

ABOUT ME AND MY RATHER UNLIKELY LIFE IN AND AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

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FOREWORD

There is a story set in Italy of about a hundred years ago. A man goes to see a very famous doctor. The doctor asks him why he has come. The man says, *"doctor, I am the most unhappy man. My life is empty. It is devoid of pleasure or meaning. I suffer heavily through my days. Everything seems dark to me and I cannot find any comfort or hope. I see no end to this. My friends cannot help me. Can you help me?"* The doctor says, *"I know just the thing for you! Go to the circus, and see Grimaldi the clown. He's the funniest creature you will ever have seen. He'll have you falling off your seat in laughter and your cares will melt away. He'll raise your spirits. Really, treat yourself to a visit to the circus and see Grimaldi. You won't regret it."*

The man says, *"I am Grimaldi"*.

People have always liked me. They've found me to be smart and interesting, and they've even enjoyed my dry sense of humor. But in my life I have felt a lot like Grimaldi did. I am 82 years old as I write this, and I am spending a lot of time looking at the windey path of my eight decades, including what a miracle (i.e., *statistically ridiculously improbable outcome*) it was that I survived my early life -- which began in the middle of the Holocaust of World War II -- at all. I've had a lot of good luck and a lot of bad luck over the years in ways and circumstances that are beyond imagination. I don't feel I'm being particularly morbid in thinking about the bad things; they are part of my life just like the good stuff is. I must say, though, that the very worst parts are intangible and thus hard to find adequate words for.

THE EUROPEAN HOLOCAUST OF WORLD WAR II

As far as my public and professional life is concerned, I am a guitar maker and writer; I am well-known for these things. As far as my personal life is concerned, it began with the fact of being a Holocaust survivor and child of Holocaust survivors. I've never spoken much, nor written, about that side of my life. There is quite a large and growing body of archived narratives of what people did in order to survive that genocidal event and its deadly circumstances. Those archives are available to anyone to read, and will in the future be mostly read by researchers instead of people looking for stories to reminisce about. There are people who believe that individuals who did NOT live in "the camps", and who survived without having been captives, are not "real" Holocaust survivors. They're wrong. There are others who don't believe that the Holocaust happened at all. They're wrong too. They hold these seemingly anti-Semitic opinions in order to have the pleasure of being contrary, with an element of smugness, as they have no trouble believing in every other genocide and war that humans have ever engaged in.

I was born in Hungary in May of 1944, right in the middle of the World War II. And I survived it. But unlike most of the survivors who have written about the risky things that they and their families did in order to remain alive against tremendous odds and losses, I myself didn't actually do anything to stay alive. I was too young to be a participant in any way other than to *take in* and *absorb*. I didn't *observe*; I was a neonate/infant whose young brain wasn't up to such a task. I'm alive because my mother kept me alive. I was at that point no more than a biological and neural sponge. Infants don't *do* anything that has the remotest connection with any sense of existing. They don't know that they exist any more than a sea urchin knows it exists. Infants feel (i.e., *take in*) everything without any of it making any sense. They are sponges without cognition; everything they take in is raw data. They absorb *everything* -- from champagne to sewage -- directly and in the moment, without filters or defenses . . . and without any control over any of it.

And how not? Infants are born "knowing" NOTHING other than to suckle, defecate, and sleep. Infants know NOTHING about what's what, where, how, when, who, why, NOW vs. NOT NOW, HERE vs. NOT HERE, THIS vs. THAT, or even ME vs. NOT ME. Whatever they're taking in through their eyes, ears, taste, and skin is beyond them . . . 24-7 . . .

. . . and so, not yet having meaningfully functioning brain cells, life is a basic "really good" or "really bad", in a way that a fish might understand . . . in a timeless and nameless way that contains no thoughts or words for anything like *Me, You, Us, It, Hot, Cold, red, green, Big, Small, Up, Down, wet, dry, loud, quiet, light, dark, Male, Female* . . . etc. Mammals need to make sense of such data; and by the time humans are two or three years old they've already learned enough to fill an encyclopedia of little details and big impressions -- that they'll spend years putting together in making some of life's "bigger pictures".

