



Graphic: hollandse meesters

About three generations impacted by World War II

# ‘You didn’t go through that hell for nothing’

Some are still living with the consequences of the Second World War every day. This rings especially true for the first generation, for those who experienced the Second World War as a child, adolescent or adult. This generation, a generation that will be lost to us over the coming years, pass their wartime experiences on to succeeding generations. But what is it that they pass on? And how?

*by Mercede van Voorthuizen*

To answer these questions, this article describes literature into the impact of the wartime past on three generations of World War II victims. As the literature on the subject is so extensive, this article is limited to a number of qualitative studies published from 1990 onwards, in which at least the third generation has been studied, sometimes in combination with the first and second generation.

A review of the literature on the intergenerational transmission of war experiences, such as Holocaust survival, shows that the war experiences of the first generation can affect the second and third generations in several ways. For the sake of clarity and brevity, we have divided the findings into three themes: psychological impact, attribution of meaning and identity, and interpersonal relationships.

## The grandchildren fear that the past will repeat itself and sometimes have nightmares about the Holocaust

### **Psychological impact**

In particular, the transmission of trauma has been studied extensively. In Rachel Lev-Wiesel's 2007 study of Israeli families whose first generation suffers from PTSD as a result of their war experiences, the intergenerational transmission of trauma over three generations is indeed evident. The first generation shows symptoms of post-traumatic stress, such as anxiety and avoidance. The second and third generations feel a lot of empathy for and identify with this suffering of the first generation. They are more likely to cry when exposed to Holocaust-related topics, for example. One second-generation respondent in this study says:

*'I often have nightmares in which I am in a concentration camp...I am haunted by the atrocities my parents had to endure.'*

In 2018, Ilana Cohn and Natalie Morrison also found that the Australian grandchildren of Holocaust survivors find it emotionally difficult to ask their family about their wartime past. Some prefer to avoid the subject. The grandchildren fear that the past will repeat itself and sometimes have nightmares about the Holocaust. How families subsequently deal with these traumatic expe-

periences from their Holocaust past varies significantly, according to Julia Chaitin's 2003 research. One family might sink into fear and distrust and fear towards the outside world, while another family focuses on 'proving' that they have successfully come to terms with their past.

Contrary to research on trauma transmission, fewer studies focus on resilience. Both Rachel Dale's 2010 PhD research into the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and Selma Haverkate's 2018 master's research into three generations of Jewish Dutch people reveal an important conclusion: aspects of both trauma and resilience can coexist. People experience their Jewish identity as both a strength and a threat, which shows how vulnerability and resilience relate to each other. Resilience is clearly evident in a quote from an interviewee in the Dutch study:

*'I have always compared everything in my life to my grandparents being in Auschwitz, what they had to endure there. And compared to that, everything is insignificant, luckily. And that's what gives you strength. As crazy as that may sound. That really is what gives me the strength to keep going. So very sad for them too. We will survive and we will go on and you didn't go through that hell for nothing.'*

### **Attributing meaning and identity**

What meaning do the different generations attribute to their history? And does this past have impact on their identity? Karen Burton's 2011 doctoral research on American third-generation Holocaust survivors concludes that the third generation has thought about the impact of family stories on their own lives, but that the extent to which this affects their identity actually appears to be small.

Joshua Goldstein's 2018 doctoral research among American grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, on the other hand, reports that the experiences of their grandparents do have an impact on their identity. The third generation is sensitive to topics related to the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, and fears that such events will happen again. The impact of the Holocaust also seems to reverberate in the identity of Jewish Australian grandchildren (Cohn & Morrison): they feel connected to their family history and feel responsible to pass it on.

Research into meaning attribution is not limited to families of Holocaust survivors, but has also been conducted among German families whose first generation may have been 'perpetrators' or 'followers' during World War II. A 2013 study by Oliver Fuchs and his colleagues shows

that German grandchildren are ashamed of their country's past. In that survey one respondent says:

*'Being German means that, when one goes abroad, one—for example—has to explain. ... I have the feeling that one has to explain: "Listen, we are ... um ... um ... no longer the bad guys.'*

The war is ever-present and the grandchildren experience the German role in it as an eternal burden. In their experience, their identity is tainted by history, resulting them feeling compelled to protect their family, parents and themselves from the past. In addition, according to the study by Sandra Brugger (2001), they often lack concrete knowledge about their grandparents' past and are forbidden to talk about it. This is despite the fact that the unknown past does have emotional significance for the next generation. It is striking that, in contrast to the collective memory, the Holocaust is barely present in the memories of German families, Harald Welzer et al. concluded in 2002.

