

# A DROP-IN CENTRE FOR HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

## Inspiring Hope, Meaning, and Purpose

MYRA GIBEROVITCH

*Supervisor, Services for Holocaust Survivors and Their Families, Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors, Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

*A Drop-in Centre at the Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors, a community-based agency, addresses Holocaust survivors' needs for socialization with peers and fosters a sense of community and belonging. It also serves as an entry point for survivors who have had little or no previous contact with the Jewish community and integrates them into further involvement within the agency. Its holistic approach gives members a sense of autonomy and control as they learn new coping skills and wellness strategies to improve their quality of life. This article discusses the program's creation, evolution, and success in reaching out to Holocaust survivors.*

In recent years we have seen the proliferation of specialized services for Holocaust survivors in agencies across the world. Several reasons are responsible for this development. First, the majority of survivors are seniors, and they are showing up in our health and social service systems, some voluntarily and others involuntarily. Many survivors had been resistant to seek assistance; however, as they age, past vulnerabilities are emerging that require understanding and a compassionate community response. Second, the aging process poses particular challenges to Holocaust survivors. A core issue of aging is the many losses that accompany it. Life-event stresses, such as retirement; the death of a spouse, family members, and friends; loss of autonomy; illness; relocation to a new residence; and lack of financial security, can contribute to feelings of powerlessness and activate or exacerbate symptoms of post-traumatic stress in the form of intrusive recollections, sleep disturbances, and increased anxiety (Brodsky-Cohen, 1991; Danieli, 1994; Ehrlich, 1988; Giberovitch, 1992, 1995; Rosenbloom, 1983, 1985; Safford, 1995). In short, survivors' current losses are often reminders and triggers of their wartime experiences and accompanying feelings of grief, vulnerability, dependency, and helplessness. Such responses are most acute among the elder Ho-

locaust survivors who live alone (Torczyner & Brotman, 1994).

The developmental, cognitive, and psychological aspects of aging are also challenging. Many elderly Holocaust survivors are experiencing the cognitive and emotional re-living of their original trauma. Some knowledge of the developmental tasks of aging helps us understand the reasons why this is so. These tasks include reflecting upon and reexamining one's life, integrating past experiences, resolving psychic conflict, and attempting to find some peace of mind. Cognitively, short-term memory wanes and long-term memory becomes more pronounced, releasing repressed traumatic memories to consciousness. As protective defenses or coping mechanisms weaken, survivors are no longer able to ward off such symptoms as intrusive memories, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and depression. In short, the process of aging leads to an unrelenting focus on the past, often generating feelings of vulnerability.

The third reason we are seeing the development of services for survivors is because the societal taboo about the Holocaust has dissipated. After the war and for many years thereafter, there was a pervasive silence about and denial of the horrors of the Holocaust. Danieli (1981, p. 7) explains that survivors' "war accounts were too horrifying

for most people to listen to or to believe. They were, therefore, easy to ignore, avoid and/or deny. . . . The silence imposed by others proved particularly painful to those who had survived the war determined to bear witness." This "conspiracy of silence" about the Holocaust has weakened, and we are witness to a deluge of literature, television and radio programs, and movies on the subject.

The fourth reason for the upsurge in programs for Holocaust survivors is the availability of funding provided by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. In 2002, the Claims Conference allocated nearly \$76 million to organizations and institutions in more than 30 countries to assist and care for Holocaust survivors (*Together*, Spring 2003).

One key strategy for empowering survivors is to ensure that the health care and social service systems are responsive to their unique needs. We must address the following issues: How well educated are service providers about the unique needs of elder Holocaust survivors, their psychosocial functioning, their diversity, and the resources available to them? How much do service providers understand their resistance to assistance? What factors contribute to their vulnerability in the community? What gaps in services need to be filled to deal effectively with this population? The next section describes how one agency responds to the unique needs of elderly Holocaust survivors.

