

# “I lit the candle with fire from my heart” Observing Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) at a Jewish Home for the Aged

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Volume 34, Number 1-2, 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1026146ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026146ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)  
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gould, J. (2012). “I lit the candle with fire from my heart”: Observing Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) at a Jewish Home for the Aged. *Ethnologies*, 34(1-2), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026146ar>

Article abstract

At the Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) ceremony at the Terraces of Baycrest in Toronto, resident survivors sit at a head table facing the room. They are the embodiment of the ceremony: the victims we remember and the survivors before us. As the eyewitnesses of the darkest time in Jewish history, they mourn their family and friends, and the community mourns with them.

This paper presents a case study of this unique service, which stands apart because it is situated in a seniors’ residence. Other Holocaust Remembrance Day observances typically take place “outside” in public institutional spaces: synagogues, schools, community centres, museums; but here, residents invite the community “inside”—into the institutional home—and highlights each survivor’s experiences. By giving residents an opportunity to bring to the foreground their individual narratives, Baycrest staff members facilitate the confirmation of each person’s self-worth and sense of identity. In this way, a creative ritual like the Yom Hashoah Ceremony helps residents to face death, mourning, and remembrance in a supportive, familiar environment while contributing to the sense of family, culture, and community shared by the residents and their extended families.

## **“I LIT THE CANDLE WITH FIRE FROM MY HEART”**

*Observing Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) at a Jewish Home for the Aged*

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Once a year, at the Terraces of Baycrest, a Jewish retirement home in Toronto, residents, families, and community members participate in a Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) ceremony<sup>1</sup>. The service integrates the past into the present lives of residents, honouring resident Holocaust survivors by highlighting their collective history. Furthermore, the retirement home opens its doors to family members, as well as to the larger community (Jewish and Gentile), to bear witness, and in turn, implores these witnesses to “never forget.” This paper explores the various meanings of the Yom Hashoah service, which provides a space to enact grief, loss, courage, and celebration. The ceremony incorporates elements of various Jewish mourning customs, and is propelled by history, narrative and collective and personal experience. Finally, this paper explores how Holocaust narratives are central to the Terraces Yom Hashoah ceremony, and yet, the details of these narratives are not shared during the service, but rather discussed and shared separately – and privately – at the Terraces Survivors’ Group meetings throughout the year.

### **Origins of Yom Hashoah**

Of all ways to commemorate the destruction of European Jewry, perhaps none – save narrative – is more endemic to Jewish tradition than the

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1. This paper is a revised chapter from my PhD thesis (2009). Thanks to my mentors and colleagues who offered support and encouragement along the way, especially to Hanna Griff-Sleven, Jerry Pocius, and Diane Tye. Heartfelt thanks to all the past and present residents and staff of the Terraces at Baycrest, particularly to the resident survivors, and to Paula David and Shawn Fremeth for sharing your insights and suggestions. Finally, I am grateful for the sharp and helpful comments received through the anonymous review process.

day of remembrance. (Young 1993: 263)

According to anthropologist Harvey Goldberg, among countless issues raised by the enormity of the Holocaust, are some of the “personal” and “practical” matters relating to Jewish custom. As he points out:

Often, those wishing to say kaddish [prayer recited for the dead] annually for relatives who died in the gas chambers do not know a date of a family member’s death and can only recite the kaddish on occasions of communal memorial... (2003: 221-2).

In this light, Yom Hashoah was designated as the official date to mourn Holocaust victims, whose *yartzeit* (anniversary of death) is unknown. This day of remembrance serves a practical and personal need for Jews to remember individuals, as well as the collective victims who perished in the Holocaust. The cultural history of this solemn date, however, is a story in itself, explored in detail by Holocaust scholar James E. Young (1993: 243-285). As Young and others have pointed out, choosing a date for Yom Hashoah was not without controversy, since days of remembrance and commemorative fast days have long been observed at different times throughout the Jewish calendar, and it was difficult to come to a consensus regarding a new day specially for Holocaust victims (Young 1993: 243-285; Robinson 2000: 128-29; Klagsbrun 1996: 139-141). “Like historical incidents related in narrative,” writes Young, “the Jewish holidays, festivals, and fasts also acquire meaning according to their places on time’s grid” (Young 1993: 264), so designating a suitable day proved to be challenging.

The Israeli Parliament (known as the Knesset) chose the Hebrew calendar date: 27 Nisan (five days after Passover) in 1951 to coincide with the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This is significant because it illustrates Israel’s effort to create a post-Holocaust identity of fighters, not victims. As Young explains: “In keeping with their vision of a new, fighting Jew and their rejection of the old, passive Jew as victim, the founders would prevent this day from entering the commemorative cycle of destruction altogether” (268). The cycle refers to the day that had previously been suggested by the rabbinate: the Tenth of Tevet, which, as mentioned above, already existed on the Jewish calendar as a date of mourning. For the “New Jew,” explains Young, the aim “was never merely to find a new world view... but to select which governing views to advance and which to abandon” (266). It was time to replace the “old” ways of commemorating with something new. While 27 Nisan was accepted in 1951 as the designated date, as *Jewish Days* author, Francine Klagsbrun

