

‘I never understood what they experienced’

Keeping memory alive

Holocaust survivor grandkids wrestle with their legacy

BY JORDAN LITE
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GROWING UP, Dan Brooks never attached the weight of the word “legacy” to the stories his grandparents told him about their escape from the Nazis.

But as Holocaust survivors live out their last days, attention is increasingly focused on their grandchildren, who will be the last living link to their stories.

Dubbed the “third generation,” some of these young Jews are shaking off the survivor identity they were once assumed to have inherited. But they continue to absorb its emotional pull.

“I’ve been introduced as a third-generation survivor and I’ll cringe,” said Brooks, 28. “‘Legacy’ is a very loaded word.”

Though early research suggested survivors’ descendants also experienced Holocaust trauma, psychologists have moved away from characterizing grandkids the way they did their parents.

Paul Lantos once mimicked his parents’ approach to the Holocaust: He shunned books and movies about the subject, believing they would be too painful to absorb. He hated hearing German spoken and wouldn’t consider buying a Volkswagen.

But by the time he got to college, he sensed he was removed enough from his grandparents’ horrors to no longer feel like a victim himself.

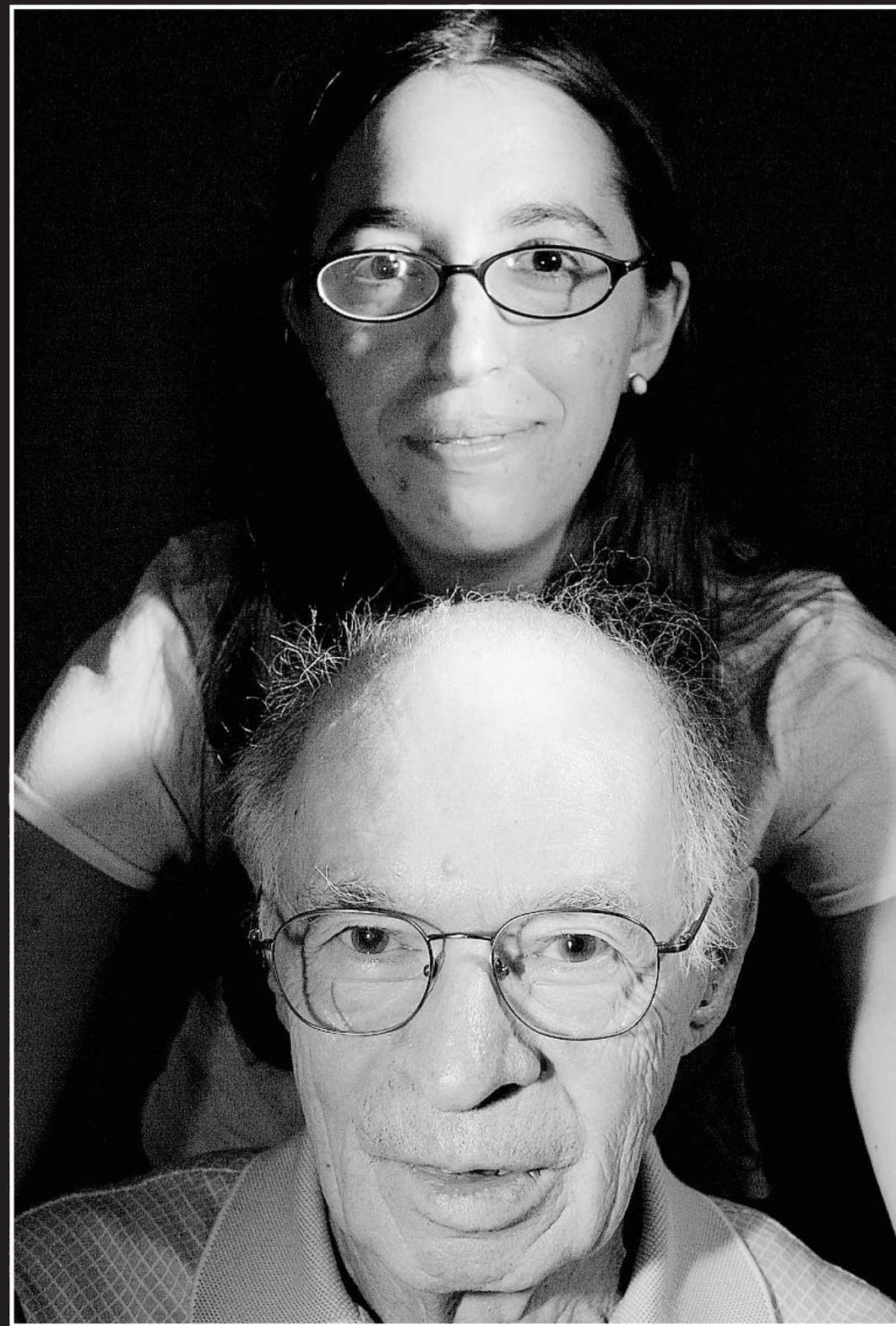
“I took a lot of ownership of the pain I saw in my grandparents. My perspective has changed a little bit. I know full well I am not a survivor,” said Lantos, 31.

