Brethren Again
Personal Witness to a Search for Healing

Carolyn H. Manosevitz

This autobiographical account in narrative and art charts the continuing journey of a scholar and artist to keep alive the memory of those who perished in the Shoah and to find reconciliation and healing with the “other.” Her story reminds us of the need for compassion, understanding, and a shared sense of responsibility as Jews and Christians strive to walk together.

Author’s note: The word holocaust derives from the Greek word meaning “burnt offering,” which seems to give the event a religious significance. There was nothing religious about Hitler’s “Final Solution.” Therefore, I prefer to use the Hebrew word shoah, meaning “catastrophe,” the term used by modern scholars in reference to that event. In keeping with the Jewish belief that the name of the Divine should not be pronounced, I use the spelling G-d.

Great sages and thinkers, some of whom are mentioned in this article, have helped me formulate my thoughts vis-à-vis ‘the other’. Most important, however, it has been my personal experience and the people who have appeared on my path that have influenced me. I believe there are no accidents—that there is a reason for everything that befalls us. Growing up in a Jewish neighborhood in

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Canada, with only Jewish friends, I never thought much about ‘the other’. Now I have come to recognize that ignorance breeds fear. Certainly I feared anyone who was not Jewish. It was not until I faced a sea of Christian faces in the chapel of a Christian seminary that I truly began to encounter the other. This article details my discovery about healing and the other. That discovery has changed my life.

**Encounter**

I opened the door to my studio and this tall, young German man entered. A few days earlier, Bob Shelton, dean at Austin Seminary had called me. He told me that a seminary student had been at the opening reception for my art exhibit there and wanted to introduce himself to me but was too afraid. He was from Nuremberg, Germany, and his parents would not talk to him about the war. Bob asked if I would meet with him. The only reason I said “yes” was that I knew my two sons would never forgive me if I had said “no.”

“Why are you here?” I asked. “I was hoping for some sort of reconciliation,” he replied. “Not in my lifetime” were the first words out of my mouth. I pointed to a series of portraits I was doing of the second generation (children of survivors) and said, “It is one thing to read the number 6,000,000 in a history book, but it is a whole other story when it is his mother, her father, my aunts, uncles, cousins.” And then I proceeded to cry for two hours.

However, I quickly realized that it took more courage for him to come to my door than for me to open that door. “The reconciliation needs to be right here, in this room between you and I,” I said. When he got up to leave, he extended his hand. “I need a hug instead,” I said. Dieter Heinzl has become my dear friend. I consider him one of the angels on my path to healing. My painting *reconciliation* is a testimony to our friendship.

But the story of Dieter Heinzl is not the beginning of my story. My story begins January 4, 1992, the day my oldest son boarded a plane for Berlin, where he was going to live with his German girlfriend—the daughter of a Nazi. For days my husband had been saying that I needed to tell our son how I felt. However, I was too afraid. Finally, five days before he left, we sat at our kitchen table in Austin, Texas, and I said, “I am certain your girlfriend is wonderful. Please don’t ever invite me to visit you, because in memory of my family, I vowed never to step foot on German soil.” He got very angry saying, “They were my family too.” Ten days after leaving he called me, “You know, Mum,” he said, “I feel as if I am here conducting my own investigation about what went on fifty years ago.” (I should mention here, that my son came home a year later without the girl. We collaborated on a documentary film about the second generation. Now he lives just down the road from us with his girlfriend—a nice Jewish doctor.)
The day my son left for Berlin was one of the most painful days of my life. I came home from the airport and through my tears began a painting of an empty swing. All I could think about were the people who are not here to swing on the swings, play the music, collect the garbage.

A friend suggested I do a series. I found myself searching for children of survivors to talk to. We would have a conversation, and back in the studio I painted the stories I was hearing. Very quickly I discovered a running thread of similarity amongst the people with whom I was conversing. Their stories were about traumatized parents; about their own guilt for being unable to heal their wounded
parents; stories about fear of not measuring up to their parents’ courage and about always having to be happy. Their parents could not tolerate any sadness. The second generation has been robbed of its childhood.

