

The Lost Generation:

Survivors' Reflections on Surviving the Holocaust as Children

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World War Two and the subsequent Holocaust had an unprecedented effect on humanity, whether directly due to the perpetrators' actions and consequences felt by the survivors, or indirectly through the knowledge of the true depravity that human beings could unleash upon themselves. Focusing on the truly innocent, the children who managed to survive an assured death sentence under national socialism, can it be seen the lengths that humanity will go to in order to both preserve and destroy life as they see fit. The cases of Ida Grinspan and Magda Hollander-Lafon showcase that despite the similarities between the two survivors who would both settle in France after the war, the journey to get there varied considerably. The legacies that these two women left behind, are the tale of a lost generation that are integral to the full understanding of human nature as a whole.

Born in Poland, Ida Grinspan's non-practicing "Jewish" family immigrated to France to escape the economic uncertainty and inflation prevalent during the 1920's. Grinspan and her family spoke highly of their new homeland since, "France had made the Revolution, it was the land of liberty, of tolerance, the country that had freed its Jews."¹ Even after the Second World War had broken out alongside the knowledge of the Nazi's policies on Jews, Grinspan personally did not fear persecution until 1942. That summer saw the roundup of Vel' d'Hiv ² occur, a period from July 16th-17th where 13,000 Paris "Jews" were rounded up and deported to Auschwitz and other concentration camps.³ Ida Grinspan's mother was one of these victims.

Grinspan had faced antisemitism beforehand, particularly from her caretaker in Jeune-Lié, Alice. The woman claimed to Grinspan one Easter Sunday that, "It was the Jews who had killed Christ."⁴ Vel' d'Hiv however, acted as a wake up call to French

individuals who would become the “righteous among the nations.”⁵ In spite of Jeune-Lié’s mayor, Monsieur Poupinot telling Grinspan not to wear the regulatory Jewish star, and Grinspan’s teacher, Madame Picard attempting to have Grinspan’s food rations cancelled to make tracking the girl down more difficult, Ida Grinspan was arrested by the collaborating French police on January 30th, 1944 at only fourteen years of age.⁶ This incident among others, prove that the French state and other collaborationist regimes were, “...Waging a war to the death against a child, among thousands of others, for the crime of simply having been born.”⁷

Magda Hollander-Lafon was born on June 15th, 1927 in Hungary, also to a non-religious “Jewish” family. This similar upbringing extends to both of our survivors’ teenage years, as at fourteen, Hollander-Lafon too was barred from attending public school by her country’s government. One crucial difference between the two girls’ backgrounds prior to the Holocaust, is in the Jewish intolerance they faced. As stated beforehand, Grinspan would occasionally face ignorant comments about Jewish people, however Hollander-Lafon’s family would be targeted consecutively on Good Friday by devout Christians. The family would annually have their windows smashed in and were physically assaulted with crosses on several occasions.⁸

With the occupation and collaborationist regimes from France and Hungary, the two children suffered from both of their parents being killed in ways related to the Holocaust. Grinspan’s mother and father were both deported and killed, while Hollander-Lafon’s mother was killed alongside her sister during *Selektion*,⁹ and her father was sent to a slave labour camp, before later being pronounced dead.¹⁰

Being Hungarian, Magda was deported in the last years of the Holocaust, in 1944, following Germany installing their puppet government in Hungary after overthrowing the former Hungarian leader, Admiral Miklos Horthy.¹¹

Even after Ida Grinspan's detainment, the network of people in Jeune-Lié who continued to fight for her release grew, now including Alice. After Grinspan voluntarily went with the police who threatened to illegally arrest Alice's husband if Grinspan was not handed over, Alice went out of her way to attempt to rescue the girl by obtaining a forged certificate of baptism, and handing it over to the *Kommandantur* (military headquarters).¹² While this plan ultimately failed, the volume of people who attempted to save "The Jewess of Lié,"¹³ far surpasses that of Hollander-Lafon, whose family was turned into the Gestapo by their neighbours.¹⁴

The convoy that Grinspan was placed in consisted of 674 men, 814 women, and 218 children under the age of eighteen years old, from three separate round up campaigns.¹⁵ After arriving in Auschwitz, Grinspan only then learned that despite her mother's absence, the woman had inadvertently looked after her daughter by taking Grinspan to a hairdresser that gave her a houpette hairstyle. This updo and lack of identification made Grinspan pass for older and be deemed "*Häftlinge*" (fit for work), saving her from being killed in the gas chambers immediately. Grinspan was tattooed with the identification #75360,¹⁶ and due to her knowledge of Yiddish, Grinspan claimed, "Since [Yiddish] is close to German this would be a help to me in the camp, it saved me."¹⁷ This small luxury protected Grinspan, while prisoners such as Hollander-Lafon struggled with the language barrier.

