*

*When I get older
I will buy a new diary with gold leaf
(And put away the loose-leaf binders of errant pages)
To write long and straight upon the ivory colored page
But in the meantime
Leave me to scrawl in jagged sentences
That bend around stains and scribbles,
the story of my life.*

*When I get older,
I can start to imagine being someone
I hadn't imagined before
But in the meantime
Leave me to sit on the park bench ,
between my parents,
Eating sandwiches out of waxed paper bags.*

Martin Herskovitz

And the promise of blessing:

Curses and Blessings

At the bus stop he pointed at me in recognition

But I showed no sign.

Undaunted he came and shook my hand, his silver-framed glasses askew.

"Let me finish my say then you can speak," he said

"May God bless you three blessings

That you join in the building of the third Temple,

That you live to see your children and grandchildren under the wedding canopy

That all your enemies be vanquished.

I am mentally ill,

Please give me some money so I can go to Yehezkel's grocery

And buy some food."

Which I did.

Some would dismiss this incident but I have not.

You see, my mother stood on the frozen muddied ground of Auschwitz,

Whose cursed soil petrified generations of lives

And I like to think that now God sends his peculiar messengers

to bless me,

And resuscitate my soul.

Martin Herskovitz

This is my journey and the journey of others like me in which poetry serves as a signpost to the journey from silence to mourning to dialogue to healing. Poetry functions as a form of expression and protest, to communicate and to grieve, to vent and to comfort and ultimately it serves as an expression of change and hope. Because poetry gives me the words in which to express my inner world, it can serve educators well in trying to explain the Second Generation experience.