The Holocaust's Grandchildren Are Speaking Now

Three generations on, filmmakers, writers and artists are making new meaning from ancestral trauma.

Photo illustration by Ben Denzer

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By Marc Tracy

Published Oct. 20, 2024 Updated Oct. 21, 2024

Toward the end of “A Real Pain,” a movie written and directed by Jesse Eisenberg coming to theaters on Nov. 1, two first cousins played by Eisenberg and Kieran Culkin approach the house in a Polish town where their recently deceased grandmother had lived before the Holocaust.

Eisenberg’s character, David, the more reserved of the pair, proposes the two leave stones on the doorstep, riffing on the Jewish tradition of placing stones on graves.

“She’s not buried here,” says Culkin’s cousin, Benji.

“Yeah, I know, but it’s the last place she was in Poland,” says David. “It’s the last place any of us were.”

The improvised remembrance, the interruption of self-awareness, the confused sense of duty — all are characteristic of how American descendants of the Holocaust’s victims two generations removed today commemorate an event that, nearly 80 years after it ended, can feel like something that still governs their lives, not to mention the lives of Jews and everyone else.

This cohort is known as the third generation of Holocaust survivors, and “A Real Pain” is representative of their output. Which is to say: It is often not about the Holocaust at all. The cousins go together on an organized tour of Holocaust sites and memorials in Poland, but much of it — excepting a visit

to the Majdanek concentration camp — is lighthearted. David and Benji grieve mainly not for the Holocaust but for their grandmother, who survived it. They struggle with their own problems, including the dissipation of their relationship. They question why they are even there.



Jesse Eisenberg on the set of his new movie, “A Real Pain,” about the grandsons of a Holocaust survivor visiting Poland. Agata Grzybowska/Searchlight Pictures

Two relatives — a cousin a couple times removed who was a Holocaust survivor and an aunt who had left Poland in 1918 — inspired Eisenberg to tackle the topic. The aunt’s former house was used to film the fictional grandmother’s house.

“I’m telling the story of the third generation with all of its contradictions,” Eisenberg said in a recent interview, “with its distance, its privileged remove, its grotesque fascination, as well as all the reverence that should be applied.”

Works of art about the Holocaust by or about the third generation have been made ever since survivors’ grandchildren (or grandnephews and -nieces) were old enough to make them. The early years of this century saw important examples like Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel “Everything Is Illuminated” (2002) and Daniel Mendelsohn’s family history “The Lost” (2006).

But only more recently has the third generation definitively taken center stage. Its perspective now dominates writing and art about this seminal event of modern history. The last couple of years have witnessed a bumper crop of such works: theater (“Here There Are Blueberries,” “Prayer for the French Republic”), television (“Transparent,” “Russian Doll”), history (“Plunder,” “Come to This Court and Cry”), a striking number of graphic novels and memoirs.

The third-generation perspective on the Holocaust is carefully hedged, defiantly distanced, explicitly filtered, supremely self-aware. These stories fundamentally do not belong to the writers or artists, who are always reminding you and themselves of that fact.

“They know something is important to them and affected them and is their story, too,” said Amy Kurzweil, the author of two graphic memoirs that depict different grandparents’ Holocaust narratives. Last year’s “Artificial: A Love Story” embeds Kurzweil’s story within those of her grandfather, a

conductor who escaped Vienna in 1938, and her father, the futurist Ray Kurzweil, who built an artificial intelligence-enabled chatbot using his deceased father's written words.

"But they are aware of the things they didn't experience," Kurzweil added of her and her colleagues, "and they're almost hesitant to take ownership. That anxiety and humility is actually a good thing."

Above all, these works are virtually never satisfied with the straightforward story so familiar to decades of schoolchildren. In "Plunder" (2021), the writer Menachem Kaiser discovers that much of what he knew about his grandfather's property in Poland, which was lost in the Holocaust, is wrong. Joshua Harmon's play "Prayer for the French Republic," which had a Broadway run this year, refracts the story of French survivors and descendants through a naïve, interloping American cousin staying in Paris. "Never Again Will I Visit Auschwitz," Ari Richter's graphic memoir published this year, embeds his grandparents' stories of escape within his own of assimilation and privilege in the United States.



Joshua Harmon's play "Prayer for the French Republic," which ran on Broadway this year, told the story of an interloping American cousin visiting his French survivor relatives. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

In a 2013 Pew Research Center survey, 73 percent of American Jews said remembering the Holocaust was "essential to being Jewish" — more than said the same of "working for justice/equality" or "caring about Israel." But the shape Holocaust remembrance takes has never been more urgent. The youngest Holocaust survivors with any memory of the experience are pushing 90.