According to the Nazi's policies, Magda Hollander-Lafon should have also been sent to the gas chamber immediately upon entering Auschwitz alongside her mother, sister, and an estimated 350,000 of the over 430,000 known Hungarian deportees,¹⁸ due to being only sixteen years old, an age deemed "unfit for work." Thankfully, due to the courage of a prisoner risking his life by breaking formation and walking back and forth between the rows of deportees repeatedly muttering, "You are eighteen years old,"¹⁹ Hollander-Lafon lied about her age and survived *Selektion*. Years later, Hollander-Lafon would realize that the *SS-Lagerärzte* (Schutzstaffel camp physician) who personally damned her mother and sister to die in the gas chambers was Josef Mengele himself.²⁰ Due to the large influx of Hungarian deportees at the time, Magda would fall through the cracks of bureaucratic affairs, not being registered nor tattooed like Grinspan was, a result she claimed would go towards saving her life.²¹

A unique difference between the two girls, was an early belief in what was occurring in the crematoriums. Grinspan and her group in the quarantine barracks, despite being told from prisoners such as Suzanne Birnbaum²² about the purpose behind the crematorium, originally did not believe what happened to the group taken away during *Selektion*. Hollander-Lafon, whose family was separated in front of her on the other hand, had no choice as to be blissfully ignorant in this matter, especially since she was assigned to be a *sonderkommando* (special command unit) at one point.²³

A common threat to women and girls in concentration camps specifically, was that of sexual humiliation and violence. Both Grinspan and Hollander-Lafon recall being forced to strip naked in front of male guards, and while neither was as unfortunate as to

be sexually assaulted, survivors such as Otto Rosenberg's first wife, were victims of the Romani sterilization campaign in Auschwitz.²⁴

Both Ida Grinspan and Magda Hollander-Lafon recalled the deplorable conditions of the camp. The lack of food and potable water, spreading of lice and disinfection campaigns, as well as poor treatment by various prisoners and block commandants were nearly identical. While imprisoned, Grinspan nearly relapsed with croup²⁵ and was forced to concoct a home remedy so as not to appear ill, as it became known early on that women and girls with pimples, or those who had contracted *Krätze* (scabies),²⁶ would be gassed once given a medical examination. In regards to dehydration, Hollander-Lafon personally recalls an instance where she passed out stating, "Other prisoners whom I did not know came to my aid, performing miracles just in time to save me... I know that I owe my life to them."²⁷

While kindness could be found among the imprisoned, the deplorable conditions the survivors were forced to endure, often resulted in inner conflict among the group in order to survive. Describing this sentiment, Hollander-Lafon explained, "Once the social norms were broken, for a morsel of bread we were no longer recognizable: we could crush our fellow human beings without a second thought."²⁸ The wounds that certain individuals left behind were still felt even decades later, such as with Edwige, a block commandant whose cruelty Hollander-Lafon remembered quite vividly. The block commandant would parade around with a whip and riding crop in tow that she often used to beat prisoners into submission with, if not until their demise. Hollander-Lafon recalled the woman had a particular fondness for targeting the elderly, even yelling while beating an older woman once, "Why is it taking you so long to die?"²⁹ This cruelty

appeared to resonate among certain *kapos* as well, such as Klara 'Leo' Pfortsch, whom Grinspan and others would testify against in court following the war.³⁰

While those higher up in the Auschwitz-Birkenau hierarchy have become infamous for their multitude of crimes during the Holocaust, outliers have been known to have been present. After Hollander-Lafon's shoes were stolen, a prized commodity in the camp at that time, one guard pulled her aside and gifted her a new pair of galoshes. Even going so far as to warm her frozen feet by rubbing newspapers on her soles, Hollander-Lafon was greatly moved, stating, "With this act of generosity he gave me back my life, and at the same time put his own at risk... When he left I could cry once more and still have hope in the kindness of people."³¹

Both Ida Grinspan and Magda Hollander-Lafon experienced moments during the Holocaust with their fellow inmates that would change their outlook on life forever. Going so far as to name her combined memoirs after the occasion, Hollander-Lafon emphasizes the sacrifices the older generation often made to ensure the survival of the children; in this case, an elderly woman gave Hollander-Lafon her remaining four scraps of bread and told her, "Take it. You are young, you must live to be a witness to what is happening here. You must tell others so that this never happens again in the world."³² As the inevitable defeat of Nazi Germany loomed closer, both girls were forced to go on the death marches, to which Grinspan would meet her saviour. After nearly dying due to contracting frostbite, typhus, and the early signs of necrosis, while situated in the *Revier* (infirmary) in Neustadt, Grinspan was nursed back to health by a Polish inmate named Wanda Ossowska. Ossowska alternated hot and cold baths for Grinspan's feet to promote circulation, a method done so well that after Grinspan's liberation, her doctor

stated that her feet would have to have been amputated otherwise.³³ Over fifty years later when doing further research for her memoir, Ida Grinspan finally gained confirmation that Wanda Ossowska had survived. In her last letter of correspondence to Grinspan, before passing away due to complications from a stroke, Ossowska wrote, “In the camps at Neustadt-Glewe you were my child, condemned to death, whom I wanted to save forever and for all... I begged the Lord insistently to save you, my little Ida! And you are alive, Ida!”³⁴

