



Tokens of Trauma

The Aging Experience of Shoah Survivors in a Jewish Support Center

2014 Margaret Clark Award for Best Graduate Student Paper

Ben Kasstan

Durham University, UK

contact: ben.kasstan@durham.ac.uk

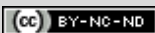
Abstract

This paper explores the traumatic memories of aging Shoah survivors who attend a social and therapeutic support facility in London (UK). The study investigates the perceived differences in trauma within a diverse group of members who partake in the day center. I discuss how this gradient is shaped by a controversial dialogue over who is ascribed the status of "survivor." Differences in Shoah experience contextualise how survivors of ghettos and concentration camps possess a salient relationship with food, notably bread which acts as an enduring symbol of catastrophe for participants. A conscious strategy of care is provided to these elderly survivors by returning elements of their pre-war lives in Eastern Europe, and by metaphorically re-inscribing lived experience of violence with new meanings. This study then details how religious and cultural elements of Judaism, which are made available to aging survivors and refugees within the field-site, mediate the trauma that has become thoroughly embodied for participants. The case study presented here offers a novel contribution to the anthropological study of genocide and the consequences which come into sight with the passing of time.

Keywords: Shoah, trauma, embodiment, aging, food

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 36, No 1 (2015), pp. 26-44

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2015.81



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its

[D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Tokens of Trauma

The Aging Experience of Shoah Survivors in a Jewish Support Center

2014 Margaret Clark Award for Best Graduate Student Paper

Ben Kasstan

Durham University, UK

contact: ben.kasstan@durham.ac.uk

Introduction

Nestled amidst London's sprawling suburbia is a day center which offers social and therapeutic support to aging Jewish Shoah¹ survivors. In order to honour the anonymity promised to the Center's administration, the true name of the field-site has been replaced with the Hebrew pseudonym of Bitachon. This word conjures an image of safety, trust and faith. It emulates the ethos of the service, and how the support staff say they attempt "to create a space where survivors can be themselves, [and where] they are always heard." For these reasons the Center is sentimentalised as a "second home" by many of its members.

The convenors of Bitachon tell me that "the safety [offered in-house] is the sensitivity and understanding shown" to members on the part of staff and volunteers, the program of events, and the all-important "open door policy" which enables survivors to "come in and say anything and everything." Moreover, the Center's convenors stress that this latter belief is perpetuated "because for all old people the sense of loss [o]f identity, control and independence is incredibly hard. For survivors and refugees who[se] dominant life experience was having all those things taken away from them, they are more sensitive around this issue."

As many Shoah narratives focus on bearing witness, the issues of what it means to be a survivor and the effects of surviving are often overlooked. Conducting field-work at Bitachon then offered an invaluable insight into understanding the aging experience of survivors of genocide. Moreover, it offered an opportunity to explore the ways in which an ethno-religious care organization addresses the needs of an aging and traumatized community, especially those which come into sight with the passing of time.

This paper follows classic attempts to understand "lived Jewish spaces" and "Jewish strategies of place-making" (Lipphardt, Brauch and Nocke 2008:2), specifically in the context of an aging demographic. In her seminal ethnography *Number our Days* (1978), Barbara Myerhoff championed the cause of Jewish ethnography and conducting anthropology at "home." Her study portrayed the senior Jewish members of a US day club, many of whom were refugees of Eastern Europe, as "survivors twice over" by first escaping the Shoah through emigration and then by living into old age and "surviving their peers, family, and often children" (Myerhoff 1978:23). Jillian Gould (2013) later explored the ways in which elderly Jews (re)create feelings of home and hospitality when moving into institutionalized care homes with shared spaces for public gathering. These studies provided an influential foundation when attempting to navigate



Figure 1: Glass artefact in Bitachon. Photograph by the author.

how Jewish members of non-residential day centers reconcile past traumas with the present day. Departing from related Jewish ethnographic studies of aging and space, this paper describes how the service at Bitachon offers the members a token and taste of their pre-war lives from a time before the Shoah and the personal as well as collective tragedies which ensued.

Bitachon

When arriving at the Center for my first day of fieldwork in January 2013, I stood on the outside of what appeared to be an ordinary brick building with tinted windows reflecting the currents of London's quotidian life. The *mezuzah*² discreetly fixed to the door post – a typical marker of Jewish homes and institutions – welcomed me into an open plan space. It first appeared humble yet somewhat plain until I noticed the artwork produced by members which had been proudly framed and exhibited on a sidewall. A stained glass light-box illuminated an image of intertwined hands striving to grasp a *menorah*³ – an ancient and enduring symbol of Judaism – and appeared to me as a metaphor for the struggle and journey of survival which many of my (soon to be) research participants had embarked upon (see Figure 1).

It was only once the members arrived that the space was really brought to life; each person bringing with them a different presence, language, nationality, conversation, concern, or personal request from the chef who diligently prepared – and amenably tailored – their lunches. The availability of familiar food was arguably the hallmark of Bitachon and its social and therapeutic program. Himself a refugee of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, the chef offers a menu that is not only culturally appropriate but a conscious strategy of care for the Jewish elders who frequent the Center's café.

The kitchen conforms to the dietary laws of *kashrut* and only provides *parev* (Yiddish, 'neutral') and dairy-based meals, the latter of which must be *chalav Yisrael*⁴. Upholding this high standard of *kashrut* on the premises means that "all Jews are comfortable eating here," the support staff said, and enables both members and staff to eat together regardless of their level of ritual observance or secularity. As will be discussed later in this paper, the centrality of the café in Bitachon is equally telling of how food is a deeply rooted and lingering issue for aging survivors of genocide.