Prior to this time, the only Holocaust-related material I had read was The Diary of Anne Frank. It was much too scary for me. Even the word holocaust terrified me.

**Background**

My father was the youngest of a very large Jewish Ukrainian family. He left Kremenets when he was thirteen—in the early part of the twentieth century. In the late twenties he brought his oldest brother’s wife and four children to Canada. A year later, he married his niece. These were my parents. In 1929, they returned to Kremenets on their honeymoon. My father tried to persuade his siblings to leave but none wanted to except for a nephew, his wife and two children. In the late thirties, when everyone else wanted to leave, my father desperately tried to obtain visas for them. By that time, Canada had shut its doors.

On August 10, 1942, the 15,000 Jews of Kremenets were forced to walk to an open rifle range where they were shot into pits by their Ukrainian neighbors on orders from the SS. There were 14 survivors. None were my relatives.

The Shoah was never talked about in my family. However, I heard daily the Yiddish names of my father’s brothers and sisters. I called them my invisible faces. The story that was passed down to me was that everyone was rounded up at the railroad station and shot. I was told that after the war, my father advertised in newspapers all over the world. Of course, he found no one.

While I was working on my second generation series of paintings, I began to delve into Holocaust documentation. Suddenly, I could not get my hands on enough information. As a result of my research, I began to meet (several) Holocaust scholars, mostly Christian. After chairing three major interfaith symposia pertaining to the Shoah, these encounters have turned into significant friendships. I have found a group of people who are as passionate as I am about keeping alive the memory of the Shoah . . . and they are not Jewish!

My gallery talk at the opening of my exhibit at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary took place in the chapel. I had been in a church once before in my life. Growing up in Canada, I used to cross to the other side of the street on my way to school every day so I would not have to walk in front of the church. I was taught that the people inside were my enemies. But that day in the chapel of Austin Seminary, as I looked out at that congregation, I did not see an enemy. I saw a sea of compassionate, sympathetic faces.

A few days later I called the dean and invited him to lunch. I told him how comfortable I had felt on his campus and that I wanted to be part of his community.
I proposed teaching a course: “Spirituality and the Holocaust.” I have been a visiting professor at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary since 1996. And now I teach my course at other Christian seminaries as well. I consider Dean Shelton (now president emeritus) to be one of my angels.

One of my very first students said, “This course will improve every time you teach it.” He was right. For example, at first I was reluctant to bring up the failure of the church during the Shoah, but I have found that in a safe, non-threatening arena, anything can be discussed. Jacob Neusner, noted Jewish theologian, says, “We can argue only if we take one another seriously. But we can enter into dialogue only if we honor both ourselves and the other.” In my classroom, I strive to do just that. I am eager to learn my students’ traditions and faith histories. And I share my own with them. We are all richer for it.

From teaching this course, I have discovered that for people of faith, one cannot talk about the Shoah without having a conversation about the absence/presence of G-d. That is a running theme throughout my class. One of my students said that in all his years at seminary, in no other class has there been more discussion of faith.

Neusner reminds us that in ancient and medieval times, disputations concerning propositions of religious truth defined the purpose of dialogue between religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity. Such debates, he says, attested to the common faith of both parties in the integrity of reason and in the facticity of shared scriptures. He claims that disputation went out of style when religions lost their confidence in the power of reason to establish theological truth.

My approach in my teaching as well as in my art is a personal one. I reveal to my students my own vulnerability, my own fears, my own concerns, my Jewishness. And they respond in kind. I look into their faces and I see myself.

Since beginning to teach this class, I have become more Jewish. An imam told me it is because I have become more of who I am. The same is true for my students. Neusner believes that in articulating our beliefs and having them challenged, we sharpen our understanding of our own faiths. In a safe arena, my students and I share painful moments. We learn about and from each other. Because we are no longer afraid of each other, we are able to comfort each other.

