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URVIVORS

Despite Inhumanity Our Neighbors 'Somehow Go On'

Today, "going on" means making cents stretch at Safeway, or finding an alternative to commuting along the Bay Bridge.

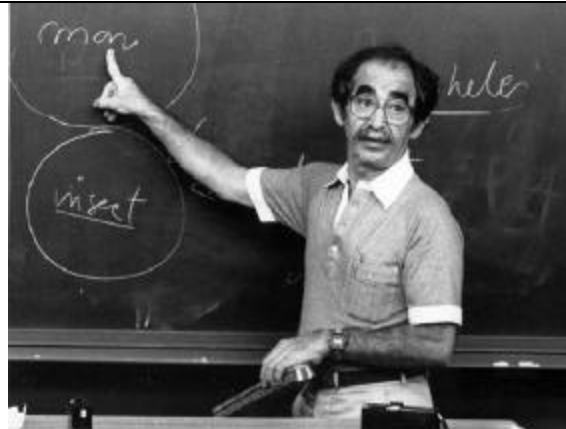
Yesterday, for some Sonomans, it was surviving the Holocaust... or fleeing the Pol Pot regime by side-stepping the landmines all the way from Cambodia to California... or counting the days until internment camps were no more.

There is a link among our surviving neighbors: "We somehow go on," they say.

Take one particular biology professor at Sonoma State University, for example. The scholarly-looking man with the chalk in his hand has more than a dissertation to deliver. Paul Benko's life in a concentration camp brings more insight than graduate school ever could, and the label "survivor" is the best credential this teacher could have.

"The only reason most of us are alive after the concentration camps was because somebody picked us up at a time when we stumbled."

"It isn't only food," says the sole family survivor of several Nazi concentration camps. "It isn't only shelter. It isn't only clothes – but the belief that human beings need to feel worthwhile with a



PAUL BENKO

Now a professor of biology at Sonoma State University, Paul Benko is the sole family survivor, at age 15, of several Nazi concentration camps, including Dachau.



Goodness, truth and beauty are real values. And it's not just something that philosophers argue about! There is an absolute need for love and affection that is genuine and satisfying and nurturing... You can keep values in your heart and they will warm you. If you don't acquire those values, there'll be an emptiness which you can't fulfill with things... And it matters a great deal how you live your life and what kind of society you will construct. If you tolerate discrimination, if you tolerate injustice - if you participate in it - eventually you discover that this is destructive. It has always been that way throughout history.

need to feel worthwhile, with a sense of dignity inside them that empowers them to survive.”

But what separates survivors from the rest? In 1987, Phyllis Rosenfield and Lisa Slater began to shoot portraits and tape interviews which have evolved into their answer. They created what they call the Sonoma County Survivor Project – piecing together lives from different times and traumas, with a common strand of survival.

One life is that of Renée Newman, born in Austria, who was on a skiing trip with her young friends at the time of the Anschluss. When she came back to town, as she recalls, “I had really been way out in the mountains, and I came down and landed on a sea of swastikas. Flags all over! And that’s how I found out that Hitler occupied Austria. From then on, overnight, everybody was a Nazi... there was no warmth.”

“And very early on, a man came to our store with a badge and said, ‘I am the commissar and the store is being taken over. Give me the keys.’ And that was that... we became totally preoccupied with trying to leave.”

Newman is but one of our neighbors who have undergone various losses of human and civil rights in other times and other places. The project’s writer, Lisa Slater, admits that when the project began, “neither of us had much idea of how we could use our work. But we soon began to see these portrayals as a rare tool to touch the hearts and minds of other individuals in the community.”

As Slater’s counterpart and photographer, Phyllis Rosenfield put it, “My photographs show



IRV PIOTRKOWSKI

Now an attorney in Petaluma, Irv Piotrkowski (above right) is pictured at left with his brother with his brother Nate (in mother’s lap) with mother, Ida, and father, Joe. Both sons were born in West Germany after their mother (pictured above, with Nate at left) survived Bergen-Belsen and Auchwitz. Their father hid in an attic in Poland.