The elders at Bitachon comprise a diverse community of people originating from Poland, Hungary, France, Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia (but who are often now British citizens).

Whilst the members I encountered were exclusively Ashkenazi in origin, I was not made aware of any Sephardi survivors who lived through Nazi occupation or persecution and who may have had a considerably different relation to the material under study⁵.

The composite nature of the Center means that social and cultural differences remain between the members. Although English is the vernacular language of the Center, sub-groups can often be identified through the use of common languages. Many elders also continue to speak Yiddish, particularly those of Polish, Hungarian and to a lesser extent German origin, and the Yiddish conversational group is the most lively and frequented activity on a Wednesday. When attending one session I was categorically told by a survivor that one does not come to learn Yiddish, one comes to speak it.

Like the café at Bitachon, the Yiddish conversational group is a successful feature of the social and therapeutic program because it enables the Eastern European elders to engage with their pre-war lives. As confirmed by Ariel, a Polish-born member, the Yiddish language provision “reminds us of the *heym*, the home, it reminds us of the home.” This meant that the opportunity to hear and speak Yiddish brought members back to a pre-war era; “back all the way that life used to be,” claimed Isaac, a Hungarian-born survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Such statements exemplify how the social and therapeutic service at the Center attempts to restore elements of the elders’ former lives and customs in Eastern Europe, and can perhaps be considered an interpretation of “culturally-appropriate” care for this particular group of aging victims of violence.

The religious practice of participants ranges considerably, from Orthodoxy to Reform or non-observance. Although most are not religiously observant, I was told by a member of support staff that “religion or being Jewish” remains a prominent part of the service offered to the members through guest speakers as well as celebrating all religious holidays. Similar to the high standards of kashrut maintained in-house, Orthodox rabbis tend to frequent the Center for religious discussions or services because the “core members tended to come from religious or traditional families,” note the conveners. Catering to Orthodox standards in Jewish institutions, even when the majority of Jews might not be ritually observant, is common and reflects practices observed in the wider ethnographic study of Jewish topographies (see Gould 2011).

Of the 450 or so members on record, the regulars will frequent the Center for particular activities offered during the Sunday-Thursday period rather than linger around for the day. A quarter of this number receive support from the therapeutic and counselling wing of Bitachon, which I did not have access to. The weekly social program includes, but is not limited to, Bridge, art, creative writing, Israeli dancing, keep fit, Yiddish, guest speakers and discussions, as well as a spouse’s group. The latter group was particularly interesting to understand how peer or social support is directed to the marriage partners of Shoah survivors, which is considered necessary because, as Hindi, a British-Jewish spouse, remarked, “we all have the same, I wouldn’t say a problem, but experiences. It’s not a normal life.”

The Center is within easy reach of London’s Jewish suburbia and most members arrive by public transport or pre-arranged taxis, though members who lived further afield remarked that they were less inclined to *schlep* [Yiddish, arduous journey] over to Bitachon for regular activities or gatherings.

Many of the members are prominent personalities in the United Kingdom’s Jewish social body, speaking regularly in Jewish as well as mainstream schools and public institutions, and

frequently featured in national and local press. The demand for members who can narrate their experiences of the Shoah is intense, and peaks around commemorative events such as Holocaust Memorial Day and *Yom HaShoah*⁶. As part of the research I was able to accompany various survivors as they spoke at schools across London and saw the tiresome impact of constantly re-narrating and revisiting their escape from death. In spite of this, many of the more active members resolutely continue to speak in schools because of their respective personal obligations, either to lost family and relatives, youth education, or the perceived threat of “Holocaust deniers.”

Although Bitachon is administered by paid members of staff and supported by a network of volunteers, there are elected committees which are designed to give the members more autonomy over the space they use and the service provided to them. The Center’s advisory committee allows the staff to liaise with elected individuals and negotiate how to continuously meet the needs of the Center’s members and appropriately respond to challenges that emerge over time. In addition, there is a separate representative sub-committee for survivors of the camps and ghettos to advise on the delivery of services and commemorative events to this particular demographic.

During my initial induction I was told that there are “different groups of survivors” who come to Bitachon. Membership is inclusive of those who were made refugees owing to Nazi anti-Jewish and persecutory policies in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia from 1933 onwards; children who arrived in the UK by Kindertransport⁷; hidden children (who tend to be the younger demographic); camp and ghetto survivors; and spouses. The support staff also made it clear to me during the induction that the Center accepts members on one condition: “if you were Jewish enough for Hitler you are Jewish enough for the service.” This means that the Center does not base membership on the strictly matrilineal definition of a Jew according to religious law (*Halachah*), but anybody who was defined as Jewish according to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935⁸ and experienced Nazi persecution accordingly.

However, the title of survivor which is ascribed to all members equally by the organization remains a contested term amongst the tacit communities or groups within the Center⁹. This questions the extent to which “non-survivors” in the Center (i.e., its administering staff) generate – and enforce – subjective perceptions of what constitutes a survivor and how this compares with the perspective held by those who were incarcerated in the ghettos and concentration or extermination camps.

Research Methods

The ethnographic research and semi-structured informal interviews presented here comprised my postgraduate thesis, the fieldwork of which was conducted continuously between the months January-August 2013. Ethical approval to conduct this research was granted by Durham University, and permission was also granted by the parent organization which oversees and funds the services provided at Bitachon. Oral or written informed consent was obtained from research participants. The names of all research participants who contributed to this paper have been replaced with pseudonyms in accordance with the ethical guidelines outlined by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (see ASA 2011).