Shortly after beginning to teach this class, I began receiving letters from my seminary students. One was from Phillip Blackburn, now pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Illinois. Here are some excerpts:

One cannot talk about the Shoah without having a conversation about the absence/presence of G-d.
Finally as a Christian I want to say something to you Carolyn. I want to give you a world in which you don’t have to be afraid of strangers. One in which you do not have to learn how to deal with anti-Semitism. . . . I want you to have a life without the memory of the Shoah. . . . I want you to know that you are loved and valued as a child of G-d by all of humanity. But I cannot give you any of these things. I cannot make it all better. But perhaps, if I remember this, and continue to be a Christian influenced by the atrocities of Auschwitz and the beauty of the righteous among nations, maybe I can give a small piece of the world, of life itself back to your grandchildren. That is my prayer. . . . Maybe as a leader of Christians and as a Christian myself, maybe I can give this gift to you. I will try. Phillip. (Blackburn 2001)

Phillip’s words inspired my painting, my naked soul. I wrote in my journal that finally I had someone to walk beside me . . . to hold my hand, and he was a Christian brother. Corliss Gaspari wrote:

This course is an act of tikkun (mending the world) both on the part of the instructor and on the part of the participants. No one who elected to take this course could possibly be guilty of indifference. It takes courage to take this course, because we know that we will walk through the darkest hours of humanity. . . . This course has been present in my thoughts on a daily basis . . . it has caused many of us to seek greater knowledge through many different means. . . . We wrestle with, struggle with and are horrified by the Holocaust. Yet it is the desire for tikkun that brought us here, the desire to be in dialogue, and that desire, that passion, is greater than any risk we took.

From Solomon Waigwa, the following words:

I want you to know how grateful I am for all the work you have done to create in me the awareness of the Holocaust. . . . the journey has begun. . . . I will explore what there is and also help others especially in Africa to do so. I believe now that the Holocaust is not just something bad that happened once to the Jews. It happened to humanity and . . . ignorance about these matters can cause a repeat of such atrocities. . . . to ensure that it doesn’t, we must inform people of every detail at our disposal. For your part in this, I thank you.

These students, along with most whom I have encountered, “got it.” They have responded to my teaching with compassion, understanding, and a sense of responsibility to keep the memory alive.

For his final paper, after many private conversations, I had instructed David Barker to write a Christian response to the Shoah. He prefaced his paper with a letter. Some of his words were:
This is the hardest paper I’ve ever had to write and I say that with a thesis, dissertation and 15 years of academic paper writing behind me. . . . What you are getting . . . is reflective of my ongoing struggle. . . . We should be suspicious of anyone who writes as if he/she has the Holocaust figured out. . . . I’ve come away from the experience of writing this with the conviction that both the depth of the horror of the Holocaust and the call G-d has placed on my life require I pursue what I’ve begun here with the integrity its subject demands. . . . I hope, therefore, that this will be the first step of a journey that perhaps we can take together. . . . Thank-you for telling me to do this—you’ve given me a greater gift than either of us probably realizes at the moment. Your brother in the family of G-d. David.

In summer 2001, I returned to Texas and participated in David’s ordination in the Presbyterian Church. I read his letter to me, and I recited the Shehechianu—an ancient Hebrew prayer thanking G-d for permitting us to reach that day. My painting the call g-d has placed on my life was inspired by David’s words.

According to Emmanuel Levinas, “The light that permits encountering something other than the self makes it encountered as if this thing came from the ego. The light . . . is intelligibility itself; making everything come from me, it reduces every experience to an element of reminiscence” (39). My encounters with my Christian seminary students typify these words. When I encounter the other at close proximity—no longer at a distance—I see his/her frailty, fear, and vulnerability at the same time that I recognize my own. These elements that I see in the other are the “reminiscences” that Levinas speaks about. We see ourselves in the other. And for this reason my students and I, in a safe arena, no longer fear each other. Instead we make room for the dialogue and as a result—healing begins.

