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Article

# **Between Silence and Storytelling: Intergenerational Transmission of Holocaust Trauma and Identity through Family Education**

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates how traumatic memory, identity, and prejudice are transmitted from one generation to the next by Holocaust survivors in the process of family education. On one hand, the issue of intergenerational transmission of traumatic experiences has been mainly studied in relation to the psychological and biological processes of inheritance by modern scholars, and on the other hand, by concentrating on the micro-process of education within the framework of the family and focusing on the roles of the emotional mechanism and narrative approaches in the process of transmission, this paper presents an in-depth exploration of survivor stories, memoir narratives, and theoretical frameworks, specifically Hirsch's "Post Memory" and "Redemptive Self" by Adaperson, in order to clarify how and in what way the process of "emotional containment, silence, and fragmentation" stands as a unique and specific form of the "Implicit Educational Mechanism" and how and in what way it significantly impacts the descendants' cognition of identity and historical knowledge in relation to the reconstruction of the identities and the construction of intergenerational education in the framework of both "family narratives and cultural narratives in the form of films and other memorial education activities and related phenomena." This paper presents specific guidance for contemporary "Trauma Education and Prejudice Education."

**Keywords:** Holocaust; family education; traumatic memory; emotional containment; postmemory; identity formation; intergenerational transmission

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### **1. Introduction**

The Holocaust of the twentieth century represents an extreme historical trauma in modern world history, resulting in the deaths of millions of Jewish people and exerting a lasting influence on Jewish spiritual life and cultural heritage. This historical catastrophe has extended beyond its original temporal and spatial context, continuing to shape the psychological experiences of subsequent generations. Within the family memories of survivors and their descendants, trauma has not remained confined to individual physical or psychological injury; rather, it has been reconstructed, narrated, and reproduced through everyday family interactions, educational practices, and broader cultural discourses. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding how second- and third-generation descendants-despite not having directly experienced the historical trauma-may nonetheless inherit and internalize their ancestors' experiences at psychological and cultural levels. Through mediated

memories, images, stories, and affective atmospheres, traumatic history becomes embedded in the consciousness of later generations, forming a distinctive mode of intergenerational remembrance.

In recent years, "intergenerational transmission of trauma" has gradually become an important topic of academic inquiry. However, much of the existing scholarship has tended to focus narrowly on pathological analyses at the individual psychological level, examining issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [1]. While such studies have contributed significantly to understanding the long-term impact of traumatic events on mental health, they often pay insufficient attention to the subtle yet powerful roles played by family education, emotional communication, and daily interaction in shaping intergenerational experiences of trauma. The family, as a fundamental unit of cultural continuity and emotional exchange, functions not only as a conduit for the transmission of memory but also as a site of implicit "trauma education." Within many survivor families, emotional expression, silence, and selective narration form particular communicative patterns. Descendants frequently absorb distinctive emotional logics, moral orientations, and historical identifications through these patterned interactions, especially when shaped by tacit taboos, indirect references, or restrained verbal expressions concerning the past. Empirical research indicates that the quality of family communication significantly influences descendants' identity formation and psychological well-being: open and supportive dialogue may alleviate feelings of historical loss, whereas repression or avoidance can contribute to emotional distance, uncertainty, and inner tension.

More recently, scholarly attention has expanded to explore how "family narrative mechanisms" and related forms of "cultural memory" influence identity construction and moral consciousness among descendants. Studies suggest that descendants of survivors do not merely inherit fear or pain through family narratives; rather, they actively reinterpret and reconstruct family memory. Traumatic experiences may be emotionally recoded through warmth, humor, resilience, and everyday affection, thereby transforming singular traumatic memory into diversified forms of family memory [2]. In this process, descendants often experience both psychological complexity and emotional depth as they engage with family history. The effort to understand and situate oneself within that history can lead to the formation of a reflexive identity shaped by perceived intergenerational responsibility and cultural continuity [3]. These findings indicate that traumatic experience is not transmitted mechanically; instead, it is regenerated, reshaped, and symbolically rearticulated through narrative practices, shared rituals, and cultural symbols within the family context.