Data was drawn from twenty-three interviews; one conducted with a deceased member's spouse; five with conveners, staff and volunteers of the Center; five with members who came to the UK by Kindertransport or as refugees; and twelve with camp and ghetto survivors. By using the method of participant-observation I was regularly in the Center to "hang out," acquaint myself with the members, and build rapport over activities such as Rummikub or the Bridge tables. It was somewhat common for school and university students to volunteer in Bitachon, and I was often mistaken as being a young volunteer, which led me to continuously remind members of my role and intent as a postgraduate researcher.

The sensitive nature of the research project meant that I was careful to first develop strong relationships with the survivors before pursuing interviews. It was during an informal discussion with Daniel - a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the death marches - that I truly valued the contributions which participants felt able to make to this study when he said, "it's painful. It's not easy to talk about it, there's a lot of pain to sort of turn the pages and talk about those days. So every word said is gold, diamonds."

L'Dor VaDor: Generation to generation

I was initially motivated to conduct this study as my paternal great-grandmother was deported from France to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942, and my grandfather and his sister lived through the Nazi occupation of France and French complicity in the Shoah. This visceral link to the research matter caused a genuine willingness to learn about the lives and biographies of the members in Bitachon. As a number of the elders I encountered harbored a wish to impart their testimonies in younger generations, conducting multiple interviews in London and maintaining correspondence from Durham meant that long-lasting and personal relationships formed over time. I was then welcomed into the homes and lives of participants to the extent that my own name (Ben) became "Benjy" or simply "*bubbeleh*" [Yiddish; term of endearment, dear or sweet] and I was regarded by some of the elderly female members as an adoptive-grandchild, rather than a researcher and they, in turn, became akin to grandparents.

Trauma

Anthropological studies of embodiment have been greatly impacted by the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, and particularly by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion that the body can be considered as a "disclosure" of individual experience and the social world (2008[1945]). Here, the body is seen as less of "an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture" (Csordas 1999:5). Uses of embodiment within anthropology have consequently positioned the body as a true reflection of lived experience, and as a social artefact which becomes inscribed with the ordeals and marks of time (see Fassin 2006).

As discussed in the context of genocidal legacies in a Mayan village in Guatemala, survivor "communities face a fundamental challenge in how to reconcile deep, inescapable mourning over the traumas of the past with hope for a better future" (Manz 2002:295). In working with the members at Bitachon it could be inferred that the aging process presents a challenge to that "hope for a better future" (cf. Manz 2002:295), as some of the elderly survivors would look back on their lives rather than forward to their futures. Although the social and

therapeutic program attempts to mediate traumatic expressions of lived experience of persecutory violence, the Shoah can feel irreconcilable with the present day for some elders:

I went through a very hard time darling because I lost my mother, father. I lost my fiancé. I was engaged; he was 24 and I was 21. People died, why not me? Why am I still here at 90? We are all damaged goods. We don't have a normal life, not with our past. (Mara, Hungarian survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau)

A well-documented issue of working with testimony is the potential for over-lapping individual and collective narratives of genocidal experience, and the consequent need to “decipher and decode the meanings in people’s stories, to sort out the public voice and concealed, unspoken thoughts” (Manz 2002:299). The individual and group reflections of escaping death were indeed harrowing as the elders carefully shared their testimony of lived experience of genocide, but the interview process enabled me to ask further questions about how these memories persist over time as an embodied trauma and genocidal legacy:

With a white glove on he [Dr Mengele] was pointing left left, left – all without asking any questions. Suddenly when he came to me, he stopped and asked “*wie alt bist du?*” [How old are you?]. I said sixteen [...]. I will always remember that millisecond, he thought to himself “well alright, I’ll believe you” and he pointed me to the right. It was as close as that to death in those times; life was literally at the whim of somebody’s feelings or thoughts. As far as I’m concerned, most of the survivors do have some sort of haunting experiences which reminds them literally day by day – either loss of family or any other tragedy. (Isaac, Hungarian survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau)

A Community of Survivors

The Center was created by a founding group of members who expressed a shared need to be with survivors who carried similar experiences of trauma in a specifically Jewish space. Abigail, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, remarked that a key motivation in initiating Bitachon was the reality that many survivors felt unable to talk about their past experiences to “normal citizens, [because of the perception that] they wouldn’t understand what we went through.”

Another one of the founders is Rachel, who was deported from Hungary to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. She remains an active member of the advisory committee, which, as mentioned, brings staff and representative members together to discuss the running of Bitachon. It is important for her to be involved in the Center’s leadership because, as she says, “in a way it’s like my baby! When you build up something from nothing then it is very important to carry on that.”

Rachel recalled a time when survivors could not, and had never, spoken about their experience; a reluctance which also resulted from a perceived feeling that “nobody wanted to listen.” As Rachel went on to say, part of the issue for survivors living with embodied trauma resulting from the Shoah is the subjective belief that “it is very difficult to live with it and to also have a life, [and] in the beginning you could not do the two things together.” Many of the elders who lived through the concentration and extermination camps discussed the initially slow and painful process of meeting informally with fellow survivors and opening up to each other. The resolve for Rachel was to nurture a timely intervention which began as a peer-led bagel brunch

group and eventually became Bitachon in 1992, she said, “There was a need to do something, to build something, for now as we age. Today it is a lifesaver for quite a lot of people.”

When interviewing the elders at Bitachon it became clear that there was some diversity in how they perceived the issue of past trauma presenting, or becoming more acute, with age. Many elders felt that the past was persistent over time, and Isaac (a Hungarian survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau) noted how “hardly days go by without some sort of recollection or remembrance of either before, during, or after the war.” According to Rachel, the replaying of trauma from her incarceration in Auschwitz-Birkenau is independent of age and is not an issue of becoming “more difficult, but [that] it is difficult to live with.”