Brethren Again

One year I was preparing to teach my course at three different Christian seminaries. I realized that I needed to familiarize myself with Christian Scripture. I began reading Matthew. Shortly thereafter I said to myself, “This is Jewish stuff.” When I turned out the light, the image of the cross emerging from the star of David came to me. And so began my series: seeking the holy spirit together. How far I had come from the days of crossing to the other side of the street in front of the church!

It was on a trip to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum with my Austin Seminary students that I learned the fate of the Jews of Kremenets, Ukraine, my ancestral home. All across Eastern Europe, the pattern was the same. Mobile killing units would enter small towns; force Jews into a ghetto; mobilize the local population; liquidate the ghetto; and, with plenty of vodka, instruct the non-Jewish
population to murder the entire Jewish community. There are mass graves scattered all across the Ukraine. Father Patrick Desbois, a French priest, only recently has begun a personal mission to uncover these mass graves and with dialogue from local citizens, document what happened.

After the museum visit and seeing the documentation on events in Eastern Europe during the war, I began to realize the extent to which my own family was affected by the Shoah. It was never discussed in my household. As previously mentioned, I had what I called invisible faces to go with the Yiddish names I heard every single day. My parents never knew what really happened. The story I got from my mother was that everyone was rounded up at the railroad station and shot. It turns out that the mass grave was near the railroad station. Upon first learning about the Shoah—every Jewish child learns about the Shoah—my burning question was where were the Jews of the world? I was angry. Why did the victims go like sheep to the slaughter? I have since come to recognize that it was not the victims who failed. For the Jews of Europe, just staying alive as long as they could was resistance in itself. It was humanity that failed. It was the collective world population that failed. As Father John Pawlikowski reminds us, the failure of the church was largely due to the fact that the church had no policy on human rights.

seeking the holy spirit together
Three dimensional; oil-based mixed media, 14" x 10" © carolyn h. manosevitz.
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Upon recognizing the great loss in my family due to the Shoah, I vowed to keep alive the memory of those who perished. The only way we have of honoring them is to preserve their memory.

In May 2003, I traveled to the Ukraine, accompanied by my husband and our two sons. I thought the purpose of this trip was to see the place that I had heard about daily growing up. I wanted to see the land and the town that my mother talked about and yearned for every day of her life. I stood at the mass grave in Kremenets where 15,000 Jews are buried. I recited the Kaddish (Hebrew prayer for the dead) over and over again. Then I realized that that is why I had come—to stand at the mass grave and recite the Kaddish for my relatives who are buried there. Our non-Jewish guide told me that the moment he saw me at the airport, he knew that that was my real reason for coming.

As I repeated the Kaddish over and over again, I felt the spirits of my Christian brothers and sisters with me. Several friends and colleagues sent me messages wishing me well on my journey. I realized I could not have made this journey without their support—without the strength of my Christian brothers and sisters holding me up, without their words of encouragement.

Since that day, my original assumptions have been confirmed. The collective Jewish Community has been wounded. As Elie Wiesel reminds us, “While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims.” We need the whole world to help us heal.

My dear friend Rabbi Marc Sack reminds us of a famous Talmudic passage on suffering:

Rabbi Yochanan became ill. Rabbi Chaninah came to him and said, “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand and Rabbi Chaninah raised him up. And why? “One who is imprisoned does not release himself from prison.”

Traditionally Jews, as in the destruction of the second temple, have understood human suffering, individual or collective as punishment for sin. However, the Talmud teaches us that Rabbi Yochanan does find resolution to his suffering in an act of love by a friend. The Talmud suggests that a resolution to our suffering may come by acts of human kindness.