Building upon these perspectives, this paper argues that a comprehensive understanding of how historical trauma participates in the long-term construction of Jewish identity requires analysis from three interrelated dimensions: emotional education, family narratives, and cultural memory. Emotional education refers to the implicit and explicit ways in which emotional responses, coping strategies, and value orientations are transmitted within the family. Family narratives encompass both spoken stories and meaningful silences, as well as the narrative structures through which history is framed and interpreted. Cultural memory involves the broader symbolic systems—texts, commemorative practices, artistic representations, and communal traditions—through which collective remembrance is maintained and re-signified over time. By examining the dynamic interplay among these three dimensions, it becomes possible to understand how historical trauma is integrated into everyday life and identity formation across generations.

Furthermore, through a cross-analysis of the processes of "emotional encapsulation" and "postmemory," this study proposes that trauma should be understood not only as a multidimensional psychological phenomenon but also as a continuing cultural practice. Trauma is internalized, reorganized, and reconstructed through educational interaction, narrative mediation, and symbolic representation. In this sense, the legacy of historical

suffering is neither static nor exclusively pathological; rather, it becomes part of an evolving cultural framework that shapes identity, ethical awareness, and collective self-understanding over time.

## 2. Research Framework

In response to the limitations identified in existing scholarship, the present study positions "family education" as the central analytical lens for examining the intergenerational transmission of trauma associated with the Holocaust. By foregrounding family education as an interpretive framework, this research seeks to move beyond the dominant paradigms of conventional psychology and biological determinism that have largely defined discussions of traumatic legacy. Previous studies have extensively investigated the psychological states and anxiety levels of descendants of survivors, often emphasizing clinical indicators and measurable symptoms [4]. Some research has further proposed possible biological transmission mechanisms, including epigenetic explanations such as alterations in the transcription of genes related to stress response after wartime experiences [5]. While these approaches have enriched understanding of trauma at the physiological and pathological levels, they primarily focus on individual manifestations of distress. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the constructive and relational dimensions of family interaction, particularly the ways in which educational practices, value transmission, and emotional guidance within the family contribute to the reshaping and reinterpretation of traumatic memory across generations. The present study therefore aims to situate trauma within the broader context of family-based cultural and emotional education, emphasizing not only its burdens but also its transformative potential.

More specifically, a synthesis of the relevant literature indicates that this research integrates three interconnected strands of inquiry. First, drawing upon emotion theory, it engages the concept of "emotional encapsulation" to analyze how survivors establish narrative boundaries regarding "what may be told" and "what must remain unspoken." Through selective repression, moderated disclosure, and the controlled expression of intense emotions, survivors often shape the affective atmosphere within the family, thereby structuring the communicative framework through which historical experience is transmitted [6]. Such encapsulation does not simply silence the past; rather, it creates a patterned emotional environment in which memory circulates indirectly, influencing descendants through tone, gesture, hesitation, and symbolic reference.

Second, the study adopts the theoretical perspective of "postmemory" to examine how later generations reconstruct their understanding of the past and negotiate their sense of belonging. Within the family setting, memory is not conveyed solely through explicit narration; it is also embedded in silence, photographs, domestic spaces, rituals, and everyday practices [7]. Descendants frequently engage in imaginative reconstruction, piecing together fragments of stories, visual materials, and emotional cues to form a mediated relationship with events they did not personally experience. In this process, identity formation becomes intertwined with inherited memory, as individuals position themselves within a transgenerational narrative that connects private family history with broader cultural remembrance.

Third, the study incorporates insights from the sociology of education to conceptualize family education as an informal yet continuous process of cultural transmission. Unlike formal schooling, family education operates through habitual interaction, implicit norms, and shared value systems. It conveys historical consciousness, ethical orientations, and emotional dispositions through daily practices, commemorative activities, and intergenerational dialogue [8]. By viewing the family as an educational space, the study highlights how cultural memory is internalized not only cognitively but also affectively, shaping descendants' moral awareness and collective identification over time.