points out, given that Jews were only just starting to come to terms with the Holocaust, “[f]or the most part, the resolution was ignored” (1996: 140). The Knesset continued to debate its name, the appropriateness of its chosen date, and added new elements of its mandate. Still, the public remained uninterested, “it seemed that the day of remembrance had been forgotten by all but survivors and partisans,” writes Young (1993: 270). The Knesset responded by creating a law for this holiday observance in 1959, with a few changes from the previous incarnation. Originally it had been called Holocaust and Ghetto Uprising Day [Yom Hashoah Umered Hageta’ot], but some thought the Ghetto Uprising was too specific, so it was renamed Day of Remembrance of Holocaust and Heroism [Yom Hashoah Vehagevurah]. In North America, most know it simply as Yom Hashoah. Furthermore, by law, two minutes of silence would be observed throughout Israel. At the sound of a siren, “all traffic on the roads shall cease” (quoted in Young 1993: 271). Klagsbrun describes the stand-still as incredibly moving, to hear the wail of the siren and to witness all activity stopped for a moment of silence: “People look like figures in a wax museum” (1996: 141), while Young, reflecting on his own experience describes “the wail growing tighter and thinner, like a taut thread, binding all together, until it unwinds”. After the siren he wonders “where they were, and if they remember the moment we shared” (1993: 280).

Outside of Israel, it is not so dramatic, and the observance itself did not really catch on until a second turning point in 1961, with the highly publicized trial of the infamous Nazi, Adolf Eichmann. Though the trial took place in Israel, Jews everywhere – who were only just coming to terms with the devastation that took place in Europe – were following it; according to Klagsbrun, “the trial opened discussion about the Holocaust that has continued to intensify with time” (140). Today Yom Hashoah is observed worldwide. While there were challenges in choosing the date, “Beyond its place on the calendar,” writes Young, “Holocaust remembrance is enacted by a variety of observances encompassed by the day, including commemorative ceremonies and speeches, moments of silence, and mass-media programming” (265). Most often these take place in public spaces: synagogues, community centres, and schools. Because it is a fairly new observance, performed rituals are constantly evolving, and vary from group to group. But there is often a basic structure for the public ceremonies, including a candle-lighting ceremony (usually with six candles for the six million Jews who perished); the reciting of the Kaddish; a recitation of a Yiddish poem or song, and singing the Hatikvah, Israel’s national anthem.

Often these public ceremonies honour Holocaust survivors who live in the community, by inviting them to light the candles and participate in the service in various ways.

### **Yom Hashoah in the Institutional Home**

In Toronto, at the Terraces of Baycrest, the ceremony has special significance, as it honours its own resident survivors, who are the key participants in the service. Whereas other services may invite Holocaust survivors as special guests, here the survivors invite the community to join them in their home as they remember their past and look towards the future. What follows is an ethnographic account of a Yom Hashoah service that took place at the Terraces in 2005. At the time, I was wrapping up my thesis fieldwork about the lives and domestic culture of the Terraces residents; how they create and re-create notions of “home” through their material culture, narratives, and creative rituals. I return to the ceremony, nearly ten years later, wondering how the service might have changed. In fact, it has changed very little; and the number of resident participants has actually grown. As I will discuss below, a key aspect of the service is that it is formulaic. A comparison of the printed programs from 2005 and 2014 reveal the same basic structure for the service. The residents depend on this. As Paula David, the former coordinator of the Terraces Holocaust Resource Project told me, “The order of the service – that residents know what’s coming next, is crucial to the ceremony.” While the ceremony is a creative ritual that incorporates elements of various Jewish funerary and mourning traditions, the success of the service is that it follows a similar structure from year to year. Resident survivors take comfort in the conservative elements of the service, while the dynamic elements highlight the individuals and creative forces that change from year to year.<sup>2</sup>

### **Folklore and Yom Hashoah: Ritual, Narrative, Memory**

As a folklorist, I am interested in how people incorporate customs, rituals, and traditions into their everyday lives, and how groups express their beliefs and practices through various forms of traditional culture. While the Terraces is an ethno-specific setting, the diverse resident population incorporates many languages, experiences, beliefs, and values. Likewise, survivors have various experiences and beliefs, but many share elements of a past that bring them together. Like the summer Catskills residents

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2. See Barre Toelken (1996) for deeper discussion about the conservative and dynamic elements of tradition.