However, the experiences associated with moving through the later stages of life (such as entering retirement, losing partners, and transitioning states of (dis)ability) can indeed make the latent feelings of loss from the Shoah feel more acute. As Abigail told me:

I feel more in need of company now than ever before. When I was young, before I retired, I was a very busy woman! I had no time to feel lonely or to think too much about the Holocaust. But since I retired, I have a lot more time and also getting older is not a very pleasant experience. So I need people more than I ever have.

The Center has since brought a once disconnected group of people together to that effect, but I was told by Avi (a Viennese survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen) that Bitachon is not a depressing place to be for the elders. On the contrary, he said, “When you see the people here, they are all optimists! They are all happy people, it’s a wonderful place and we enjoy being here.”

For these reasons Bitachon is regarded as a “lifeline” by participants and the criteria of “one of us” nurtures a sense of trust between members, as suffering is shared yet understood without speaking. This sentiment was echoed by many members I interviewed, and was seen as a quality that was not perceived to be granted by people outside of the Center or the non-Jewish world:

After all the years I lived in non-Jewish surroundings, it’s almost like being born again for me. Because, for all of a sudden I am with people that I don’t have to explain anything to. (Leah, German refugee)

I have a chance of coming across people who had the same experience and they know exactly how I feel and we reminisce a lot. It helps us tremendously. (Ariel, Polish survivor of Buchenwald and Mauthausen)

If you’ve gone through the Holocaust or gone on the Kindertransport you have a different life. You went through experiences in your childhood and your adulthood which are not like other people’s [experiences]. So there is a whole block of your life which is not something that other people can relate to. (Esther, granted a special child visa to leave France for the USA in 1941)

Degrees of Suffering

This is not to say that all survivors are considered as equal survivors; in fact, it would be more accurate to say there is a “hierarchy of suffering”¹⁰ between the different groups who use the service. This was raised during a pair-interview which alluded to the experience of two women:

I never felt that I had gone through anything they [camp survivors] had gone through.
(Naamah, Kindertransport)

I very often feel that really I don't belong, from their point of view not from mine. From my point of view, I very much belong because for years and years I thought about nothing else; I dreamt that I was in a concentration camp, that I knew what a camp was like. But I really feel like I don't belong because I haven't been through anything. I even think there is a difference between her and me, she [Naamah] lost her parents and I am still living in the house my parents bought! (Leah, refugee)

This discussion introduces the gradation of suffering that some members felt existed, not only when compared with camp survivors, but also amongst each other. Not all the elders in Bitachon chose to define themselves as survivors, and when I questioned Michal about her past she was quick to correct me by saying “I am not a survivor because I came out with the Kindertransport.” Moreover, I sometimes found using the term survivor obstructive when discussing the research project and my intent to interview the elders. This was especially the case amongst members who came to the UK by Kindertransport or as refugees, and some of whom needed additional prompts and reassurance that I was just as interested in their narrative as I would be in anybody else's.

I was then interested to ask whether a range of members from the different type of groups felt there was a sense of community at Bitachon:

Look, I'll tell you what is the community here; the proper survivors from the camp.
(Michal, Kindertransport)

The people who were in the camps sometimes don't feel the same kinship with the people who came over as refugees. In the beginning there was almost a separation because they feel that they suffered in a way that others didn't. They don't understand that somebody was put on a train by her parents and never saw them again, it's a tremendous loss.
(Esther, granted a special child visa to leave France for the USA in 1941)

There is a terrible difference between us, we should be separate groups. The so-called “survivors,” they were refugees. They had a perfectly normal life here compared to us.
(Mara, Hungarian survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau)

The Kindertransport don't understand the people that were in the camps for instance. The refugees they can't, it's not possible to understand what the camp survivors went through. They came with their parents, their families, and their goods and valuables – they were in a different position altogether. They said “we all suffered the same, suffering

is suffering” but there is a big difference. (Deborah, Polish survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen)

Taut encounters or exchanges between the different groups of members were few and far between, but were nonetheless awkward to observe when they did occur. On one such occasion I sat for tea with two members when one of the ladies present, Shifra (a spouse of a deceased member), commented that “it must be so nice to be young and twenty-one, I wish I was young again.” Mara then sharply responded “that is the difference between you English and us survivors. God forbid, I couldn’t be again twenty-one years old. I had the most horrific experiences at that time.” Whilst I was startled by Mara’s frank statement and sharp use of “you” and “us,” the encounter was demonstrative of how the gradation of suffering or sense of difference between the groups in the Center was enacted.

Tensions between members were not always restricted to hierarchical claims and counter-claims of suffering, or debates of who was entitled to membership. Confrontations between camp survivors appeared to be buffered by their deep sense of fraternity when they occurred. On one occasion during a Yiddish session I sat with Daniel, who was once one of the Center’s most temperamental members but was also, I sensed, one of the most vulnerable. After a heated exchange between some of the participants during the Yiddish group one Wednesday which resulted in Daniel exiting the Center, a male elder turned to another and asked “Can’t we banish him?” To which his peer responded, “What can we do? He’s one of us.”

Although Bitachon is widely appreciated by the members as a “second home,” there remains a contentiousness of bringing together a spectrum of experiences under one survivor’s term and one roof, with assertions of exclusive rights as to who is or who is not a survivor. For members that were incarcerated in the camps, there is a sense of resentment when sharing the status of survivor with those who did not experience their lives in the Nazi concentration camps. At the heart of this disjuncture between the members clearly lies a difference in suffering, but also a perceived lack of understanding between the groups regarding the trauma and loss that Kindertransport and refugees experienced.