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SIDEBAR: The current/recent [i.e., the 2020s] Ukrainian peoples' wartime experiences will have been no different than the ones I'd had . . . with the exception of the fact that most Ukrainians are far more than three years old and have a sense of both "*now*" vs. "*not now*" and "*me*" vs. "*them*". And they have a sense that they are Ukrainians who are at war with non-Ukrainians. So, the one big difference between my experience and theirs is the fact that they already know that *they are not the same thing* as their war experiences. They have identities. I just couldn't make that distinction at my young age. I marinated in War well before I had any sense of "*me*". And, lacking any boundary between the "all of it" and the "*me*" I experienced the confusion, terror, and turmoil around me simply as *being me*.

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I marinated in war even while still in the womb. I took it in along with my mother's adrenalin-fed terrors, hunger, deprivations, freezing in the Winter, the sounds of bombing and screaming . . . and the fear of death . . . and the shaking of the ground from the bombings . . . and then the dreadful silences . . . 24-7. It went on from the day I was conceived, day after day, and week after week, and month after month, for the first year-plus of my life. Well . . . those earliest data *were* the first sensations I ever had, and the first sounds I ever heard. You could call those my mother's milk.

Along with that, though, my mother was not – and had never been – a toucher. I think she was shell-shocked since before I was born and she never emerged from that. She touched and held me as little as possible at a time when I needed it most, and a lot of my earliest life experience was something that I could later describe as being a great emptiness -- even though in this case that's just a word. The first data to come in are the foundation for whatever gets built on top of that, and a sense of the world is laid down in stone (neurons, actually) before anyone has any idea of cognitive. It's only about a year or two into this that we even "think" that "we" are "something" that "exists". So, the very first life experiences I ever "learned about" were those that gave me the capacity to "feel" Lack of Safety².

Now, I mostly carry with me a degree of fear that I hide well and if you ever met me you'd never know it. By the time you get to be my age, though, you'll have an idea of how many of the people we live among are badly damaged, or internally misshapen, and otherwise carry heavy internal burdens. Read this last sentence again; it's one of the most true pieces of information I've ever put on paper.

Years ago I participated in a Children Of Holocaust Survivors discussion group. There were 20 of us in it. The topic of discussion was not our personal histories, but something really academic and uninteresting to me: *how the Holocaust had affected our choices of careers*. I didn't really care what these people did. And I was certainly far from having any career of my own. But in this group's discussions it became clear to me that MOST of these people's families contained histories of depressions, dysfunctions, trauma, serious mental problems, abuse, and suicide. Of course, given the theme we'd signed up for, those things were not what we talked much about. It also didn't help that the participants were in their twenties, thirties, and forties, and had not spent much time reflecting on how their Holocaust aftershocks might have affected their choice of work; so what could they know about their lives? For that matter, no one that I know of talks about those kinds of things openly even now when they're older. These are not topics of conversation. Today, those with Holocaust accounts and their various resonances are dying out. Yet, how are such narratives not part of the package of life, of people of those places and times? And their children, too, who would have absorbed things that were never spoken about out loud at home.

"How the Holocaust might have affected one's choice of career" can be tricky to pin down regardless of how hard you try. There can be many other factors involved and many of those are likely to be post-Holocaust ones – like the parenting one has had – and which may be more related to the Holocaust. Many of those would fall into the category of P.T.S.D., which is not usually thought of as a formative factor in anything; it is instead considered to be an interruption or inhibition of "normal and neutral life experiences" and therefore a part of some other process than whatever winds up being a career. You know: a problem that is helped by therapy. No one goes to a therapist to discuss what career one ought to shoot for.