A group Brooks founded last year, 3GNY, grew out of his own feeling of alienation from the second generation, who he said were focused on working through their relationships with their survivor parents.

Brooks and the 400 members of his group want to preserve their families’ stories, educate children who might not know survivors, and in some cases, connect to a history that may feel unfamiliar, despite being a Holocaust descendant.

Still, consciously or not, they mourn their grandparents’ suffering, and “one way they find meaning is to connect” to the Holocaust, said New York psychologist Eva Fogelman.

A protest against the genocide in Sudan last month turned out a strong contingent of Holocaust survivors’ grandchildren who felt a visceral pull toward the tragedy.



KEN GOLDFIELD

Werner Greenbaum's searing memories of the Holocaust live on in his granddaughter Ariel.

They also are twice as likely to enter medical and social service professions as American Jews whose grandparents did not experience the Holocaust, Fogelman said.

Lantos, who conducts medical research in poor countries,

said he is motivated by the tales his grandfather told him during childhood walks, when the older man would recall being tortured in slave-labor camps and stealing potatoes to survive.

“I feel like my obligation is

to be humanitarian,” said Lantos, who lives in Brookline, Mass.

That the third generation sees their grandparents not as victims, but as heroes to emulate sometimes leads to clashes with their own parents, said

Julia Chaitin, who has studied three generations of survivor families.

Caroline Weinberg, 23, doesn’t remember exactly when she was told her grandmother, Sala Garncarz, survived a series of Nazi labor camps. Yet Weinberg read Holocaust literature obsessively as a girl and sobbed through a diary Garncarz kept in the camps, imagining herself in her grandmother’s shoes.

The depth of their connection crystallized when Weinberg’s mother, Ann Kirschner, told her that letters Garncarz had hidden during her years in the camps would be exhibited at the New York Public Library last spring.

For Kirschner, who had starved most of her life for any details of Garncarz’s imprisonment, the letters were “historical,” Weinberg said. But she saw them as “personal documents” and felt protective about sharing them.

“It really became a family to-do,” she said, adding that she and her mother eventually agreed the letters should be donated.

The third generation’s bond with their grandparents is ultimately the completion of long healing and understanding process for families.

When Werner Greenbaum, now 84, and his wife were raising their children, the memory of the Holocaust was fresh.

“You didn’t like to talk about it,” said Greenbaum of Fresh Meadows, Queens, who fled Germany after the Gestapo burned down a Frankfurt synagogue and secret police forced him to clean up their destruction of the Rothschild Museum on Kristallnacht.

Like many survivors, Greenbaum had felt comfortable only speaking English to his children. Yet he was delighted when his grandchildren, Arielle, 23, and her brother, David, 27, both learned German.

It also was at Arielle and David’s urging that all three generations traveled to the survivors’ birthplace in Germany.

“I never understood what they experienced until my children nudged them,” said Greenbaum’s daughter, Judy Cahill.

In their storytelling, it was as if her grandparents were exhaling, Arielle said.

“That was a defining moment for me. I felt like, wow, almost like I’ve come full circle,” she said. “They were helping document what happened to them. They were passing it on.”

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