This hierarchy of suffering can in fact be considered a response to the establishment’s practice of ascribing the status of survivor to all members. This occurs even though members of the Kindertransport of refugees were not subjected to the constant threat of extermination within the Nazi ‘state of exception’ (see Agamben 1999, 2005), by virtue of the fact that they had escaped its dominion. During an interview with the convening staff, I was told that the difference between members was largely an issue belonging to the past and the Center’s initial conception twenty years ago. I learnt from Naamah, who has been associated with the Center since 1992, that the groups originally kept to separate times, days, and even social programs, but as more of the elders died the separate services were no longer feasible.



Figure 2: *The marks of time.* Photograph by the author.

The administering staff of Bitachon claimed how, at that time, “People were arguing about who was entitled to come here and who wasn’t, which is a strange thing now because we break down all those barriers.” However, the observations and quotations outlined above certainly question that claim, and it is evidently the case that a discrepancy continues to exist between some elders within the different groups who use the services at Bitachon. This indicates that there remains a conflict between the subjective ideas of what constitutes a survivor between the Center and the members themselves.

To a similar effect there is a tacit dress code at the Center and notably a “no-stripe shirt policy.” This intervention is enforced by the management with the intention to avoid causing what is considered undue distress to survivors, who typically wore striped uniforms whilst being confined to the camps. By honest mistake I flouted the implicit prohibition by wearing a pinstripe shirt on one occasion during the fieldwork, and was reprimanded by Center staff accordingly. The policy is also demonstrable of traumas that are projected at Bitachon, and is a controversial intervention enforced by staff as it is believed to impact upon the wellbeing of camp survivors. Not only did some male members dress in striped shirts when attending scheduled activities (Figure 2), but the policy actually aroused unsupportive reactions amongst one survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau:

We actually ask people not to wear stripe shirts because it triggers the memory of the striped uniforms for some. (Support Staff 2)

It's stupid! If I see a proper uniform, a uniform from the camp, then it gives me a knock to the heart but stripes? Men wear striped shirts all the time! (Deborah)

I struggle with this one. There is a belief that that these things [stripes] could have impacted our member's sensitivity. Since I don't recall an incident where this happened you sometimes wonder if we project certain things or are we just intuitive? (Support Staff 1)

Although members of the Center hold the staff in high regard and vice-versa, it is evidently the case that the staff operate at a heightened level of sensitivity which is not always congruous with the survivors they seek to protect. The discrepancy between the subjective "triggers" aired by the staff of Bitachon and the true tokens of trauma that survivors feel burdened with reiterates the need to deconstruct the testimonies shared by survivors and draw out the issues that members themselves detail as enduring reminders of the Shoah.

The contest of defining an authentic survivor in Bitachon is reflected in the contemporary anthropological discourse of medical certificates and how they legitimize the embodied trauma of asylum seekers in Europe. Didier Fassin and Estelle d'Halluin (2005) chart how clinical investigations are deployed to identify and validate the physical traumas harbored by the body as evidence in claims for asylum. In these instances, embodied trauma is investigated and formalized as an "inscription of truth" when "narratives are less often believed and more proof is often requested" (2005:598). The body can then be considered as the "ultimate evidence," and "the place in which individuals' truth about who they really are is experienced" (2005:597).

This discussion of embodied authenticity can be applied to the tacit dichotomy that is felt by the different groups of survivors at Bitachon. Here, Camp and ghetto survivors are considered – and arguably consider themselves – to be 'proper' survivors by virtue of the numbers indelibly etched on their arms or their testimonies which clearly recount their lived experiences of the camps (Figure 2). The absence of which gives rise to embodied boundaries within Bitachon, and explains why the Kindertransport or Jewish refugee groups are not considered equal survivors by the former based on the fact that their embodied experience cannot testify to the same extreme horrors of the Nazi "state of exception."

Gould recently relayed how Jewish elders in a Canadian institutionalized care home were differentiated as being "real immigrants" or those who were "Western-born Jews" (2013:192). However, the reflections made by members of Bitachon take us beyond relevant examples in Jewish ethnography or the wider anthropological discourse. We can see how boundaries within a mutual space are created by virtue of different experiences of trauma, but also how marks of lived experience are mobilized to revoke allocation of the term survivor by those who consider it undue to share.

The Taste of Affliction

As the lunch-time period approaches the open-plan space is transformed into a café decked with tables and chairs, offering a break between the scheduled activities. The café forms

the core of the Center and is a shared and social space; conversation fills the air along with the smells of *heyim* [Yiddish; home] as fresh and subsidized food is prepared in house by the chef.

Foodways play an implicit role in demarcating the aforementioned groups by virtue of their diverging experiences. The support staff inform me that this is particularly the case for survivors of the ghettos and camps, for whom “tasteless food is an insult but not enough food is traumatizing.” Satiety is not just a physical or caloric requirement in *Bitachon*, but is fundamentally an emotional state of being with traumatic reflections that are directly related to Shoah experience for camp and ghetto survivors. The importance of the Center’s café cannot be understated for some of the elders, and for some of whom, the lunches on offer might even be their main meal of the day.