## **CUMMINGS JEWISH CENTRE FOR SENIORS (CJCS) IN MONTREAL**

### **Organizational Context**

In 1998 two constituent agencies of the Montreal Jewish federation—a social services agency and a community center—merged to form the Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors (CJCS). The purpose of the merger was to reduce bureaucracy, enhance accessibility, eliminate duplication of services, and thereby facilitate the cost-effective delivery of services. CJCS provides a

continuum of social, recreational, educational, transportation, financial, and support services to meet the needs of all adults, aged 50+, from those who function autonomously to those who have become frail. It strives to create an atmosphere that promotes positive attitudes on aging and acknowledges the dignity and self-worth of the individual.

In CJCS's centralized intake system, individuals obtain information about and easy access to needed services. There is no fee for this intake service, and clients refer to it as "one-stop shopping." Services to Holocaust Survivors and Their Families fall within the Department of Support Services, our social service network. The services in this department are designed to help seniors and caregivers gain access to resources that facilitate independent living. A counselor is available to listen to needs and direct individuals to services either within CJCS or externally. Case management, in collaboration with public sector organizations, is provided, as well as advocacy and dissemination of information about resources. Having specialized services for survivors in an agency that provides a wide range of services results in faster service referrals and less bureaucracy.

### **Creation of Services for Holocaust Survivors**

The program, Services for Holocaust Survivors and their Families, is partially funded by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany and comprises the following elements:

- Drop-in Centre, created in 1997
- Survivor Assistance Office, which provides a full range of services to assist Holocaust survivors and their families with the various compensation and restitution programs
- Intergenerational programming:
  - In the Survivor Memoir Project, young adults interview survivors about their prewar, wartime, and postwar lives. These interviews are being published in a book.

- In collaboration with our Program Department, ongoing programs held with students of Jewish day schools celebrate the Jewish holidays and focus on survivors' prewar, wartime, and postwar experiences.
- Emergency Financial Assistance Program, which provides subsidies to survivors in need

### THE DROP-IN CENTRE

In the postwar years survivors languished in the displaced persons' camps of Europe until they were permitted to emigrate to countries including Israel, the United States, and Canada. The conspiracy of silence and ambivalent feelings toward them in the postwar years prevented many from integrating into the general community. They responded creatively to their rejection by forming social support networks, primarily *landsman-shaften* (organizations of people who originated from the same European geographic area; Giberovitch, 1994).

In recent years, the activities of these organizations have diminished, and many have ceased to exist because of members' deaths and other factors. With the loss of this important resource many survivors are experiencing loneliness, isolation, and consequent depression. Creative responses have included the development of social support groups that fulfill survivors' needs for socialization with peers and foster a sense of community and belonging. In recent years, we have seen the development of such groups all over the world (Dasberg, 1995; Fried & Waxman, 1988; Gutmann, 1995; Hassan, 1995). Although some are strictly socialization groups, others such as Shalvata in London follow an empowerment model (Hassan, 1997). In the Montreal Jewish community, survivors have found a place of belonging in our agency's Drop-in Centre.

The Drop-in Centre for Holocaust Survivors is a weekly program for Holocaust survivors living in the community. It serves a group of cognitively high-functioning individuals who have originated from a variety

of European countries and have endured different experiences during the war. It takes place every Tuesday morning from 9:00 AM to 12 noon in the CJCS auditorium. It opened in 1997 as a pilot project with the first year of funding provided by the Jewish Community Foundation of Montreal.

CJCS provides an excellent setting for the Drop-in Centre for several reasons. First, some participants are CJCS members who have had difficulty fitting into existing programs. Second a free first-year membership has motivated participants to partake in other activities (e.g. social programs, cafeteria, educational courses, Passover Seder), thus, increasing their sense of community participation and belonging. Third, this program is well suited to CJCS, a community agency where the focus is on social, health, and leisure activities that promote positive attitudes on aging and acknowledge the dignity and self-worth of the individual.

### Advertisement, Referral, and Liaison Process

The Centre was initially advertised through flyers sent to social service agencies and synagogues, outreach visits to senior clubs and mini-centers, press releases and articles, and a paid ad in the Jewish newspaper. In addition, telephone contact was made with social service centers in outlying areas to encourage them to refer Holocaust survivors in their clientele. Finally, a collaborative process was established with the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) and the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (MHMC) for referrals and the sharing of information of relevance to survivors.

Approximately half of our referrals have come from CJCS and the other half from the above sources and public and private sector agencies in the community, including sister federation agencies. We now receive referrals from adult children and grandchildren of survivors and self-referrals as well.