Regarding material selection, the research draws upon three categories of textual sources to ensure analytical breadth and depth. The first category consists of survivor narratives, including both oral testimonies and literary accounts, such as personal recollections describing experiences in wartime detention camps [9,10]. These texts provide insight into firsthand memory, narrative strategies, and the emotional vocabularies employed by survivors when recounting extreme circumstances. The second category includes literary and autobiographical works produced by the next generation born into survivor families. Such texts offer valuable perspectives on psychological development, family interaction patterns, and the complex processes through which descendants come to understand inherited history [11]. Through these narratives, it becomes possible to observe how traumatic memory is refracted, reinterpreted, and integrated into personal life stories. The third category comprises influential theoretical writings related to memory, identity, and narrative structure, including works that elaborate on concepts such as postmemory and the "redemptive self." These theoretical sources provide the conceptual tools necessary to situate empirical observations within a broader interdisciplinary framework.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative analytical approach. Close textual reading is conducted to identify key vocabulary, recurring metaphors, narrative structures, and emotional expressions within the selected materials. Particular attention is paid to shifts in tone, patterns of silence, and strategies of representation that reveal how memory is framed and emotionally encoded. At the same time, the analysis situates these texts within their respective historical and cultural contexts in order to avoid decontextualized interpretation [12]. By integrating perspectives from psychology, memory studies, and the sociology of education, the research constructs a multidimensional analytical framework that interweaves culture, education, and emotion. Through this integrative approach, the study seeks to offer a holistic understanding of how the memory of the Holocaust is transmitted within families, how it evolves through narrative and educational practice, and how it ultimately shapes descendants' identity formation and ethical consciousness across generations.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

#### 3.1. Emotional Encapsulation and Coping Mechanisms

"Emotional encapsulation," a product resulting from extreme survival conditions, is one of the fundamental ways in which Holocaust survivors coped with a disaster situation. In his memoir, Walter Frank remembers:

"Closing off his heart" was the way in which he maintained a certain level of mental balance in the camp ("you get even used to that"). In other words, Frank was attempting to repress fear and despair and thus render himself capable of dealing with the daily brutality and starvation with a certain routine-like detachment: a rather deliberate process of emotional numbing in response to an atmosphere full of death.

Frank's testimony also establishes another technique in maintaining hope: his love affair with a Polish Jewish woman in the concentration camp served as his spiritual lifeline in "holding on to life." This "emotional investment" does not negate "emotional encapsulation" but rather explains the complexity of trauma survival: in controlling their emotions, people actively design meaning structures that are basically future-directed. In the context of post-war family education, his survival experience was translated into implicit values like "pragmatic adaptation," "emotional repression," and "finding spiritual solace" that are interpreted by his descendants in non-verbal ways.

The case of Joseph Mandrowitz is a different story. Again, his memories convey his inability to escape from the torture of memories of the concentration camps, car horns giving him terror, and night dreams replete with visions of German soldiers chasing him. He failed to achieve a strong emotional encapsulation, his memories of the trauma coming back to him consistently and severely, reflected in strong PTSD. More importantly, within

his family, instead of consolidating memories into an "educational" form, he impacted his offspring in a "disorganized" manner, reflected in his descendants' "undue alertness to the outside world, increased sensitivity to his descendants' emotions, and, in some instances, the induction of 'intergenerational trauma.'"

By comparing these two cases, it has been shown that the difference in trauma processing strategies affects family educational patterns and the descendants' emotional cognitive structures directly. Emotional encapsulation not only has the nature of a psychological response but also has the nature of an intergenerationally extensible foundation for educational language.