The final crucial distinction between Hollander-Lafon and Grinspan’s conversance with the Holocaust, comes from how the two were liberated. As for Ida Grinspan, on May 4th, 1945, after their captors had fled Neustadt, Gisette, a woman from the Revier who could walk, managed to obtain help from Russian soldiers deployed in the neighbouring town of Neustadt-Glewe.³⁵ In Hollander-Lafon’s case, she was liberated earlier, but was deported and marched all over Germany for a longer period of time. Hollander-Lafon went from breaking rocks in Ravensbrück³⁶ to being a participant in a miniature rebellion to sabotage the nails manufactured for the A4 airplanes in an underground factory in Nordhausen,³⁷ before managing to escape with four other girls into the Bischofferode forest.³⁸ After hunkering down for six gruelling days without food, the women reemerged on April 12th after spotting an American tank.³⁹ In both girls’ scenarios, liberation was not something that was given to the survivors, it was something that they had to take for themselves.

Every Holocaust testimonial, memoir, and story is unique. Certain patterns can be drawn upon depending on factors such as the survivor’s country of origin, or their inner network of connections. Despite Ida Grinspan and Magda Hollander-Lafon being

only two years of difference in age, they both suffered tremendously under the Nuremberg laws, all due to national socialism viewing them as “*Untermensch*.”⁴⁰ The very existence of these two survivors and their accounts are detrimental to fully understanding the complex nature of human beings; for every Edwige or Leo, there was a Wanda or unnamed saint to fight back against the tyranny of fascism. Magda Hollander-Lafon passing away during the writing of this essay, is a further reminder for the necessity of instilling the importance of these legacies in the next generation, for chances are they will be burdened with having no eye-witnesses left to tell the story.

End Notes

1. Ida Grinspan and Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, *You've Got to Tell Them: A French Girl's Experience of Auschwitz and After*, trans. Charles B. Potter, English ed. (Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 7.
2. Otherwise known as the Rafle du Vélodrome d'Hiver (The Winter Vélodrome roundup), named after the bicycle race track stadium all of the victims were detained in.
3. Holocaust Encyclopedia, "The Vélodrome d'Hiver (Vél d'Hiv) Roundup," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last accessed December 11th, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-velodrome-dhiver-vel-dhiv-roundup>.
4. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 12.
5. "The Righteous Among the Nations" is a title given to non-Jewish individuals who selflessly aided Jewish lives during the Holocaust.
6. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 18.
7. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 3.
8. Magda Hollander-Lafon, *Four Scraps of Bread*, trans. Anthony T. Fuller, English ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016) 56, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=nlebk&AN=1228118&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
9. *Selektion* was the process of separating detainees into groups in a concentration camp either for work or immediate execution by gassing.

10. It is unknown how Adolf Hollander died, however it is implied to have been from being overworked, and possible health complications due to being housed in a “ghetto” at the time.
11. Doris L. Bergen, *The Holocaust: A Concise History* (Lanhan, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 223.
12. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 22.
13. A title referring to Ida Grinspan and the name of the first part of her memoir.
14. Hollander-Lafon, 100.
15. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 25.
16. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 5.
17. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 9.
18. Hollander-Lafon, 109.
19. Hollander-Lafon, 102.
20. Hollander-Lafon, 102.
21. Hollander-Lafon, 60.
22. Suzanne Birnbaum and other women would sneak into the quarantine barracks on Sundays in Auschwitz to scavenge for information about the outside world. Despite being in her 40’s at the time, Suzanne Birnbaum would survive the death camp and chronicle her memoirs in *Une Française juive est revenue* (A Jewish Frenchwoman Returned).
23. Despite most *sonderkommandos* being male inmates who were eventually killed in an attempt to prevent the spreading of information about the

crematorium and gas chambers' true purposes, Hollander-Lafon was one who managed to survive. While her memoirs do not expand heavily on her time as one, it is known that she was assigned to Crematorium IV before it was blown up on October 7th, 1944, as Hollander-Lafon was deported to Walldorf on August 20th of the same year.

24. Otto Rosenberg is considered to be one of the most famous Sinti Holocaust survivors. His first wife is unnamed in his memoir *A Gypsy in Auschwitz* to protect her identity.

25. Croup is a type of diphtheria that causes breathing problems due to swelling beneath the larynx.

26. Scabies is a highly contagious type of mange that is caused by a specific type of mite that causes intense itching and rashes to form.

27. Hollander-Lafon, 16.

28. Hollander-Lafon, 14.

29. Hollander-Lafon, 17.

30. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 90.

31. Hollander-Lafon, 25.

32. Hollander-Lafon, vii.

33. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 79.

34. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 112.

35. Grinspan and Poirot-Delpech, 74-75.

36. Hollander-Lafon, 7.

37. Hollander-Lafon, 108.

- 38. Hollander-Lafon, 108.
- 39. Hollander-Lafon, 108.
- 40. "*Untermensch*" was a derogatory term used by the Nazis, translating to "subhuman," or "inferior being."

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