### Program Format

When the program was originally conceptualized it was unstructured and the goals were twofold: informal socialization and information about community resources. However, within its first two months, these goals were expanded to include a programming component, as the same core group of individuals attended on a weekly basis and quickly became bored with only the socialization aspect of the program. They requested a more structured program dealing with issues of interest.

There is an eclectic mix of programming during each three-hour session. After about a half-hour for socializing, there is a discussion period for an hour in which individuals bring in topics of discussion from newspaper headlines and day-to-day problems and staff inform them about recent developments in compensations and restitution. This discussion period is followed by a half-hour exercise session with a professional aerobics instructor and then a refreshment break. The final part of the program may be a psycho-educational program, a lecture, an interactive social program, or entertainment.

The Drop-in Centre uses an empowerment approach. Members are consulted about most aspects of the program. Every two months the entire group participates in program planning. In fact, the members act as the Drop-in Board of Management. This is essential for two reasons. It empowers survivors with a sense of capability and accomplishment, freeing them from their victim role. It also helps survivors attain a sense of mastery and control over their environment.

### Program Content

Programs teach new skills to enhance coping strategies, inform members about community resources and new laws governing the different compensations, and help survivors achieve physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual well-being. They address the following issues: proper nutrition and exercise, stress management, assertiveness

techniques, communication skills such as active listening and managing anger, conflict resolution, dealing with depression and anxiety, sleep disorders, coping with the holidays, spiritual fitness, and when to move to an assisted living facility or nursing home. Members have also been exposed to such interventions as emotional freedom techniques (EFT) and body-centered somatic therapies.

Lectures, films, and discussions are another important part of our program and have focused on such topics as the political situation in Quebec, where was God during the Holocaust, Israel-Diaspora relations, child survivors in Poland, wills and mandates, patients' rights in a hospital setting, keeping the Yiddish language alive, and the history of Jews in Montreal.

We have also empowered survivors by teaching them leadership and program skills. Some have shared their creative interests with the group, and others have led discussions on such topics as life in prewar Europe, the attitudes that greeted survivors when they emigrated to Montreal, and current events. Survivors read inspirational poetry and prose and educate the group about the Jewish holidays.

One of our members, an artist, designed the logo for the Drop-in button worn by members, as well as the cover of the book, *Preserving Our Memories: Passing on the Legacy*. A Drop-in newsletter, "Never Again," is published four times a year. Its content includes a varied mix of members' wartime experiences; poetry and short stories; a Yiddish corner; congratulatory, birthday, and get well wishes; and up-to-date information about restitution and compensation. The newsletter reflects the spirit of the group.

We also encourage survivors to give themselves permission to have fun. Some survivors' unrelenting mourning process prevents them from enjoying themselves and even laughing. So we celebrate birthdays each month and organize parties to celebrate the Jewish holidays. We also have regular

talent shows to showcase our members' talents.

We encourage activities that bring meaning and purpose to survivors' lives as well. Survivors are viewed as historians, as individuals who have much to teach. The members of our Drop-in Centre have become important resource persons for university students, artists, and writers.

The issue of memorialization is an important one for Holocaust survivors. Most have lived with the "holy mission" of memorializing their dead family members, friends, and extinguished communities. Providing them with a forum for memorialization and ritualization has helped them deal with their ongoing mourning process. Our members plan, organize, and participate in the CJCS annual Holocaust commemoration service, which includes the lighting of six memorial candles, the reading of poetry and prose, the recitation of the Kaddish, and the singing of the Partisan Hymn.

Peer support, survivors helping survivors, has been an important part of our program. Members support each other when they are ill and visit each other when hospitalized. Participants are provided with a membership list and call each other regularly.

### **Intergenerational Programming**

We have helped survivors enhance their relationships with their children and grandchildren in several ways. We have shown several films and held discussions that deal with the intergenerational transmission of trauma. During the first three years of operation we had several intergenerational programs with the March of the Living participants before and after they left on the March. In February 2002 we initiated the Survivor Memoir Project, in which young adults have interviewed survivors about their prewar, wartime, and postwar experiences. A book of these first-hand historical accounts will be published in 2006.