### *3.2. Silence and Fragmented Narration: Implicit Educational Mechanisms of Family Memory*

Although some survivors were willing to recount their experiences during the Holocaust in a relatively direct manner, many others chose silence, avoidance, or highly selective storytelling as their primary mode of response. Such "family silence" should not be understood merely as an individual coping strategy; rather, it functions as a distinctive communicative pattern within the family. On the one hand, silence serves as a protective mechanism for those who have endured extreme suffering, helping them regulate overwhelming memories and emotions. On the other hand, silence itself becomes a subtle form of "educational language," through which history, anxiety, and identity-related tensions are indirectly conveyed to the next generation. In this sense, ambiguity, emotional restraint, and what remains unspoken can shape children's perception of the past as powerfully as explicit narration.

In the autobiographical work *The Choice*, Edith Eger reflects on her decision to remain silent about certain painful experiences in order to protect her daughter from bearing the emotional burden she herself carried. She writes that she "chose silence" as an act of shielding, while also acknowledging that there are moments when language appears insufficient to express what has been lived. This form of silence emerges partly from love and care, and partly from the recognition that some experiences resist verbal articulation. However, "not speaking" does not mean that the past disappears. Instead, it creates a particular emotional atmosphere within the family. Children may sense the presence of hidden narratives through pauses, changes in tone, or sudden emotional reactions. As a result, they often develop a diffuse yet persistent awareness that something significant remains unarticulated. This awareness may generate a mixture of curiosity, uncertainty, and subtle anxiety about "the past," which in turn stimulates self-reflection and a desire for understanding.

From the perspective of postmemory theory, inherited memory is not a simple act of direct recollection but a secondary process of imaginative reconstruction. The second generation does not passively receive a complete narrative; rather, they actively assemble fragments—images, gestures, anecdotes, photographs, and silences—into meaningful patterns. In families where communication is fragmented, descendants may engage in interpretive work, filling narrative gaps through reading, questioning, and reflective dialogue. This process extends beyond psychological adjustment and acquires broader cultural significance. It becomes an informal educational practice in which children gradually construct historical understanding through inquiry and mediated representation. Silence, therefore, paradoxically encourages intellectual engagement. The absence of explicit explanation often motivates deeper exploration, prompting descendants to seek contextual knowledge in books, community memory, and broader cultural discourse.

At the same time, prolonged silence or highly selective storytelling may also produce what can be described as "identity anxiety" in the next generation. When historical memory is not transmitted in an organized and coherent manner, descendants may struggle to integrate elements of ethnicity, belief, and moral orientation into a stable narrative of self. Without a clear articulation of family history, questions such as "who we

are" and "where we come from" may remain unresolved, leading to feelings of fragmentation or uncertainty. In families that experienced displacement due to wartime upheaval, these challenges can become particularly pronounced. Migration, adaptation to new environments, and the necessity of rebuilding life under unfamiliar conditions may intensify the difficulty of sustaining cultural continuity. In such contexts, silence can contribute to a heightened sensitivity regarding identity boundaries and group belonging. While this sensitivity may foster resilience and cohesion, it can also generate defensive attitudes shaped by perceived vulnerability.

Therefore, silence and fragmented narration should be understood as complex educational mechanisms operating within family memory. They simultaneously protect and obscure, transmit and withhold. Through these mechanisms, descendants learn not only historical facts but also emotional codes—when to speak, when to refrain, how to interpret hesitation, and how to respond to inherited vulnerability. The educational function of silence lies precisely in its ambiguity: it invites interpretation, stimulates inquiry, and shapes identity through indirect means. By examining these implicit communicative practices, one can better understand how traumatic memory continues to influence identity formation across generations, not solely through explicit instruction but through the nuanced dynamics of everyday family life.

### *3.3. Public Culture and Family Education: Reconstruction of Postmemory via Different Channels*

In post-war Jewish families, family histories are not strictly a comprehensive source for memory. Over time, there is a gradual intervention on the part of public culture: films, television programs, education in schools, museums, commemorative ceremonies, which eventually become a significant channel for children to cognize history and rebuild identities. Public stories not only impinge upon receiving family histories but also generate a "reciprocal educational mechanism" with respect to silence and memory within families.