How the Holocaust will be remembered and its lessons applied — from Bosnia to Darfur to Ukraine to, many have argued, Israel and Gaza — is now up to this cadre, and going forward will be informed by its own "anxiety and humility," as Kurzweil put it.

Reflecting on his generation's continued fascination with the Holocaust, Eisenberg wondered whether it represented a search for meaning. "As our lives have become so comfortable, we are seeking a connection to something more grounded in the extremes of what humanity can do," he said. "Maybe we are in some ways taking comfort in connecting ourselves to something tragic because our current lives feel meaningless."

'We Own It'

The third-generation perspective's distinctiveness lies in how it rebels against the preceding canon: first- and second-generation Holocaust art.

The first generation — the survivors themselves as well as those trying to tell survivors' stories in the first couple of decades after the Holocaust — were, understandably, obsessed with transmitting the facts.

Elie Wiesel's "Night" and Primo Levi's "If This Is a Man" (also known as "Survival in Auschwitz") are books straightforwardly about their authors' experiences, and even Anne Frank intended that a version of her diary would function as a testimony. Film documentaries like Marcel Ophuls's "The Sorrow and the Pity" (1972) and Claude Lanzmann's "Shoah" (1985), which feature extensive interviews with firsthand witnesses and survivors, are finicky, even neurotic about remaining loyal to what occurred; Lanzmann, whose French Jewish family hid during the war, in his nine-hour opus abjures historical footage.

Several first-person books about the camps were deliberately artistic and even took occasional factual liberties, as studies such as Ruth Franklin's "A Thousand Darknesses" (2010) have shown. But they were intended above

all to be received as credible testaments. “It seems to me unnecessary to add,” concludes Levi’s preface to “If This Is a Man,” “that none of the facts are invented.”

The second generation — the children of survivors — wrestled with their ambivalent relationship to the event, which was proximate enough to affect them enormously (some even claimed they were themselves traumatized by it) but always just out of reach.

“If a chasm opened in the lives of the First Generation, they could nonetheless sigh on the far side and recall the life Before,” the novelist Melvin Jules Bukiet, the son of a survivor, wrote in 2001, “but for the Second Generation there is no Before. In the beginning was Auschwitz.”

“Maus,” Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning comic in two volumes (1986, 1991) about his parents’ nightmarish odyssey through the Holocaust, is also about how that experience indelibly shaped his parents and in turn shaped Spiegelman. In a brief section about his mother’s death by suicide in 1968, Spiegelman draws himself, a young man in 1960s America, wearing concentration-camp stripes.

In contrast, the third generation is far enough removed not to possess such intimate legacies. In place of the first generation’s unassailable credibility — a characteristic whose virtue is complimented by several famous fraudulent survivor narratives — and the second generation’s anguish is the third generation’s aloofness and modesty.

The third generation has also benefited from a wildly different information environment, owing to the delayed national fascination with the Holocaust — piqued by the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, magnified by the much-

watched 1978 NBC mini-series “Holocaust” and turbocharged in 1993 by “Schindler’s List” and the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington — technological advances and the end of the Cold War.



The 1978 mini-series “Holocaust” on NBC helped propel the genocide into Americans’ consciousness. NBC/Everett Collection

“There were no other books about us,” said Helen Epstein, a daughter of survivors and the author of the pathbreaking study of intergenerational trauma, “Children of the Holocaust” (1979). “Now, if you’re a 3G,” Epstein said, using a term for the third generation, “you have tons of Holocaust

memoirs, you have all these resources in the Holocaust museums, all the audio and video tapes, the Spielberg archive, the Yale archive. And Eastern Europe is now available, both online and in the flesh."

The passage of time has also granted a wider swath of writers and artists permission to plant their flag in the Holocaust, a right that had been guarded jealously by its witnesses and their children.

Where Bukiet argued in a 2001 book that the subject should be reserved for survivors and their descendants, like himself — "To be shabbily proprietary, we own it. Our parents owned it, and they gave it to us"— he recently recanted. "Now, instead of thinking nobody but us should write about it," he said in an interview, "I think everybody should write about it."

