

## Personal Perspective

# Life Is Not Beautiful

## Reflections of a Second Generation Child of a Holocaust Survivor

By Jeffrey Glanz

### Introduction

In 1999 the Oscars were conferred upon those considered most deserving by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, an august body made up by the intellectual lights of the time. On this highly auspicious occasion, Roberto Benigni, the auteur, writer, director, and starring actor of *Life is Beautiful* received several awards. His response to his recognition was to cavort about in a supposedly spontaneous display of untrammelled joy. The authenticity of his performance at the Academy Awards is a matter of passing curiosity. The authenticity of the film upon which his awards were based is another issue.

Many deep thinkers in Hollywood and elsewhere accepted the premise that the Holocaust could be considered amusing. Clearly, Mr. Benigni's non-Jewish antecedents were not prime players in this event. This fortunate situation provided him with a more disinterested view of the goings-on and high-jinks during this period.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he was capable of appreciating the potential humor of the circumstances.

For some strange reason, I am not capable of such appreciation. To paraphrase the oft-quoted quote ascribed to Queen Victoria, "I am not amused." I must be a bit of a dullard.

I am a child of a Holocaust survivor. (Happily, my mother did not share my father's potentially amusing experiences during the early 1940s.) I married a child of two Holocaust survivors of Auschwitz/Birkenau. Until fairly recently, I avoided all discussion and study of the Holocaust.

To put it succinctly, my memories regarding the Holocaust have never been fond ones.

I personally consider the premise of the movie in question to be utterly lacking in depth. I consider the shallow nature of this award-winning film to be appropriate to the *weltanschauung*, way of looking at the world, represented by Hollywood. Moreover, as an educator I am offended because errors and misrepresentations may cause many unenlightened teens and adults to think that the experiences in the concentration camps were similar to those portrayed in the film.<sup>2</sup>

Now that I have pontificated about the drivel popularized by the West Coast American propaganda machine, I will discuss reality as I learned it at my dear father's knee and what affect his experiences had and still have on me.

### A Potato

My father taught me the meaning of the simplest food by a none too amusing tale of his years in a Nazi labor camp.

One day, he was lucky enough to find a potato while working in the field. He hid it from the guards and his fellow inmates for the rest of the day. That night, he took his daily ration of black bread, wrapped it around the potato, and placed it under his shirt for the night. While he slept, his body heat slow cooked the potato until it became reasonably soft. The next morning, he ate the potato sandwich, with great relish, albeit slowly and clandestinely.

Decades later, he told me that this

potato was tastier than any steak he had ever eaten since: "Even today, when I think about how I ate that sandwich, my face lights with a blazing smile."

So even when I eat food today it takes on special meaning.

### My Family Tree

I recall an incident that took place when I was a child. We were asked to draw a family tree. The teacher explained what she meant, but I still could not comprehend what she was talking about.

I really did not know who was in my family other than my parents, sister, and one or two aunts and uncles. We had very small family gatherings. I recall wondering why "our family was so small" compared to some of the other drawings in the class. I recall staring in envy at huge family gatherings of my friends. Even at that tender age I realized the importance of family.

Although today I intellectually appreciate the value of "quality" family gatherings, I still fantasize what if Aunt Chaya, Aunt Channa, Aunt Esti, Uncle Tzvi, Uncle Noah, Bubbie (Grandma) Faiga Sima, and Zaidi (Grandpa) Yosef and their relatives and inevitable offspring were alive. Now that I think of it, we still have a small family. The seeds, however, have been planted, so to speak, for this situation to improve. No wonder my wife and I had four children. (Let the truth now be told: I really wanted two more).

## Holocaust Studies

I have always avoided, albeit unconsciously, study and, even, discussion of the Holocaust. It wasn't until my father died that I decided to examine this past—my father's past—the events that have indeed shaped my beliefs and attitudes. This past summer I spent a month studying and doing research at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Center in Israel. I spent this time alone, as my family remained in America. My sons and daughter preferred camp—they had vacationed in Israel twice before. My wife knew that I would spend most of my time attending classes or in solitary study. I can be a horrid killjoy and stick-in-the-mud, at times.