Conducting an interview with Naamah (Kindertransport) affirms the particular significance of food for camp survivors rather than refugees, illuminating the graded difference between the members of *Bitachon*: “I think food is far more important for people in camps who really were starving.” This statement is supported by recollections of life in Auschwitz by Rachel, who remarked that “now you will see grass there, but there was no grass or else we would have eaten it. That was the situation.” Such extreme recollections of lived experience and trauma were common amongst the camp and ghetto survivors, as also expressed by Baila who tells me that, in the Lodz Ghetto, she received a “ration that wasn’t for living but for dying.”

As a result of years spent in a violently enforced state of starvation where life and death were hinged on having bread, this particular food is leavened with meaning for survivors of the ghettos and camps. A resolve of *Bitachon* is to always have a basket of bread besides the kitchen which is free of charge and constantly available. These slices were often wrapped into a napkin and tucked into a handbag or blazer pocket “just in case”; a learned survival strategy which is also reflected in notable Shoah testimonies (see Levi 1987[1947]). Bread came in forms that were familiar to the Ashkenazi Jewish elders, including rye-bread with caraway seeds or braided rolls (*challah*) at lunch, and sweet cakes or *rugelakh* (a pastry typical of Ashkenazi baking) would also be served during particular activities or times in the day.

Whilst interviewing Deborah in her London flat, she told me that food waste is common in her kitchen yet bread is to be saved at all costs as “people were dying for a crust of bread.” The inextricable associations of bread and bondage were common, perhaps because, Moshe tells me, bread was “important because this is what we got every morning when we got up [at Auschwitz-Birkenau], a slice of bread.” However it was clear from many interviews conducted that bread continues to sustain traumatic memories of the camps and ghettos.

Whilst being escorted to London’s Wiener Library in Russell Square by Chaya, she recalled a fairy-tale of Hansel and Gretel that she recited to children under her care in the orphanage of the Lodz Ghetto. Except the fairy-tale was retold in a way that made the staple of bread, rather than the luxuries of gingerbread, dreamful:

The only difference was that instead of children finding a lovely house made of chocolates and sweets in the middle of a forest, the house was made of bread and they could just go in there and eat as much bread as they wanted.

That bread can act as a barometer of experience between survivors of the camps or ghettos and those who escaped Nazi persecution as refugees from 1933 onwards can be inferred

from a further reflection by Chaya. She went on to share an anecdote from her married life, as her husband had left Poland for the United Kingdom in 1939:

As a student [in England] he had no money. He was telling me sometimes for lunch he had to have a bar of chocolate and that's where our differences started when I was telling him about bread, and then he told me about chocolate!

Chaya goes on to tell me how much she values bread to this day, also stating that this particular food can 'never' be wasted because of its importance during her incarceration in the Lodz Ghetto.

The meanings ascribed to bread by camp and ghetto survivors also recount an ancient narrative of subjugation and redemption for Jews that is annually commemorated through the eight-day festival of Passover (*Pessa'h*). This marks the narrative of the ancient Israelites who, in their desperation to escape enslavement by the Pharaoh King of Egypt, took their dough before it had leavened and journeyed endlessly into the wilderness. The uncertainty which they encountered along the way caused the Israelite community to long for the bread and sustenance they once had, and there they complained to Moshe and Aaron: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread" ([*Tanakh*] Exodus 16:2-3)¹¹.

Following the Biblical narrative of Exodus, it is forbidden to consume leavened bread and derived-products or even allow a single crumb of leaven to remain in Jewish homes over the holiday of Pessa'h. During this time Jews are instead instructed to consume unleavened bread (*matzah*) which is metaphorically considered to be the "bread of affliction" in Judaism and marks their ancestral tale of bondage and eventual emancipation. Foodways can therefore be considered an integral part of evoking memory in Judaism, as to remember (Hebrew; *zachar*) "is often a verb of action rather than simply thought" (Berlin and Brettler 2004:315).

The intimate connection between bread and memory has been recorded in notable anthropological studies, particularly by David E. Sutton's (2001) account of "remembrance of repasts" in the Greek island of Kalymnos. For one of Sutton's Athenian research participants, bread evoked "the image of children and desperate people during wartime crying out in desperation *psomaki* [a little piece of bread]" (2001:32). This example relates deeply to the reflections of bread explored above, and its status as the definitive "taste of affliction" since the time of exodus to the extermination of the Jews.

Krupnik Soup

Although the bread is freely available, a daily menu offers a nourishing choice of meals at a subsidized cost to members. One recommendation is the Polish barley soup, the recipe of which is supplied by Deborah. During an interview in her living room, she unfolded a piece of paper from a tin and recites: "my homemade barley soup [...] is thick and nourishing, and what did we get in the camp? Water with a piece of turnip swimming around, if we were lucky."

The bowl of thick and textured soup in front of me stirs up a journey of survival. As Deborah recalls, the soup in the camps was weak, watery, and lacking sustenance, but now at Bitachon the survivors are served a warm and wholesome soup that "represents where they have

come.” The Polish barley soup ladles a memory of the *heym* in the physical sense of the term ‘home’, but also a lost place of origin, time and pre-war life for the Ashkenazi Jewish elders at Bitachon. Not only is the soup a conscious strategy of care that is culturally appropriate, but in some way it also offers a historical counterbalance or re-inscription for members of Ashkenazi origin. In this sense, the soup is more than a familiar culinary memory of the *heym*; it also overrides the taste of suffering experienced by survivors of the camps and ghettos with a relished and lasting taste of survival.