This process can be seen, for example, in the cinematic version of "the Holocaust" in the motion picture "Schindler's List," creating "the Holocaust" as a historical event that carries the narrative filigree of "survival-rebirth-assuming memorial responsibility." The "redemptive narrative" within the realm of public culture, as outlined by Dan McAdams, has given way, in turn, to the "redemptive self" found within American culture, where individuals work to reconstruct life meaning via suffering. The second-generation survivor would certainly integrate parental silence and suffering into "survival-rebirth-assuming memorial responsibility."

It is especially important to note that the impact of public culture is not one-way in effect. What children bring to their families in response to Holocaust knowledge in school or social commemorative practice are often questions, and "inward inquiry" necessarily drives parents to recall, to tell, or to heighten avoidance. This reveals that the field of family education is not closed but rather an open field in dynamic interaction with external structures of memory in public culture.

"Family silence" becomes "public retelling" and then "family dialogue" in a socialized educational journey through traumatic memory. The transmission of history and the formation of identity through family education is exactly the repetitive movement between "family and society" in which the cultural identification and prejudice defense mechanisms are established for generations of Jewish descendants.

## **4. Conclusion**

The Holocaust is one of the most extreme cases of group trauma in history, extending beyond the painful memories of Holocaust survivors to establish a continuous educational mechanism within families. From the concept of "family education," this paper will demonstrate that, in the process of intergenerational trauma transmission,

silence and cultural narrative do not remain passive but instead develop a complex educational mechanism that significantly influences the formation of identity and prejudice perceptions in the next generation.

By examining the methods of "emotional encapsulation" devised and utilized in extremely difficult conditions by those affected, it becomes clear that these psychological processes not only provide an emotional safeguard for survival but evolve into a composed and pragmatic model of a family teaching language. The differing cases of Walter Frank and Joseph Mandrowitz illustrate how different methods of trauma recovery correlate closely with different models of a family teaching system, and varying degrees of their descendants' emotional structures and their capacity for emotional expression.

The universality of the phenomenon of silence and the fragmented form of storytelling in the family not only symbolizes the survivors' defiance of difficult memories but also allows for the descendants to occupy the terrain of imagination to recreate history. Indeed, the concept of "postmemory" theory reveals that the descendants, without personal experience of the trauma and pain of the previous generation, are able to contribute to the "construction of historical memory" not only through environmental atmosphere and symbolic materials but through the form of the fragmented narrative itself. The phenomenon of identity anxiety and the exploration of morality and the responsibility to culture that often ensues becomes a "hidden curriculum" in the education system of the family. Indeed, the case of Edith Eger illustrates that silence itself becomes an educational phenomenon that generates a conflict between shielding and hiding that pushes the descendants to delve deeply into the history of the family. The presence of public culture has led to a feedback effect on the family educational process. Films, television works, and collective ceremonies serve as knowledge and emotional resources for descendants, allowing them to make sense out of historical experience and construct narratives about personal identity. This "outside-to-inside" influence of culture leads to dialogue and re-narrative in the family, causing the family memory to be constantly rebuilt through social interactions and educational processes. The "redemptive self" paradigm within public narratives has given descendants a cultural blueprint for interpreting and connecting family tragedies, promoting the productive exchange between family education and social education.

To conclude, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory is far more than a psychological or physiological process; in effect, it is some family ritual rich with cultural and educational meaning. "The educational languages of Holocaust families-silence, emotional encapsulation, or re-narrative-are essential to the process of resistant forgetting and the transmission of identity as a means of understanding prejudice." This comprehension of the process helps us further understand the "historical trauma" process and achieve theoretical reference and insights concerning prejudice education and trauma education.

The study's limitation lies in its focus on textual analysis. Future studies could delve deeper into the variety of these family educational mechanisms or the transformation process of memories through generations, which might include the third or fourth generations, in gaining more insight into the continuity mechanism of family memories. Another area could involve comparative studies, which may cover family educational patterns among various groups, such as war or genocide victims.

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