During this period, I attended a seminar held at the International School for Holocaust Studies. This was a meaningful and creative experience. I am most comfortable spending time alone. Working ten hour days and then spending time contemplating my life: from my marriage, to my father's history, to my decades studying the martial arts, to my dedication to education, and, most surprisingly, to understanding what it means to be a second-generation child of a Holocaust survivor.

One of the lecturers at the seminar mentioned, parenthetically, that she was a second-generation child of the Holocaust and that she had recently joined a therapy group. Her story, candidly related, combined with my intense experience last spring exploring concentration camps in Poland,<sup>3</sup> prompted me to further explore my roots.

## My Holocaust Journey

Late in 1998, I decided to retrace my father's early life and learn more about the Holocaust. So, I prepared to set out on a journey that would take me to five major cities in three countries, five former ghettos, one concentration camp, one labor camp, six death camps, and one villa where the bureaucratic arrangements for the murder of 11 million Jews were made over lunch. (The intent of the Wannsee Conference was to eradicate the 11,000,000 Jews in Europe. This figure did not include the intended victims in Asia, the Americas, etc.).

I researched the dates, places, and events. I arranged my own self-guided tour, based upon my studies. I was on the road and on my own for two and a half weeks, examining where it all happened.

Why did I go?

I didn't go only because I am a Jew, although that would have sufficed... *Dayenu*.

I didn't go only because I am the newly named Director of the Holocaust Resource Center at Kean University, although that would have sufficed... *Dayenu*.

I didn't go only because my dear, deceased father suffered at the hands of the Nazis through the years of the Holocaust, although that would have sufficed... *Dayenu*.

I didn't go only because I teach a course entitled "Teaching the Holocaust," although that would have sufficed... *Dayenu*.

(The word *Dayenu* is Hebrew. It means "It would have sufficed for us." It is a song sung to G-d at the Passover Seder. Had He merely done one thing or another, *Dayenu*, it would have sufficed for us. Thus, the concept and the use of the word here.)

I went to more fully understand and confront certain issues that arose as I was growing up. Although my father is no longer alive, he would have been happy and proud that I cared enough about him to learn more about his early life and about the ordeals he endured, and that I have dedicated a significant portion of my life to the study of that time.

Before this summer of study, I did not realize that the Holocaust affected my life (and my educational philosophy) in any significant way. Due in large measure to my visit to the camps in Europe and my time spent in Israel in a monastic-like existence, I now realize that the Holocaust is the defining feature of my life, both personally and professionally. Why was I not aware of that before?

Those individuals who survived the Holocaust are not "normal." How could they be? I, too, am not normal. It was no accident that I married a child of Holocaust survivors.

For most of my life, I felt that I was living in my father's shadow. His education was interrupted. His career cut short. His mission as my father was education. For many years, I resisted. Boy! Did I resist!

It was axiomatic that I would succeed academically. His pushing me to excel had a significant impact on my development. I fought him for years. Happily, he won.

My multiple degrees as an academician, my numerous publications, my intensive research agenda are all degrees, publications, and signs that my father could not earn, publish, or undertake. I am an obsessive-compulsive for good cause. I organize my time, my duties, my vocations, my avocations. Barely a moment of the day and of significant portions of the night are wasted. I must make up for the time I wasted in my youth and for the time that was stolen from him.

## A Greenhorn

Another significant defining influence in my life was what you may call "cultural neutralization" or the anti-Greenhorn effect. When Elias David Glanz arrived in the United States as an immigrant, he was 36 years old. He was a product of the Eastern European Jewish culture and educational system. He had also been through the classrooms of Hell.