Collective experiences of political violence are known to give rise to emic categories of somatic responses, such as people complaining of a heart that was “spoiled” and “torn apart” by the tragedies and suffering that ensued during the Sierra Leone-Guinea border conflict (Henry 2008). In a similar expression and embodied response to lived experience of violence, bread can be interpreted as a vernacular and enduring token of trauma in Bitachon because of its role in continuing to mark the threshold between life and death in the ghettos and camps. Moreover, the specific way the Center’s social and therapeutic program features foods that are not only familiar but re-inscribed with meaning demonstrates how a form of care that is culturally-appropriate or historically-significant can be delivered to traumatized victims of political or social violence.

In the context of the Shoah or exilic narratives more broadly, Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish memoirs also point to particular foods as offering a taste and memory of their former lives (see Rodent 1997). For Iraqi Jews especially, date fruits not only mark the taste of dispossession and being uprooted from their home cities of Baghdad and Basra, but also the difficulties and discrimination experienced when being re-sown in Israel as an ethnic sub-group largely after 1950 (Shaba 2009; Benjamin 2007). Just as the shoots of Iraqi date palms that were transplanted to Israel yet failed to flourish as they once did, Iraqi Jews too were sown:

Into the new soils of Israel. And this land, they say, seemed unaccountably hostile to Middle Eastern and North African Jews – so they didn’t grow right, either (Shabi 2009: 3)

The foods associated with Jewish communities, Claudia Roden notes, recount ancient tales of ‘an uprooted, migrating people and their vanished worlds’ (1997: 3). Considering the fact that food brings the past and continuity into alignment (see Roden 1997), age-related care settings should be considered ideal spaces to explore how foodways feature within the needs of aging communities and particularly those elders who have been uprooted from their formative lives. Annemarie Mol (2010) has explored the key role that food performs in delivering “good” care in Dutch nursing homes, and identified how nutritional and palatable qualities are “interdependent” as much as “in tension.” As “survival comes in cultural inflections” (Myerhoff 1978:257), the attention paid to food in age-related care settings which cater to aging and traumatized victims of violence should be emphasized. Moreover, the way in which the café at Bitachon offers a metaphorical taste and token of the *heym* as a conscious strategy of care adds a novel interpretation to studies of “Jewish topographies” (cf. Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke 2008).

Several landmark studies have furthered current understandings of the impact of suffering over time, and, based on the experience of war-rape in the Bosnian conflict and Greek civil war, calls have been made for interviews to nurture “a better understanding of the impact of trauma on the victim’s later life” (Van Boeschoten 2003:47). As observed in Bitachon, lived experience of violence continues to shape the behaviors and foodways of elderly victims of

genocide and persecution. Here, former survival strategies from concentration and extermination camps continue to be enacted, demonstrating how “people’s inner states reflect lived experience within everyday worlds” (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007: 5). The embodied trauma of aging survivors at Bitachon, marked through sensitive and acute relationships with bread, is a visceral example of how, as Dider Fassin argues, “history is not merely a narrative or the sum of competing narratives. It is also what is inscribed within our bodies and makes us think and act as we do” (2007:XIX).

Narratives of embodied trauma are evidently of great relevance to anthropological studies of aging and genocide, as “even when violence has lapsed, the memory of violence permeates the subjective experience of any number of people around the world” (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007:11)¹².

Concluding Reflections

This paper has illustrated how a dedicated support facility with a social and therapeutic service attends to the embodied traumas held by aging Jewish Shoah survivors. In Bitachon, culturally-appropriate care feeds memories of a lost way of life, predominantly for Jews of Eastern and Central European origin. As Ariel notes, the Center and its staff “are just extraordinary, who devote everything to give us back a life which we had before the war.” The data can be used as a strong foundation for further research with survivors of genocide, and enhance our understandings of the tokens of trauma which remain permanently harbored.

Food is evidently a powerful indicator and metaphor of suffering for members at Bitachon, and its feature in the social and therapeutic program is a conscious strategy of care which offers both emotional and nutritional sustenance to the Ashkenazi elders I encountered. Refugee and survivor communities more generally may possess culturally-significant relationships with food that are poorly understood by those perceived as being external to the group.

The ethnographic research presented here now furthers the bold enquiry made by Alexander Laban Hinton (2002) where he asked how an “anthropology of genocide” might be envisioned, and how anthropologists might contribute to the interdisciplinary study of genocide. He pointed to a (then) gap in anthropological understandings of genocide; how victims feel affected, and particularly the ways in which they respond to their individual or collective traumas. However, as a result of the limited design of this study, the conclusions presented here can only serve as an indicator of lived experience for a group of aging survivors of genocide.

Conclusively, analysis of the narratives shared so generously by the members of Bitachon demonstrates the intimate ways in which genocidal legacies can affect the later stages of life. I intend the findings to be of particular methodological and theoretical benefit to the design of current and future welfare policies for survivors of mass killings and genocides.

The testimonies that I refer to illustrate how a group of elderly Jewish people contend with their lived experience of the Shoah almost seventy years after the liberation of Nazi occupied Europe. As relayed by the inviting and inspiring members of Bitachon, the Shoah is a truly embodied phenomenon. The narratives that are inscribed here are nothing but a token of the trauma experienced by my remarkable research participants, but they are a token that has nonetheless been shared from “generation to generation.”

Acknowledgments

With gratitude to Dr Claudia Merli (Department of Anthropology, Durham University) for her diligent supervision and support during the field-work. This research was funded through a postgraduate studentship granted by the Center for Medical Humanities, Durham University.