described by Holli Levitsky: “They may have survived in concentration or work camps, or in hiding – either literally or with an Aryan identity – in ghettos; they may have escaped to a safer city or country. But wherever they were, they were hunted by Nazis or their collaborators, marked for death because they were Jews” (2013: 25). Nevertheless, they survived, and their identities are wrapped up in their past experiences, and shaped as they tell (or don’t tell) what happened. Indeed, some survivors may feel that their experiences were not as horrific as others, and therefore may feel that their stories would not be validated. Amy Shuman remarks that: “Jews hidden during the Holocaust who were previously reluctant to tell their stories (because they did not suffer in concentration camps) find the validation of their experiences in group meetings in which they share both the stories of the experiences and their experience of not being able to tell their stories” (Shuman 2005: 55). Survivors, like families or other folk groups, create their own culture, based on a range and diversity of experiences. In *A Celebration of American Family Folklore*, Steve Zeitlin suggests: “For an individual family, folklore is its creative expression of a common past” (2001: 2). Terraces resident survivors, as well as their peers who fled Eastern-Europe pre-war, share a past, but like the Catskills survivors Levitsky describes: “their past was in a lost and now vanished world” (2013: 25). This paper explores several layers of the Yom Hashoah Ceremony and the Terraces Survivors’ Group. As participants in the Ceremony, survivors – by their very presence tell the audience: “I survived.” They participate in the ceremony, they take part in the ritual, yet their trauma is deeply etched into their everyday lives beyond this one day. As Amy Shuman notes: “The problem that a trauma survivor faces is to integrate the self of the past with the self of the present” (2005: 57). Furthermore, notes Mark Klempner: “Unlike ordinary narratives, trauma narratives almost always engage the narrator in an attempt to find closure... However, it may come in increments, and the concept is best conceived of in a flexible way, allowing for the many different ways and degrees it can manifest” (2006: 200).<sup>3</sup> At the Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony, resident survivors tell their stories – not as traditional narratives, but by participating in the service, sitting at the head table, and by telling the audience *who they are* and *where they were*. As participants in the ceremony, their past experiences and their present lives as survivors are made visible to their peers, neighbors, and to the larger community.

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3. For further discussion of trauma narratives please see Inger Agger (1994); Judith Herman (1993); Lawrence Langer (1993); and Elaine Lawless (2001).

## Yom Hashoah Ceremony at the Terraces

*By the very act of remembrance, oblivion and the limitations of the present are defied, death is made irrelevant, and a plane is established on which the dead do indeed meet and mingle with the living. The ceremony is transformed from a memorial of death into an affirmation of life.*

Theodor Gaster, quoted in Heilman (2001: 222)

Gaster's words are about *yiskor* (memorial service), but they hold particular resonance – especially the last line, about the ceremony's transformation “from a memorial of death into an affirmation of life” – for the Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony. When the community comes together to remember the Holocaust, resident survivors sit at a head table facing the room. They are the embodiment of the ceremony: the victims we remember and the survivors before us. The eyewitnesses of the darkest time in Jewish history, they mourn their family and friends, and the community mourns with them. They are the living memory of events that remain difficult to comprehend. “As late as 1993,” writes Francine Klagsbrun, “at the dedication of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., Elie Wiesel said, ‘It is not because I cannot explain that you won't understand, it is because you won't understand that I cannot explain’” (Klagsbrun 1996: 139). A similar statement is expressed in the Terraces Holocaust Survivors' Group collective poem, “Who Could Understand?” (David 1995b: 23). It begins:

Even the North American Jews – they can't understand.  
 Nobody can feel what we lived through.  
 They wouldn't understand because we ourselves can't understand.  
 We lived through everything we did and we don't know how.  
 We lived through everything and it hurts to talk about it.  
 I personally cannot understand how I went through it.

The Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony is not only a ritual of remembrance, but also it is a dialogue between survivors and the community to continue to build bridges of understanding regarding the events of the Holocaust.

On April 15, some three weeks before the 2005 Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony, Paula David, who has been organizing it since the early 1990s, calls a meeting with the resident survivors to discuss the upcoming ceremony. “It's your *yartzeit*,” she says in her deep voice that is both comforting and matter of fact. *Yartzeit* is the anniversary of death. Musing on the actual translation of *yartzeit*: “a year's time,” Samuel Heilman speculates “that

it is not the dead alone for whom this ‘year’s time’ is marked; it is no less for the living and in particular the bereaved” (2001: 194). “I want you to feel strong,” Paula David tells the group of survivors, looking carefully at each of their faces. Paula has worked closely with the resident survivors for over twenty years. At the time of my fieldwork, she was the coordinator of the Holocaust Resource Project, and worked with various communities of Holocaust survivors, both Terraces residents, as well as with members of the larger community. Currently Paula is a lecturer in Gerontology and clinical practice at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. While Paula is a social worker by profession, she also is a visual artist, and the programs she facilitates – and the resulting products – reflect her creativity, for example, the Holocaust Quilt that hangs in the Terraces Lobby, and the publication of the Terraces Survivors’ Group *Collected Poems*, which David edited and illustrated. The Yom Hashoah Ceremony is no exception, as Terraces resident survivors perform memory, remembrance, and mourning rituals, collaboratively and creatively with the community. Like other programs at the Terraces, the ceremony mirrors “official” observance/ custom, but it has its own variations, giving it special meaning for the residents. That day, Paula explained what the ceremony – pageant-like – would entail. She waves to the front of the room and tells everyone there will be a head table set up, where they all will sit.

“If you have a walker, we’ll park it out of the way,” she says. “Shawn [social worker] or Bobbie [therapeutic recreationist] will take your arm and walk you to your seat.” She continues: “A *yartzeit* candle will be placed in front of each of you. Bobbie or Shawn will come to you with a flame to light it. You will say your name, and what camp you were at, or ghetto – some people don’t want to name these places; if that’s the case, just say where you’re from.”