The Responsibility of Victimhood

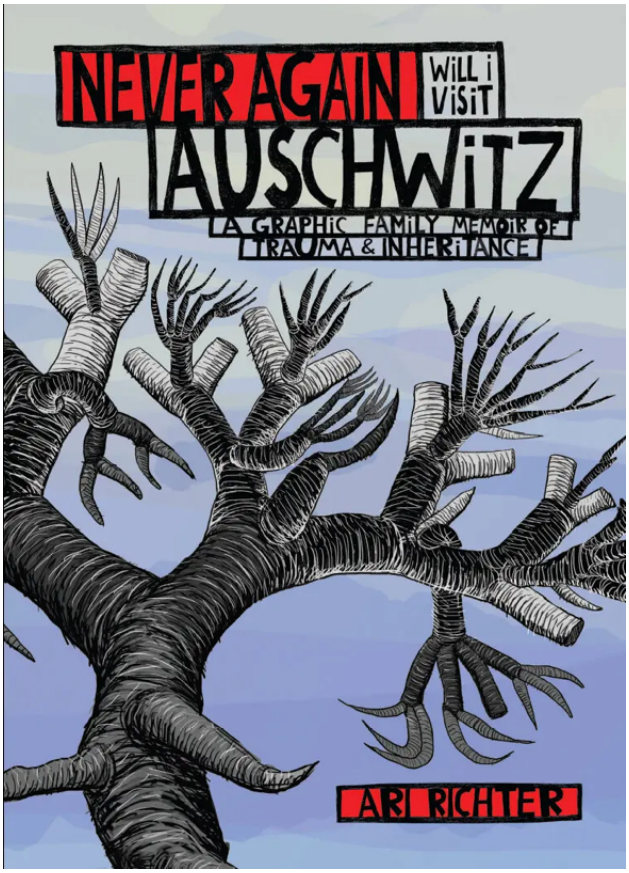
Third-generation Holocaust works span the funny and the sad, the faithful and the impious.

Often they are self-lacerating. The cousins in "A Real Pain" make jokes that are also not jokes about being on a train in Poland. Richter cracks wise about his family's gentrifying a traditionally Polish American neighborhood in New York, and then chastises himself for the wisecrack. The Amazon series "Transparent" — which features a quintessentially third-generation plotline in its second season — includes "Joyocaust," a campy musical number, in its series finale.

A related characteristic that distinguishes many third-generation works, said Josh Lambert a professor of Jewish studies at Wellesley College, is their contrast between Holocaust survivors' victimhood and their descendants' contemporary understanding of privilege. Solomon J.

Brager's graphic memoir "Heavyweight" (2024) contextualizes their German Jewish ancestors' luxurious life within European imperialism before World War I.

"If we're thinking politically, we should think about how they amassed wealth in 1910, 1920 Germany," Lambert said of Kaiser's "Plunder," in which a grandfather's stolen house turns out to have been originally an investment property. "That's a fascinating question to ask, and it's hard to ask about members of your own family, and it isn't what you see a lot in the second-generation memoir."





Ari Richter/Fantagraphics

Richter's "Never Again Will I Visit Auschwitz" reckons with the artist's relative comfort amid what he characterizes as the contemporary American right's hostility to immigrants. "We have to see this as something that affects all of us," Richter said in an interview. "This is not just about my family or the Jewish people."

The urge to draw a larger, invariably progressive, lesson from the Holocaust might produce the greatest lingering tension between this generation and previous ones.

The unease at many Jewish institutions around criticizing Israel's conduct in Gaza as a "genocide" (whatever the merit of the claim, about which there is disagreement) moats off the genocide of the Jews in a manner incongruent with the third generation's tendency toward universalism. "The word 'genocide' was created by Raphael Lemkin in relation to the Holocaust," Bukiet, the second-generation writer, said. "The popularization of the word in the last year is remarkable and repulsive."

And the earlier generations' view of Holocaust victimhood as a perpetual possession of survivors and their descendants — and, perhaps, of all Jews — can still be seen, for instance in ways Holocaust museums strive to make the disappeared past seem imminently accessible. Holograms of survivors, A.I.-enabled interactive exhibits and a touring re-creation of Anne Frank's "secret annex" communicate a jolting immediacy.

"The creation of an avatar of a survivor that lives on in perpetuity is part of the project of investing in an unending victim narrative, where we're always so close to the Holocaust that we constantly have to think we've just survived or are about to be once again in it," Brager said.

To be of the third generation, its members insist, is to have just the right proximity to the event — close enough to want to keep it in memory, not so

close to want it in the present tense; close enough to think it is a part of them, not so close to think it cannot have different meanings for others.

“The Holocaust is one of our most well-documented historical atrocities in the West, there’s a kind of obsession with it — but there’s something weird about being personally, in your family, connected to this history they make Hollywood movies about, because then you start to see your history as a Hollywood movie,” Kurzweil said.

“You don’t want to fall into self-mythologizing,” she added. “It’s a confusing inheritance.”

Source photograph for illustration above: Dmitrijs Mihejevs/Shutterstock.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Seeing the Holocaust From Further Away