Just as many others similarly educated, he spoke a number of languages. He could converse in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, German, Russian, all with an accent. His way of expressing himself in his new language, English, sounded most strange to American ears. Most Europeans are accustomed to hearing their native languages bent by the tongues of persons to whom they are strange. After all, it's not too many miles from the border of one nation (language) to that of another. Therefore, Europeans are able to communicate in several languages, each with an accent peculiar to the birthplace of the speaker. This is not the case for most of us born in the United States. Several thousand miles of ocean in two directions insulate us and most of the residents of one of our immediate neighbors, Canada, speak English, too.

Therefore, my father was at a great disadvantage as an immigrant. Furthermore, he dressed differently (he wore a hat all the years I knew him), carried himself differently, and, following his traumatic experiences, surely thought differently from his new countrymen. (Do you remember Latka from the situation comedy, *Taxi*? That's the idea!) It takes a generation for that image to disappear, but there is a significant impact on that generation.

My father met and married my mother, a native-born Polish citizen who arrived in the United States as a child in the late 1920s. They married in the late 1940s and I was born in late 1950. My sister was born several years later. He gave us American names in addition to our traditional Hebrew names. He spoke Yiddish all the time and conversed with our mother in Polish, when we weren't supposed to know what was being said. (This strategy should be familiar to many ethnic children.)

Today, I sorely regret that I did not maintain my cultural heritage by learning to speak fluently in Yiddish or at all in Polish. When they spoke to me in Yiddish, I responded in English. I was embarrassed by that non-American language and would not speak it. My father's halting, graceless English embarrassed me. Today, when I

attempt to converse in Yiddish, my speech is also halting and graceless. It is so reminiscent of his vain attempts at speaking American English. I sorely regret making sport of his English mispronunciations and mislocutions. Thus, this experience has sensitized me to multicultural education and the importance of maintaining one's cultural identity.

Hubert Humphrey once said: "Fortunately, the time has long passed when people liked to regard the United States as some kind of melting pot, taking men and women from every part of the world and converting them into standardized, homogenized Americans." Just as we welcome a world of diversity, so we glory in an America of diversity—an America all the richer for the many different and distinctive strands of which it is woven.

## The Holocaust, Stress, Optimism, and Me

Do you remember the Charles Atlas ads? Do you remember the 98-pound weakling who had sand kicked in his face? Do you remember Don Knotts from the *Steve Allen Show*? Do you remember how he said, "Nooooope." Or perhaps you recall Steve Urkel from *Family Matters*. Well, that was me as a boy.

I was skinny, quiet, nervous, and withdrawn. I was about as far from successful as you may imagine and was utterly lacking in confidence. My "best friend," Neal, used to beat me up on a regular basis. All of this contributed to increasing levels of stress that made my life utter misery.

At this juncture in my life, I realize that uncontrolled stress was a major factor that prevented me from achieving my potential early in life. It was only after I was able to control the ill effects of stress that I began to make progress physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. I also realized, albeit fairly recently, the source of most of my stress.

I grew up in a household in which I was barraged with my father's memories of the Holocaust and the death and suffering that surrounded him. Thoughts of desperation and stories of death filled my childhood and made me timid and fearful when confronted with stress-producing situations. Clearly, this atmosphere was a major source of enervating stress.

My father, peace be upon him, was a survivor of the Mauthausen concentration camp, which was located in Austria. He was held captive there during the shameful period known as the Holocaust. I am his

only son. Throughout my formative years, I witnessed the tortured moments he spent attempting to put aside the memories of his horrific experiences. This took place on a daily basis.

Consequently, my childhood was fraught with tension and stress. One of the more obvious ill-effects that my father exhibited as a result of his four years in concentration camps and seeing his family and friends perish was an increased state of nervousness and anxiety, even over seemingly trivial matters. This negative behavior manifested itself in several ways and had an adverse effect on my emotional and psychological well-being during my early childhood.

I also recall how anxiety-ridden my father would become if my sister or I didn't finish our dinner. The very thought that food was being wasted and discarded tortured him. Today, I can understand why he felt that way. In those days, he was annoying me. Therefore, I hated it when he cooked for us. My father made it a point to see that we cleaned our plates. Once (well, maybe more than once), I dropped a good part of the meal out our third floor Bronx apartment window when he was looking the other way. The well-fed neighborhood cats looked upon me as a benefactor. Sadly, we did not own a pet dog. Otherwise, Rover or Spot would have been one of my primary beneficiaries.