There is some buzz in the room as some residents exchange tidbits of their lives. Most of them know each other well through the Survivors’ Group, but there are also a few newcomers. The Terraces Yom Hashoah ceremony echoes elements of *shiva* (seven days of mourning after death), *yiskor* (memorial service), and *yartzeit* (anniversary of death), and also highlights certain dichotomies: individual/communal, private/public, Jewish/Gentile, old/young. The Yom Hashoah service follows a script; likewise, the room set-up is staged to the very last detail. Step-by-step, Paula describes what will take place during the service. It will be very emotional, and it is helpful for the residents to know exactly how the ceremony will unfold. There is no room for improvisation; structure is crucial. On the program will be the



Baycrest cantor, who will lead the Hebrew prayers and songs, as well as a class of local public school students, who had participated in a multi-visit Holocaust-related intergenerational program with Terraces residents. The children will read some poems, light a candle, and sing a song that they wrote. “Would anyone here like to stand up and read a poem?” Paula asks the group. No one seems particularly enthusiastic. “As everyone gets older, it’s harder to read,” she says sympathetically. “You can let me know later. You’ll have plenty of time to practice beforehand,” she reassures them. “What about a Yiddish song? ‘The Partisans’ Song’?” she asks, referring to the iconic resistance song, which is often sung at Holocaust memorials. Mrs. Fish, a survivor, says one of the ladies who could not make it to the meeting has a beautiful voice and knows all the Yiddish songs, but she can’t remember her name. “*Mit a husband*,” she says. With a husband. Since there are not many “mit a husband,” it did not take long to figure out whom she was referring to: Dora. “OK,” laughs Paula. “I’ll ask Dora-mit-a-husband.”

Paula tells the group the ceremony will be a little bit different this year. In the past it had been in the evenings in order to accommodate working family and community members. But the timing was not ideal for resident participants, who needed time to debrief, unwind and relax before going to bed. This year, the service would take place in the afternoon. Some residents express concern that their family members might not be able to attend, but Paula assures them they would have plenty of time to make arrangements. Later that day, Paula tells me about previous ceremonies. “It’s always so emotionally grueling,” she explains, and by the evening most residents had already expended most of their energy. Furthermore, although the ceremony functions to nurture and support resident survivors, it can also trigger brutal memories. The evening ceremony did not leave enough time to socialize and debrief before going to bed – some residents either could not fall asleep afterwards, or suffered a fitful sleep or had nightmares. A ceremony in the afternoon on the other hand, would allow the rest of the day to unwind and to sort through the range of emotions. Mostly the residents seemed pleased with the time change. Some ten years later, the service continues to be held in the afternoon. Immediately following the Ceremony, the survivors would be invited for tea. “Only survivors,” emphasizes Paula, “not friends who are residents,” she says. Gatherings, especially when they involve food, always draw big crowds at the Terraces; and with crowds, there are usually commotions as well. Paula wanted to ensure that the survivors would have a respectful, calm environment, where they could discuss their feelings if they wished, or simply sit in relative silence. “It will be difficult,” Paula

says, “it may be horrible, but we are all here to support each other.” Fela, never shy, pipes up: “How can a memorial be horrible if we’ve survived the war?” she asks, and others agree.

On the afternoon of May 5, 2005, the service took place in the Terraces Auditorium. I arrived early to help Paula with the set-up. Maintenance staff had set up the room – the “head table” – was a long row at the front of the auditorium. Two hundred chairs were set up for the audience. Paula had organized over a dozen of these ceremonies previously, and she knew exactly what needed to be done.

### **What it looked like**

Long tables with white tablecloths were set up horizontally at the front of the room. Three large black “mourning ribbons” were pinned to the middle and on each end of the table. A banner hangs on the wall behind the tables, “Holocaust Memorial – Yom HaShoah – We Remember Never to Forget.” Thirty-one Terraces survivors would sit behind these tables, facing the audience, a card in front of them indicating the place where they survived. Their names are on the back of the cards, so survivors can easily find their seats. As representatives of diverse Holocaust experiences, it is significant that the cards contain little more than the geographical information of where they were. As each resident sits behind a card, the collective history trumps individual stories. Each survivor is metonymic for *all* who did *not* survive. And yet, each individual is recognized and honoured as well. The cards represent the diversity of Holocaust experiences – not all were in the camps, but the trauma they experienced reflects what Paula David describes as their “special and unique sense of self” (2000: 2). Furthermore, David suggests, “it is essential to be aware and open to the range and depth of pre-war experiences of the survivor as well as to their varied trauma uniquely experienced” (David 1994: 2). “Here’s who we call Survivors,” Paula announced at the earlier planning meeting: “If you were in Europe – any country that the Nazis occupied. If you were in hiding or had to go to Siberia.” She says this to validate their experiences. Many were in camps, others in exile or hiding. Some experiences spanned years and several places. Each card reveals glimpses, not of time or detailed experiences, but a little window of where they were. Here are some examples of the cards:

Auschwitz-Birkenau, Maidanek, Ravensbruck  
Warsaw Ghetto, Auschwitz, Mauthausen

Siberia, Stalingrad Exile  
 Russian Exile, Bergen-Belson  
 Lodz Ghetto, Auschwitz  
 Budapest Ghetto  
 Hiding  
 Romanian Ghetto