These intergenerational exchanges imbue survivors with confidence and self-respect as they assimilate the knowledge that they have

an important contribution to make. The healing process of teaching younger people about their extinguished European communities and horrendous war experiences has a therapeutic effect, bringing hope, meaning, and purpose to their lives. It also brings them some peace of mind that their experiences will not be forgotten.

### **Individual Services**

The Drop-In Centre also has an individual services component. When a member has been absent from the program for two weeks, he or she receives a telephone call from a staff person. Members build a trusting alliance with staff so when someone needs help with a personal matter and/or to deal with a traumatic memory, professional staff is able to provide private individual short-term counseling.

### **Reframing Feelings of Isolation**

Members in the group have experienced multiple losses including death of a spouse and friends, loss of autonomy, illness, lack of financial security, loss of social status, and alienation from their children. For some, these life-event stressors have activated feelings of loss, dependency, and vulnerability related to past horrific experiences. As well, the severe victimization they experienced wherein they were treated as less than human has been integrated into their self-concept, often resulting in diminished self-esteem, self-worth, and self-respect. All these factors may contribute to a sense of isolation, loneliness, and depression. These feelings of isolation, depression and diminished self-esteem are reframed in the following ways:

- Members are viewed as historians who teach as much as they are taught.
- Members' opinions and advice about most aspects of the program are solicited.
- Members are acknowledged and thanked for their help.
- Members welcome and integrate new members.

- Members are reminded of their resiliency on an ongoing basis.
- Members' achievements are praised on an ongoing basis.

The group fosters a sense of belonging where individuals feel free to talk about their prewar, wartime, and postwar experiences. Many have expressed feeling misunderstood by their Canadian peers in other groups they have attended. In contrast, the Center has a "heimshe" (homey) atmosphere where they feel a bond with their peers who speak the same languages. For example, on any given Tuesday morning during the unstructured part of the program and break, survivors speak their mother tongues such as Yiddish and Hungarian.

### **Advocacy**

Advocacy plays an important role as survivors are given a voice on issues that are of significance to them. For example, the group wrote to the Special Master regarding the allocation of the Swiss Fund settlement. We also encourage and support survivor initiatives. We supported a child survivor who lobbied the Israeli government for the release of the names of survivors who have been institutionalized in Israel since the end of the war, and we sent parcels to those survivors at Chanukah.

We work closely with the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, providing them with documentary materials for their exhibits and participating in their commemorative events as guest speakers. We also collaborate on an ongoing basis with the Canadian Jewish Congress, the political arm of the Jewish community, ensuring that survivors' voices are heard and that issues of concern to them are recognized and taken seriously. We are active participants in local and national issues. When the Israeli consulate in Montreal was on the verge of closing for financial reasons, we invited the Regional Chairman of the Canadian Jewish Congress to our group and wrote a letter of protest.

### **Transportation and Food**

Because of mobility problems, a number of our participants are unable to get to the program on their own. Our agency bus provides rides, and for those who live in outlying areas, we hire private taxis. Survivors pay \$4.00 for round-trip transportation. Healthy snacks are provided, and our Food Services Department prepares special food trays for the holidays. Although there is no charge for the program, survivors contribute \$5 monthly to defray the cost of holiday and birthday celebrations.

### **Staffing**

Two social workers and three volunteers staff the program. It also serves as a learning environment for university students who do field placements in the Drop-in Centre. Others visit to enhance their understanding and interventions in working with survivors. Still others solicit survivors' help with projects and papers. Some of our students are not Jewish, and in the beginning we thought that this would have a negative impact on the members. However, as the group evolved and trust developed for the staff, they accepted the students as well. In fact, at one of our Holocaust Commemoration Services, one of the students, who is of Ukrainian background, thanked the survivors for educating her about the Holocaust and told them that she is now educating others. Her comments were very well received.

### **Attendance**

Approximately 50 survivors attend weekly. Friendships have developed and extended outside the group, and members notice when someone has been absent and call each other. It is also important to note the almost equal numbers of men and women coming to the Centre. In general, social programs for seniors in the community tend to attract a larger number of female participants.

### **Members' Evaluation**

On the Centre's fifth anniversary, we distributed an evaluation form to Drop-in members. In all fifty evaluations were filled out and returned.