I vividly recall being left home alone one Sunday afternoon while my parents attended a wedding. My father had previously warned me, "*Macht nischt oif des shif ladel.*" (Roughly translated from Yiddish, "Don't open the top drawer of the armoire").

Although I had previously heeded such admonitions, this opportunity was too tempting for this 14-year-old to ignore. Searching under pairs of socks for a secret treasure trove, I found a large brown manila envelope bursting at the seams. I poured the contents of the envelope on the bed and was astonished, as I gazed at pictures too horrific to describe. Aside from photos of emaciated, emasculated corpses, I saw photographs of a wraith that I barely recognized as my own father. He was only faintly recognizable given his gaunt, almost ghastly appearance. After gazing at these photographs for nearly half an hour, I hurriedly placed them back in the envelope and in the drawer beneath the socks.

"What were these pictures all about?" I wondered. I never mentioned a word to anyone.

My father's early life before the war was happy and relatively peaceful. Aside from the commonplace anti-Semitic comments he occasionally overheard, my father

said "Life was *gut* (good)." All that changed dramatically on September 1, 1939. Poland was invaded and, within a few weeks, havoc prevailed. His family and hometown were surrounded and *Einatzgruppen* (Special Action Groups or mobile killing squads) began their nefarious mission to murder hundreds of townspeople. A ghetto was soon established in Tarnow. Schooling ceased, all play with friends ceased.

Life was not beautiful. Death was everywhere. Survival was paramount.

My father's existence in the camps was precarious. For a young man, the primary lesson to be learned was that life can change for the worse at a moment's notice.

This was a lesson I learned growing up in my household in America. Without intent to do so, my father communicated that life may seem fine now. But, watch out! Calamity and desolation, not prosperity, are just around the corner.

Eliasz David Glanz was not an optimist. Neither was his son, Jeffrey.

Each time a test was scheduled, this thought entered my mind: "I'll fail that test."

Each time that life was good, I thought: "I'm happy now, but wait..."

My *weltenschaung*, my expectations, all mirrored those of my father. I was filled with a sense of vulnerability and the precarious nature of life. I believed that the world is not stable and that goodness is short-lived. It took me 30 years to overcome this sense of foreboding, to become optimist. Okay, to be honest, I became an optimistic utopian. That means an optimist who believes that all will be well—in the long run.

## Tears

My father was an emotional man. He would cry at a drop of a handkerchief. I don't mean to say that he was sentimental. He did not cry at weddings or during sad movies.

He did not sleep well. He would be awakened in the middle of the night by nightmares. He would moan, groan, and cry. I overheard these sounds of torment and wondered.... I must have internalized his reactions to his ghastly visitations. I did not realize the reason for his suffering, but must assuredly suffered with him.

Today, I am easily brought to tears by another's suffering. I cry easily. I feel for the weak and downtrodden. I am moved by an individual's tragedy.

## Hatred

My father denounced hatred of all kinds. Clearly, he had his reasons.

Once he and I were traveling on the Staten Island Ferry. A Hispanic family was seated across from us. They were poorly dressed and had difficulty with the English language, a situation that was all too familiar to me, but with a different flavor. Several young, rowdy Aryan hoodlums were mocking them. My father gazed furiously at these ruffians. I observed the look and the response it elicited. These obnoxious boys timidly responded by walking away while muttering "dirty Jew bastards."

My father later told me never to hate others for how they speak or look—only judge people by their actions, no matter who they are or what they look like. An invaluable lesson I carry with me to this very day.

I have no tolerance either for ethnic humor of any sort. I don't mind a good joke, but humor at the expense of others offends me. Call me sensitive, I have reason to be.