*'We would walk on our tiptoes when he slept, breathing quietly, not criticizing him, filtering our words because he is our father'*

### **Interpersonal relationships**

Relationships between different generations within a family, but also with the outside world, are influenced by the war experiences of the first generation as well. The 2010 study into the Israeli second and third generations by Mira Scharf and Ofra Mayselless reveals the disruptive effect that the war has on bonding and parenting. This manifests itself - in both the second and third generations - in an upbringing characterized by a lack of closeness, connection and support. These generations also often feel an urge to adore their parents, to meet their needs, and to take responsibility for their well-being. If this role reversal is excessive, however, and the child feels that it is unfair to bear the family burden, it can hinder the child's autonomous development:

*'We would not argue with him [father]. We would walk on our tiptoes when he slept, breathing quietly, not criticizing him, filtering our words because he is our father. When he bought something we had to thank him, and we were not allowed to say that we didn't like it or that it is not what we wanted, things like that.'*



Family relationships are also affected by the war experience of the first generation. In her 2002 study, for example, Julia Chaitin concluded that survivors emphasize the unity within the family and distrust people outside it. The second generation, on the other hand, perceives family relationships as problematic or conflicting, they sometimes feel a need to protect themselves from their parents. The third generation experiences both close family ties and conflict.

While most research into the effects of the Second World War concerned Jewish families, the influence of the war on interpersonal relationships is also evident in studies of non-Jewish families. Kristen Montague's 2012 study of children and grandchildren of Polish Catholic survivors of Nazi persecution shows how survivors' everyday lives are still affected by feelings of grief, loss of family and flashbacks. The second generation indicates that they hardly talk with their parents about their wartime past



Graphic: Hollandse meesters

## This is the last chance to interview three generations of the same family in one and the same study

strategies that still exist in all generations. These families keep large food reserves, have an extreme reverence for food, often overeat and find it hard to throw things away. The researchers also describe the indifference that the generations display towards outsiders as a continuing effect of the Holodomor.

The 2020 study by Aline Cordennier et al. on the intergenerational transmission of the memories of Belgian resistance fighters does show a degree of blurring over time. The family memories fade over generations and time, even when the historical events are important to the family itself and to society. The third generation regard the trauma of the past at a certain distance. Yet at the same time, they will be the last in the line of future generations who actually knew the survivors - their grandparents. That makes their position between the past and the future unique.

In conclusion, these qualitative studies show that intergenerational transmission has many forms and guises. The impact does appear to persist across three generations, although fading occurs as well. The persistence and blurring of impact can be viewed in the light of Aleida Assmann's theory that a gradual transition from communicative memory to cultural memory occurs after approximately eighty years. The vivid stories are then no longer shared and passed on first-hand and their transmission becomes dependent on texts, monuments and an active cultural memory.

This literature review is the first stage of a study into the impact of the wartime past on three generations of Dutch families, which the ARQ Centre of Expertise for War, Persecution and Violence carries out in 2021 and 2022. How does the war live on in three generations of families affected by war, is the central question is central of this research. More than 75 years after the liberation, this is the last chance to interview three generations of the same family in one and the same study.

---

**Mercede van Voorthuizen** – Junior policy researcher/advisor at ARQ Knowledge Centre of Excellence on War, Persecution and Violence

and experience their upbringing as strict and protective. The third generation describes the importance of Polish tradition in their lives, but also talks about the barriers in communication with their grandparents. It is mainly the second generation that passes knowledge of the wartime past on to the third generation.

### **Blurring and distance from the past**

Research into the intergenerational transmission of war experiences extends beyond the Second World War, also covering major historical events further in the past, which however does not necessarily mean that the effect has faded. Brent Benzo and Stefania Maggi (2015) write about Ukrainian families whose first generation survived the Holodomor, a famine in Ukraine that occurred in 1932-1933 and was caused by the Soviet Union. The researchers show that fear, sadness, shame and anger relating to this past still play a role in the three generations today. In addition, the families developed coping