Endnotes

1. Hebrew; translating specifically as “catastrophe,” “annihilation,” or more generally as “calamity”.
2. Hebrew; encased parchment affixed to doorways as instructed by religious law. A *mezuzah* denotes that (typically observant) Jews reside, own or use such a building.
3. A *menorah* (Hebrew, lampstand) has seven branches; three either side of a center point (see [Tanakh] Zechariah 4: 1-6), and remains an enduring symbol of Judaism as well as an emblem of the Israeli State.
4. *Kashrut* involves a system of food preparation and consumption. The meals served in the Center are dairy/*parev* in compliance with kashrut and the ritual separation of “meaty” and “milky” foods as well as cooking facilities. Parev foods are classed as being neither meaty nor dairy and this food group includes, for example, fish, eggs, and vegetables. Chalav Yisrael dairy products are certified as having been produced under Jewish supervision to ensure that the products derive from an animal that is considered kosher.
5. Jews of the Ashkenazi sub-group trace their origins to Central and Eastern Europe. The Sephardim (pl.) is a collective term for Jews whose origins are Spanish or Iberian, and extends to the Jewish population who were expelled in 1492 and later resettled in Mediterranean regions such as the Balkans Peninsula. During the Second World War, Sephardi Jewish communities in these regions were brought under varying experiences of Nazi persecution but also faced deportations to extermination camps. Elements of *Bitachon*, such as the Yiddish conversation group or Ashkenazi foodways, would consequently not hold the same significance for Jews of Sephardi origin. Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews have origins in the Middle East and deeply rooted Jewish communities in, for example, Yemen, Iran, Iraq and Syria.
6. Holocaust Memorial Day is marked on 27 January in the UK; the date Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated. Yom HaShoah (Hebrew; translates in English as Holocaust Remembrance Day) is a common abbreviation of “Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day.” It was selected by the government of Israel to be commemorated on 27 Nisan in the Jewish calendar; the date of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.
7. German; children’s transport. A “humanitarian program” which brought 10,000 children – predominantly Jewish – to the UK from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia (see HMD n.d.)
8. Not defined by religious observance or affiliation but by the amount of Jewish grandparents one descended from (see Rice University n.d.)
9. Corresponds with the Yad Vashem definition of a survivor (see Yad Vashem 2015). Situated in Israel, Yad Vashem regard themselves as the official “Holocaust Martyrs” and “Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.”

10. Term raised through an interview with Support Staff 1.
11. Tanakh; canon of the Hebrew Bible.
12. This chapter appears in an edited version (see Kasstan 2015) and is re-formed here with permission from both Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis and Anthropology & Aging.

REFERENCES

Agamben, Giorgio

1999 *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books.

2005 *State of Exception*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA)

2011 *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice*.

<http://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf>, accessed August 6, 2013.

Benjamin, Marina

2007 *The Last Days in Babylon: The Story of the Jews of Baghdad*. London: Bloomsbury.

Berlin, Adele, and Marc Zvi Brettler

2004 *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Biehl, João, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman

2007 *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Csordas, Thomas J.

1990 Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology. *Ethnos* 18(1): 5–47.

Fassin, Didier, and Estelle D'Halluin

2005 The Truth from the Body: Medical Certificates as Ultimate Evidence for Asylum Seekers. *American Anthropologist* 107: 597–608.

Fassin, Didier

2006 The Politics of Life: Beyond the Anthropology of Health. *In Medical Anthropology: Regional Perspectives and Shared Concerns*. Francine Saillant, and Serge Genest, eds. Pp. 267–288. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

2007 *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gould, Jillian

2011 Shiva as creative ritual in an institutional home. *In Revisioning ritual: Jewish traditions in transition*. Simon J. Bronner, ed. Pp. 317–337. Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

2013 A Nice Piece of Cake and a Kibbitz: Reinventing Sabbath Hospitality in an Institutional Home. *Home Cultures* 10(2): 189–206.

Henry, Doug

2006 Violence and the Body: Somatic Expressions of Trauma and Vulnerability during War. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 20(3): 370–398.

Hinton, Alexander Laban

2002 *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Undated The Kindertransport, <http://hmd.org.uk/genocides/kindertransport-refugees>, accessed February 18, 2015.

Kasstan, Ben

2015 The taste of trauma: Reflections of aging Shoah survivors on food and how they (re)inscribe it with meaning. Theme issue, "Religion and Food," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 26(1): 349–365.

Levi, Primo

1987[1947] *If this is a Man*. London: Abacus.

Lipphardt, Anna, Julia Brauch, and Alexandra Nocke

2008 *Jewish topographies: Visions of space, traditions of place*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Manz, Beatriz

2002 Terror, Grief, and Recovery: Genocidal Trauma in a Mayan Village in Guatemala. In *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*. Alexander Laban Hinton, ed. Pp. 292–309. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice

2008[1945] From the phenomenology of perception. *In Beyond the body proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*. Margaret Lock, and Judith Farquhar, eds. Pp. 133–149. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mol, Annemarie

2010 Care and its Values: Good food in the nursing home. *In Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms*. Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser, and Jeannette Pols, eds. Pp. 215–234. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Myerhoff, Barbara

1978 *Number our Days*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Rice University

Undated The Nuremberg Race Laws, <http://www.owlnet.rice.edu/~rar4619/nuremburg.html>, accessed February 18, 2014.

Roden, Claudia

1996 *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand and Vilna to the Present Day*. London: Penguin Group.

Shabi, Rachel.

2009 *Not the Enemy: Israel's Jews from Arab Lands*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sutton, David E.

2001 *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Oxford: Berg.

van Boeschoten, Riki

2003 The Trauma of War Rape: A Comparative View on the Bosnian Conflict and the Greek Civil War. *History and Anthropology* 14(1): 41–54.

Yad Vashem

2015 How do you Define a Shoah Survivor?
<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/resources/names/faq.asp#!prettyPhoto>, accessed April 16, 2015.