## Conclusion

In my early years, I was a boy who lacked self-confidence. I was frail and ner-

vous. It wasn't until I began to study the martial and healing arts, Tai Chi, in particular, that I was able to gain control over my problems. I learned to relax and to significantly reduce the ill effects of stress. This made me a more productive human being, not to mention a happier and healthier one.

I lead a normal life, but lurking in the background...

Several years ago, my father died peacefully in his own bed in his sleep on Yom Kippur (the holiest day of the Jewish year).<sup>4</sup> He used to say, "I suffered enough for a generation..."

He didn't leave much money, but left much for me to ponder upon for the rest of my own life. While life may not always be beautiful, we must live it as best we can. His resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity, his belief in kindness towards others despite their otherness, and his pressing the importance of education as a means to an end and as an end in and of itself are uplifting and inspirational to me.

I asked him for an oral history what turned out to be two years before his demise. I wanted to know why and how he was able to maintain his religious faith after the Holocaust.

He responded: "If I wouldn't, then Hitler and the Nazis would have really won."

Life may not always be beautiful, but

the strength and endurance of the human spirit is a "thing of beauty and a joy forever..."

## Notes

1. I am aware that his father, Luigi Benigni, while looking for a job in Albania, was captured and imprisoned in a German labor camp. However, internment in a labor camp, although an unfortunate and deplorable experience, was qualitatively different than the experiences of Jews who were singled out for total annihilation as a matter of state and national policy. Attempts to minimize and de Judaize the Holocaust are regrettable.
2. A detailed critique of this film is not my intent in this article. Many other more qualified journalists have already lambasted the film's inaccuracies and misrepresentations.
3. See "My Holocaust Journey," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81(7): 523-528.
4. Jewish tradition states that only righteous individuals pass on on that day. I can not verify that my father was righteous. I can say he was an honest, kind, and good man.

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## Global Fellowship at UDC: International Dialogues

The Second International Conference sponsored by the University of the District of Columbia's (UDC) Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Languages and Culture in the African Diaspora (CISLAD) successfully drew over 400 participants to the campus to engage in its panoramic scope of multicultural programs, paper presentations, panels, and keynote speeches during the days of October 7-9, 1999.

At the pre-conference "Ambassadors' Speak-Out" on October 6, invited ambassadors from Ghana, Ethiopia, Liberia, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, and the Philippines discussed "Economic and Cultural Survival Strategies for the New Millennium." This conference component was organized by Dr. Sarah Moten, Director of International Affairs at UDC.

These cross-cultural events provided continuity to the first such conference, which was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in the District in May of 1997. These forums have served as networking opportunities for edu-

cators and academic researchers, across diverse disciplines, to exchange their research, visions, and interests related to the global or worldwide reality and impact of various cultural expressions (linguistics, education, literature, health, economic development, media and information technology, etc.) with African roots.

Scholars from nearly 20 foreign nations representing nearly 30 universities and colleges, nationally and internationally, participated in over 61 concurrent presentations. UDC faculty were represented as presenters and session leaders on 15 of these occasions.

Keynote speakers included: William R. Ford, President, U.S. African Development Foundation; Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-IL), an African affairs activist in the U.S. Congress; Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, African studies pioneer; Dr. Frances C. Welsing, international lecturer and theoretician on white racism; Dr. Ronald W. Walters, founder of TransAfrica; and Melvin Foote,

Executive Director of the Constituency for Africa.

Dr. Julius Nimmons, President of UDC, spoke on the significance and international character of the University, and Dr. Ernest R. Myers, Co-Chair of the Conference and Professor in the UDC Department of Psychology and Counseling offered brief remarks noting that the Conference was in particular a "forum for scholarly, global fellowship."

The Conference was planned and coordinated by Dr. Shirley Jackson, Conference Director, with Myers and Gail Dixon as Conference Co-Chairs, working with 15 other faculty and staff from UDC. Another international conference sponsored by CISLAD is projected for the year 2001. Videotapes of the plenary sessions of the 1999 Conference are available from CISLAD, University of the District of Columbia, 4200 Connecticut Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

—Ernest R. Myers