While these only represent a handful of the thirty-one cards, they show the diversity of Holocaust experiences the residents endured. Terraces resident survivors come from various countries and cultures. The cards signify the myriad of places and cultures that make up a large part of the Terraces resident population. As I take a short break from setting up, in wanders Mina – a resident, a survivor. She sits down and we talk for a bit. She and her family – parents, brother, his wife, and their new baby – were sent to a concentration camp in Transnistria. Only Mina, who was a young thirteen years old at the beginning of the ordeal, and miraculously, her tiny nephew – survived. Mina recalls they were forced to walk to the camp, “I don’t know how many miles,” she pauses. “I want to forget.” By a twist of fate, her older sister, an early Zionist, had moved to Palestine and was spared the fate of her family. After many years apart, the two sisters ended up living at the Terraces – though they never seemed close. Mina walks over to see who she will be sitting next to, and is unimpressed that it will be someone from Romania. “Nothing happened there,” she says. I can’t help but smile, her words reflecting what I had already noticed: there is a sense of competition as many survivors tally up their experiences. Another poem, “The Survivor” from the Terraces Survivors’ Group *Collective Poems* (David 1995b) highlights exactly this:

It was worse in Siberia:  
 I went to work – thirty degrees below zero,  
 No clothes and two little children.  
 Just a little bread – a potato was a fortune.  
 We walked miles, it was hard to get up the hill.  
 And I was afraid to go down because it was slippery.  
 It was worse in Auschwitz.  
 There was no food – only snow.  
 There were guns and guards and dogs and executions.  
 It was worse in Buchenwald.  
 Everywhere there was the smell.  
 Everywhere there was the fear.  
 There was nothing to do, I could only wait.  
 And every day I waited to die.  
 It was worse in Bergen-Belsen,  
 No children could survive.

You couldn't hide,  
 There was nowhere safe.  
 Any survivor – every day was a miracle,  
 Sometimes in my dreams – I dream I don't know how I did it.  
 Whatever we did, we had to be strong.  
 You must be strong.  
 Wherever there was a Jew was a miracle.  
 Somehow I survived.

As Paula David notes, “The [Collective] Poems are a tangible testament to the members’ strengths and survival capabilities, and the Group hopes that the collective nature of the Poems will speak on behalf of other survivors unable to articulate their feelings” (David 1995a: 6). While many of the Poems depict survival, this afternoon the survivors will mourn those who were lost. Attached to each place card is a piece of ripped black cloth; the same as the torn cloth worn by mourners at a *shiva* house<sup>4</sup>, these black swatches symbolize both the collective mourners as well as the victims.

The cloth pinned on the cards serves a different purpose than the black ribbons which adorn the head table. The latter are black and stark, but decidedly decorative, neatly cut and tied. They may trigger an association with the ripped black cloth of mourners, but similar to mourning wreaths, they are not culturally specific. The ripped cloth on the card, on the other hand, refers specifically to the Jewish custom of rending the garment upon hearing of death. Nowadays, it is very common for Jewish mourners to wear a pinned piece of black cloth to their clothing during *shiva*. As Jenna Weissman Joselit points out, rending the garment lost favour, “despite its touted therapeutic value,” and “gave way to the more modern, resolutely genteel custom of discreetly substituting a black ribbon... for a glaringly ripped blouse, tie, or suit jacket” (1994: 281). Pinned on the card, it is as if all who suffered in Eastern Europe are mourning as well; individual names and facts are irrelevant. Behind each card is a second piece of ripped cloth. Once each resident takes her seat, she will pin it onto her clothing. The ribbons are material aspects of remembrance. Here individual mourning becomes public, and a reminder to all of their personal grief. Through these material symbols and customs, we see how the Yom Hashoah service incorporates and reinterprets various Jewish mourning customs. In front of each card is a *yartzeit* candle (customarily lit each year on anniversary of death), which each individual will light (or will be lit by Shawn or

4. The Jewish mourning custom is for immediate family members to “sit shiva” at home for seven days immediately following the funeral. The “shiva house” is where shiva takes place. Friends and family visit the mourners, provide comfort, and offer prayers.

Bobbie) when her name is called. Lighting the *yartzeit* candle echoes the observance of *yartzeit*, while wearing and displaying the mourner's cloth, weaves in aspects of *shiva* as well.

Lastly there is a small table set up near the podium where Paula David will stand. The "tablecloth" is a *tallis* (prayer shawl). A glass vase with thirty-one white and red roses, stands next to a row of six *yartzeit* candles. Unlike the small candles in front of the place cards, these candles are in a tall jar. Traditionally these longer burning candles (seven-day) are lit during *shiva*, but today they will be lit for the Candle Lighting Ceremony – the heart of the service, to be discussed below.

### **Yom Hashoah Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony – 5 May 2005**

Paula David makes the opening remarks, "The Terraces has more survivors in one place than anywhere in Toronto – if not in Canada. On this day of remembering, we should be proud to have so many survivors." Despite time that has passed, and the advanced years of Terraces residents, Paula's statement remains true today. In fact, Shawn Fremeth, who currently introduces the ceremony, says the resident survivor population at the Terraces is larger than ever before. In 2014, of the approximately 180 residents at the Terraces, there are 60 Holocaust survivors. "There were 48 survivors who participated in this year's (2014) ceremony," Shawn tells me. "There were so many names, we had to keep extending the Head Table. That's never happened before!"