I’m very conscious of material things, but I really can do without them, because they’re not that important. When there’s big gatherings that are very happy occasions, or on vacations when things should be happy... I tend to get sad. There’s a feeling that there are others who should be experiencing it, and they’re not.

HIRABAYASHI FAMILY

Interned at Tule Lake Camp as a teenager, Ed Hirabayashi (far right, standing) was to become a professor of philosophy of religion at New York State University.



people in their ordinary lives, doing ordinary things, in a very positive way – not always with joy, but with great dignity. We need to realize that one can come out of these terrible experiences – although no one ever should – and somehow go on as a whole human being.”

According to Slater, “My interviews explore the ways in which survivor populations, although initially well-integrated into their general populations, were always conspicuous as a subgroup.”

“At what point, in what way, was an organized effort made to mark them out still further? How are these efforts similar? I am especially concerned with what distinguished the individuals outside the survivor population, who became rescuers, at great risk to themselves. How can we encourage those traits?”

Survivors often remark that the depth of personal contact they had with their neighbors made a crucial difference. Whether they were brought food in hiding, or they were able to leave the country, or whether they were able to preserve their personal possessions or keep their families together, was often determined by the degree of affection between one individual and another, even more than by the degree of danger involved.

“When I show our work to people who are survivors themselves, Slater says, “I am sometimes confronted with initial fear or disinterest. They have understandable difficulty relating their own experiences to those of any other group. But as they meet their fellow survivors in words and images, they begin to care about each other, and their attention is caught. They begin to

We had a game in Boy Scouts, called “Night Football.” We take a basketball and turn the lights out, and crawl across each other, to try to make a touchdown. We’d turn the lights on when we captured a guy with the ball. But we got stopped, because somebody said we were signaling the Japanese!

Racism is tied in with ignorance. Those that knew us individually were sensitive and they came to the train, and said goodbye, and wept. What this leads me to say is that if you know the people, you will not prejudice, but will act accordingly.



MEI AND SHIRO NAKANO

Both Mei and Shiro Nakano were interned at Amache Camp in Colorado where they were married. Shiro later served in World War II in Army

intelligence Both are now in publishing.

Mei: I don’t consciously think of it, but I think that the direction of our whole lives, the way that we organize our lives politically, is always on the side of civil rights, whether it costs something or otherwise. And we vote that way, and we talk that way. And we’re really very sad when people who have undergone the same kinds of experiences that we have can turn right around and forget, forget that lesson! What it cost us!

Shiro: I think only through educating the younger generation, from the very beginning [can we] abolish bigotry and prejudice. It’s the only way that we’re going to create any kind of a sense of security... The kind of prejudice that we had here - it’s so insidious. I think we need to get to the point where everyone is informed. It’s the only answer. Without that, I just feel that we fall right back into the same old trap.

think about the kind of legacy their stories can be.”

Chhuon Pok, a survivor from Cambodia, explains: “All living beings need communication, and societies need communication with each other. Not just kings and presidents... I wish for no one to deceive each other, nor despise another, as weak as they may be.”

Slater and Rosenfield hope to weave together tales of people and governments gone awry. “We hope to stimulate critical thinking and responsibility concerning the pressing social and political issues of our own time and of the future,” Slater says. Once we relate Jewish experiences to others’, “we can learn how rights are lost – in order for them not to be lost again.”

Perhaps Professor Benko should – and does – put it best: “What you learn out of this is that survivors learn something about long-standing human values – and it has to be an inner drive and an inner hope, and a belief in a just and humane world, which causes one to strive.”

“Because to strive only for personal gain is not survival.”



BORIN KANG

Borin Kang, a former warehouse manager in Pnomh Penh, is the sole family survivor of Pol Pot’s Cambodian regime. His wife and 10 children died.

I feel I want to live again, the way I did in Cambodia. Yet, I know I cannot bring back those wonderful people. The idea of telling about my life in my country after the Communist Regime

took over in 1975 would help to take away the deep sorrow which I felt... I think of it often. It is hard to believe that so many died and I lived. I must do something fine and good. I have a new chance. I am learning English and preparing myself for another life in a new place. I am lucky... I must not give up. Now, I have a new wife and children; may they never know such agony as I have known.