Members gave the following reasons for attending the Drop-in Centre week after week:

- It's interesting. I like the program, discussions. I can participate.
- It makes the week shorter. I enjoy it. I get out of the house. I learn new things. I have a place to go each week.
- I greatly appreciate the staff persons for their knowledge and intelligence from which we all benefit.
- It's like a "family." We share good news and bad. We are learning and growing together. And we are the proof that people with different backgrounds and nationalities can live together in harmony.
- I get a sense of belonging as a Holocaust survivor.
- I enjoy the friendship and the freedom to ask questions and to comment on any subjects concerning seniors and the general public.
- The open discussion and various topics that touch the hearts of everyone.
- I am happy. I look forward to coming to the Drop-in Center. I don't want to miss any Tuesday. I come here and I don't feel like a stranger.

Forty-four members (88%) indicated that they have made friends in the group, and thirty-five (80%) said that their friendships extended outside of the group. This took the form of telephone calls and social outings.

Of the 48 members who answered the question, "In general do you like the programs we have had?" all said that they did. Their suggestions for additional programs included more outside speakers, involving youngsters during the holidays, museum exhibits, more current events and political discussions, programs on relaxation, a Christian person's perspective of Jews, discussions

with students, lectures on Ashkenazi and Sephardic history and literature, documentary movies, lunch, natural health, aging, and movies.

Attending this program has improved the general well-being of the members. Of the 50 survivors who filled out the evaluation, forty-five (90%) indicated that their physical, emotional, and spiritual health has improved. Some of the comments about their improvements included the following:

- I feel good. I feel happier. I sleep better. My appetite has improved.
- I feel that I am no longer alone.
- We understand life better in a more positive light.
- I was very depressed but now I have more energy. I am learning how to cope.
- Because of contact with people it forces me to go out.
- My feelings about the Holocaust lost the pathological pains what I was suffering for years.
- Learning to make more time for myself and how to "love" myself.
- Because of my problems, this helps me as an escape.

Although the majority of respondents were known to the CJCS, eleven (22%) had never been involved in the CJCS before attending the Centre. Seventeen individuals (34%) attend the Drop-in only and do not partake in any other CJCS activities, programs, or services.

### **Some Cautionary Notes**

There are some contentious issues that have had to be dealt with by the professional staff to ensure the evolution of the group. It is important for staff to be sensitive to the anger that emerges from time to time. Individuals who have been victimized often repress the anger/rage they feel toward their oppressor or situation. Once trust develops and they feel safe, anger may surface and be displaced onto staff and peers. Some survi-

vors use anger as a form of manipulation and control.

Although it is important for the survivor to express this anger, it can be detrimental to the group. Staff must be diligent in helping survivors take responsibility for their behavior and helping them contain their angry feelings. It is appropriate for staff to point out inappropriate behavior and to set limits. I find that some professionals have difficulty doing so, thus giving survivors the impression that they are not responsible for their behavior. In so doing we encourage their victimization.

In our group, anger was expressed in two ways:

1. Members tried to exclude individuals that they did not recognize as "real" survivors. There is a "hierarchy of suffering" in the survivor community. This means that those who were in the most horrific environments are considered true survivors. We have imparted the message that all Jews who were in Nazi-occupied Europe are survivors. We encourage inclusion rather than exclusion.
2. Language has been at times a contentious issue. In the beginning we placed a lot of emphasis on the Yiddish language. We now realize this was a mistake. Our participants originate from many European countries and speak different languages. Our language of operation is now English.

It is also important for professionals to be sensitive to some survivors' unwillingness to disclose their trauma histories. Although the survivors' war experiences are woven into our programming, the focus is not on individual war experiences. When we first started the program some survivors recounted their experiences in detail, causing other members to become agitated and suffer nightmares.

### CONCLUSION

The Drop-in Centre provides an opportunity for Holocaust survivors to find a place of

belonging with peers who shared similar traumas, improving the quality of their lives. It serves as an entry point for some survivors who have had little or no contact with the organized Jewish community and integrates them into further involvement in the agency and the Jewish community. Finally, it empowers individuals with a sense of their own capability, provides information about community resources, and teaches coping skills.

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