I am sitting near the back so I can see that almost all two hundred seats are full. Residents, family and community members, school children and Baycrest staff seem to be sitting unusually straight. The mood is pensive, sad, somewhat uncomfortable. Residents in the audience are dressed up for the occasion – skirts and pearls and a visit to the hair salon. Like a funeral, this is a formal and solemn occasion. The survivors had made their way to their seats before the Ceremony began; some look out at the audience, others keep their heads bowed down. After the opening remarks, one by one, Shawn and Bobbie take turns bringing a microphone and a rose to each survivor.

Lea speaks first: "I am from ghetto in Romania," she says, accent thick. Shawn lays the rose in front of the place card, and lights the *yartzeit* candle. Each resident speaks, few words, lots of emotion.

"I survived as a Gentile," a voice says quietly.

“I come from Poland, and I survived in Stalingrad and Siberia,” says Fela, strong, defiant. She wears a striking black sweater with sequins and white geometric shapes. Her hair expertly blow-dried, lipstick and blush – unusual for Fela – she looks beautiful and proud. Many wear black, even though, notes Jenna Weissman Joselit, “wearing black was never a particularly Jewish practice” (1994: 281). Skirts and blouses, special jewelry, a hat. A few women wear a traditional lace head covering. As is typical at the Terraces, the women outnumber the men: there are only two gentlemen in the group. When the microphone is passed to tiny, wrinkled Mrs. Guttman, who survived Auschwitz, a man behind me whispers to his neighbour, “She’s a hundred and three.”

### Candle Lighting

“I lit the candle with fire from my heart”

Terraces Holocaust Survivors’ Group

So many threads of traditional Jewish mourning customs are incorporated into the Yom Hashoah observance. While the black cloth worn by the survivors was subtle and may have gone unnoticed by an “outsider” eye, the performative nature of the candle lighting indicated to all that it was a noteworthy element of the ceremony. Candle lighting can be a marker to frame both religious and secular rites of passages, often involving life and death. Lighting and blowing out birthday candles indicate a new year for the living; on the other hand, it is Jewish custom to light a candle upon learning of death, and again at the start of *shiva*. Unlike the ritual of blowing out birthday candles, the *yartzeit* flame must die out on its own. Thus, if, as Samuel Heilman suggests, the lingering light represents the eternal soul (2001: 137), then the act of blowing out birthday candles is an affirmation of life on earth. The Jewish custom of lighting candles however, bridges the dead with the living. Each year after death, a candle is lit once again for *yartzeit*, explains Heilman: “a sign that the dead has returned on this anniversary for a brief call on those who mourn, or as other commentators see it, a sign that it has emerged out of the darkness and now is in the light of paradise” (137). Aside from death customs, candle-lighting is significant in other aspects of Jewish culture: in many homes, candles are lit to frame the beginning and ending of the weekly Sabbath, and Hanukkah candles are lit for each of the eight nights of Hanukkah. Outside the home, candle-lightings are common at contemporary Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations – calling on significant friends and relatives to

each light a candle during the evening festivities.

Of all the rituals that are performed throughout the ceremony, the candle lighting (individual and collective) is the most explicit, and some might argue, the most memorable. In fact, the *yartzeit* candle is the visual and material symbol of the ceremony: a photograph of a *yartzeit* candle adorns the printed program cover with the following words underneath:

As I light this Candle, I vow never to forget the lives of the Jewish men, women, and children who are symbolized by this flame. May the memory of their lives inspire us to live so that we may help to insure that part of who they were shall endure always.

There are two instances of candle lighting at the Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony. The first is the lighting of the individual *yartzeit* candles. Although they are lit on stage in front of an audience, lighting these candles seems to be a private act, as each candle “belongs” to the survivor who sits in front of it. Furthermore, lighting *yartzeit* candles is usually something that is only seen and done at home, in private. By lighting the candles on stage in front of an audience, Terraces resident survivors make their private worlds public, as they collectively light their candles, exposing their sorrow for all to share. The ritual of the *yartzeit* candle-lighting, and the power of the short narratives of the residents – where they came from, what they endured – are so powerful. Throughout, the audience remains visibly moved and silent. The dynamic elements of the service, for example, the shiva ribbons worn by the survivors, and the individual *yartzeit* candle lightings, are what make the Terraces Yom Hashoah service so unique. Paula David brings her creative forces to the group: it is her vision, along with the thoughts and comments of the Survivors’ Group throughout the year, that are at the heart of the 2005 service. In a recent telephone conversation I had with Paula, she said that over the years she has visited other Jewish senior homes in Toronto, and that only the Terraces includes the resident survivor population as active participants in the service. At other services, she says, survivors may light one of the six candles for the candle lighting sequence, or perhaps sing a song or read a poem. But to Paula’s knowledge, as well as to my own, the Yom Hashoah service at the Terraces has yet to be replicated.<sup>5</sup>

After the candles are lit for/by the survivors, Paula David returns to the podium to call on participants to light the six remaining candles, which are

5. In fact, as of June 2014, a preliminary search for references to Jewish senior homes that facilitate Yom Hashoah services came up with nothing. Certainly, this topic is ripe for further investigation.

lined up on the separate table, on a makeshift tallis tablecloth at the front of the room. The symbolism of the tallis is two-fold: it is a symbol of prayer and belief, and it is also customary for an observant Jew to be buried with his *tallis*. Calling on various community members to light these candles, this act becomes public and represents the collective and public mourning and remembering, as opposed to the individual and private action of lighting the single yartzeit candles.