Rabbi Sack continues:

. . . the contemporary Jewish community has not been able to find meaning in the devastation that can justify this horror. And like Rabbi Yochanan, the aftermath of the Shoah has been a prison of sorts. We Jews remain deeply hurt by the memory of our helplessness during those years: the Jews of Europe could not save themselves, and no amount of entreaties to the American government by the Jews of this country could stop the murder. This helplessness, and the shame and anger that attend it, are the underlying causes of many of the debates of today’s Jewish community. It is also a source of the anguish and guilt felt by the survivors of the Shoah.
Furthermore, Rabbi Sack says:

Manosevitz’s encounter with Dieter Henzl, a German man studying for the ministry, is most dramatic: she allows him to play the role of Rabbi Chaninah in the Talmudic passage. It is Henzl who says, “Give me your hand,” to Manosevitz and “lifts her up” to help her move beyond her anger. And in allowing him to do this, Manosevitz helps Henzl “find healing,” to use her language, from his feelings of German guilt and shame.

Regarding the Shoah, the Jewish community has found no answers to the question, “why did God do this to us?” But through her personal story, Manosevitz points a way to what we must do now. Through engagement with the other, even our erstwhile enemies, we Jews can free ourselves from our prison of guilt and shame over our national helplessness.

Rabbi Sack has reminded me of the simple talmudic teaching: “A resolution to our suffering may come by acts of human kindness.” That has been the most significant lesson from my current journey. It is the acts of kindness and compassion from my Christian brothers and sisters—my ‘other,’ that have contributed to my healing.

*A Life-Changing Moment*

After I returned to the United States, I had laryngitis for a week. A friend said that I was being silenced so that I could process what I had experienced. I could not paint for a month. And when I finally returned to painting, the images were simply faces and grasses—the invisible faces I saw at the mass grave in Kremenets and the grasses covering them. Much of my current imagery is still inspired by that trip to Kremenets. Standing at that mass grave was a life-changing moment for me as well as my art. Some of those images include paintings such as:

*we who are the remnants*
*the eternal presence of absence*
*if i forget thee o Jerusalem . . .* (inspired by Ps 137:5)

To this day, I remain committed to preserving the memory of not just my family buried in a mass grave in the Ukraine, but of all Jews murdered during the Shoah. Those who inhabited the shtetls (small Jewish communities) have much to teach us about tenacity, spirit, and tradition. It has been my Christian brothers and sisters who have given me the courage to face this legacy and attempt to preserve it.
This has been an unbelievable journey for me. I believe it is *beshert*—Yiddish meaning “it was meant to be.” Some have suggested that it is divinely inspired. I cannot argue. Just a generation ago, my aunts, uncles, cousins were murdered by their non-Jewish neighbors. My father could not find a safe haven for any of them. Almost every country had closed its doors. And today, sixty-five years after the end of the war, his daughter is a visiting lecturer at several Christian seminaries, teaching about the Catastrophe. I have had many angels along my path to healing—angels like John Pawlikowski who insists: “All Christian theology must be rooted in historical consciousness after the Shoah and in the realization
that salvation can be achieved only in alliance with Jews within history” (Pawlikowski, 40). And angels such as Paul van Buren who explains: “. . . we need to realize that we Christians are Gentiles called to serve the God of Israel alongside of and in no sense in the stead of the Jewish people of God” (van Buren, 57). And angels like Bob Shelton, Phillip Blackburn, Dieter Heinzl, and David Dunne . . . angels who are my Christian brothers. May the G-d of our fathers and mothers bless them all. And from Jeremiah 17/14, I borrow these words:

\[ R'\text{fachni adonai v'nehrahfeh} \]

Heal me O Lord and I will be healed.

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**the eternal presence of absence**

Three dimensional; oil-based mixed media, 12" x 11" © carolyn h. manosevitz.

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if i forget thee o jerusalem
Three dimensional; oil-based mixed media, 14" x 12" © carolyn h. manosevitz.
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References