“On behalf of the one-point-five million murdered children,” Paula calls upon three school children, whose class had collaborated with the Terraces Holocaust Survivors’ Group. The three children each light a candle. Next, Paula calls upon a Holocaust survivor from the larger community, “a child survivor, as well as the child of survivors” to light a candle for the survivors who were unable to participate, who “didn’t have the strength” – emotional or physical to confront their experiences in such a public display. This includes Terraces resident Margo, elegant and strong-spirited; she was just a little girl at the time. Though she is one of the most able of her peers, one of the “young-old,” she did not want to subject herself to the raw intensity of the ceremony. “It’s too much,” she said afterwards. Called to light the next candle, is the Terraces Maintenance Supervisor, Chris, on behalf of the “Righteous Gentiles<sup>6</sup>” – those who endangered their own lives by sheltering, helping, and ultimately saving Jewish lives. Finally, Paula calls upon a final resident survivor to light a candle on behalf of the Israeli soldiers.

The candle lighting represents a conservative element of every Yom Hashoah service (see for example Berman 2001: 77-78; Hollenberg 2000: 121; Klepfisz 1990: 131; Lipstadt 1999: 156). Calling on community members – including survivors, staff, residents, and schoolchildren – underscores the public nature of the ceremony, which propels the message to “never forget.” In 2014 the candle lighting and the community participation remain at the core. As Shawn explains, “We’ve tried to have all residents – not just survivors – participate in the service.” The school children no longer attend, but the Terraces Chorus (made up of residents) sings several Yiddish songs. Furthermore, in 2014, a candle is lit by two residents who are Canadian War Veterans, “on behalf of the Ghetto Fighters, Jewish Partisans, and Allied Armed Forces Liberators who sacrificed their lives” (Baycrest 2014). As in previous years, candles are lit for the Jewish men and women, and children who were murdered, as well as for the civilians and soldiers who

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6. Since 2005, the term “Righteous Gentile” has fallen out of favor; the 2014 ceremonial candle is lit by/ on behalf of “the Righteous Among the Nations who sacrificed their lives.”



“sacrificed their lives in defense of the State of Israel”. Finally, a candle is lit “on behalf of the men, women and children worldwide whose lives have been lost due to genocide, terrorism, violence and prejudice”. This candle represents the pursuit of social action and social justice, in the spirit of the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam* – *to repair the world* – linking the Holocaust to other crimes against humanity in order to strengthen global awareness.

### **The Pledge of Acceptance from the Second Generation, Kaddish, music and poems**

When all the candles are lit, Paula calls on a child of survivors to read the “Pledge of Acceptance from the Second Generation.” As Paula explains, the Pledge: “to never forget the legacy of the survivors,” had been recited in Hebrew, English, Yiddish, French, Russian and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) at the closing ceremony of the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors at the Western Wall in Jerusalem in 1981. It begins:

We accept the obligation of your legacy.

We are the first generation born after the darkness. Through our parents’ memories, words, and silence, we are linked to that annihilated Jewish existence, whose echoes permeate our consciousness.

We dedicate this pledge to you, our parents, who suffered and survived.  
To our grandparents, who perished in the flames. (Baycrest 2005: 7)

Without sounding cliché, it is difficult to describe how moving it was to hear the Pledge read out loud, in front of some thirty survivors and their peers. The survivors were looking straight ahead, thoughtful, strong, serious.

Everyone stands when the silver-voiced cantor sings the Kaddish (Mourner’s Prayer). Always poignant, but especially so in this context, in the words of Barbara Myerhoff: “The continuity of remembrance is assured for the dead by the children’s Kaddish prayers. And a community of mourners, an *Edah*, is created among those who recite the Kaddish, thus continuity is provided between all who have ever grieved for a loved one” (1978: 224). When the residents recite the Kaddish on Yom Hashoah, they collectively remember the victims who died at the hands of the Nazis, as well as remembering each time they have said Kaddish for individuals they have lost throughout their lives. The power of reciting this prayer, muses Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, is that it “call[s] up in paradigmatic fashion memories of the many contexts in which [it] has been performed” (1989: 330). As the Kaddish fills the room, I try to imagine the many

memories that are recalled, the countless people who are remembered by this collective prayer. The multiple generations in the room also allow the residents a glimpse into the future, some kind of reassurance that they too will be remembered. The room is filled with raw emotion. Many of the survivors – and nearly everyone in the audience – are crying. Intense grief and sadness thickens the air.

The mood lightens somewhat when Dora “mit-a-husband” is called to sing “In a Lithuanian Village” in Yiddish. Her voice is lovely and high-pitched, very theatrical, full of nostalgia. Some residents smile, many continue to cry. Fela, Mira, Mina – all strong and sharp as nails – I had never seen them cry. “Beautiful, just beautiful,” said the gentleman behind me when Dora finished the song. So touching, so moving, to hear Yiddish, the tune, the voice. In this context, Yiddish transcends language. Gerontologist Marc Kaminsky recalls his grandmother’s explanation of Yiddish:

Not only a *mame-loshn*, a mother tongue, but a motherland. Because land we didn’t have, we couldn’t own, but Yiddish, and the things we could carry away with us in Yiddish, this nobody could take from us. So if I go back to my motherland now, if I go back *there*, it’s to sit down in the middle of a good conversation with a few people who aren’t *here*. (Kaminsky 1993: 88)

Towards the end of the service, Dora is called back to sing the Yiddish resistance fighters’ anthem, “The Partisans’ Song,” which previously I had only read about. “The old,” write Hufford, Hunt, and Zeitlin, “are a ‘primary source’ of culture and tradition in their families and communities” (1987: 74). To hear this anthem performed in this context is nothing short of extraordinary. Many of the survivors sing along through their tears.

To end the Ceremony, all rise to sing the Israeli national anthem, Hatikvah.

At the tea reception after the Ceremony, there is a heaviness in the room, but a feeling of triumph as well. While the Ceremony followed the basic structure of other Yom Hashoah services, it is so unique because of the active participation – and sheer number – of the survivors who attend. But this was not always the case. In an unpublished paper, Paula David describes how several resident survivors approached her after the 1992 Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony. They wanted to be more involved, to share their feelings and experiences, “but were not sure they could handle either the organizational aspects or the expected emotional strains involved in coming together on a regular basis” (David 1994: 1). As a result, Paula

developed a support group, and since then, the group has worked together to create content and to share ideas about the presentation of the Ceremony, as well as to “ensure that as many places and people as possible will be included and recognized for the remembrance ceremony (ibid.: 8). Since Paula left the organization, there is no longer a Holocaust support group; however, the current Holocaust Resource Coordinator is currently working on establishing a monthly social gathering for resident Holocaust survivors. I end this section with one more collective poem written by the Group: “Yom Ha’Shoa Holocaust Remembrance Day,” a moving account of their thoughts and feelings regarding the Ceremony:

The ceremony was beautiful.  
 It made me so proud that I was there.  
 I didn’t think I could do it.  
 I would shake too much and cry.  
 If I started to cry with all the people watching,  
 My heart would roll away with my tears.  
 I don’t cry at public affairs,  
 Only when I am alone at night  
 And my memories push into my head.  
 I cried,  
 But it was alright because I was with my friends,  
 And safe with the remembering.  
 When the Cantor said Kaddish,  
 I thought of all my family.  
 I was the only one left,  
 And I knew I had to stay standing.  
 When the children sang the songs from my family,  
 In our language,  
 My tears were good tears.  
 Thank G-d for the children,  
 They are the hope for why I survived.  
 It was very important that so many people came to remember,  
 Because everyone lost.  
 I lit my candle with fire from my heart,  
 Wondering how I am still here to do this.  
 I know when I looked at all the people,  
 I survived, so I could be strong.  
 I can never forget for one moment,  
 I didn’t sleep that night.  
 But I wanted to stay safe in my bed with my memories,  
 Alone.  
 Tonight we knew we weren’t alone,  
 We want to thank everybody for Yom Ha-Shoa,  
 Because only we know how important it is.

We are the Survivors (David 1995b: 35)

The poem was written in the meetings that followed the 1993 Yom Hashoah Ceremony (David 1994: 8). Building on the core participation of the resident survivors in the Ceremony, the regular meetings of the Survivors' Group and the creation of their *Collective Poems* were a key element of the debriefing and healing process of the Yom Hashoah service. As Paula David remarks: "What historically was viewed as an emotional ordeal that residents felt obligated to participate in to pay tribute to the memories of their lost relatives, has changed its tone since the Survivors' Group has become the core of the Ceremony" (1994: 9). Steve Zeitlin and Ilana Harlow's book, *Giving a Voice to Sorrow*, explores the creative ways people respond to death and mourning. The authors explain: "Individuals who have suffered or witnessed great loss relate personal responses to death and mourning in their own words. They transport us to *inward* places where love, sadness and creativity meet; places where they forged responses to death whose *outward* expression enabled them, their friends, or their family to endure devastating loss" (20). The collaborative work of the Survivors' Group provided a platform for survivors to express themselves outside of the emotionally charged, public ceremony. In the private meetings with other survivors, the group created personal and collective poems. In the twenty years since "Yom Ha'Shoa Holocaust Remembrance Day" was written, although there is longer a Survivors' Group, the Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony continues, as Fela said, "so that no one should ever forget." Shawn's description of the 2014 service was incredibly moving. There were so many resident survivors, and lots of support from family, peers, and neighbors. As I mentioned previously, one of the biggest changes since 2005 is that the school children no longer participate in the service; but as the saying goes, "one door closes, another one opens," and the result is that more room opened up for the non-survivor residents to take a more active role in the service, bringing the Terraces community closer together.

### **Conclusion: Death, mourning, remembering**

The Terraces Yom Hashoah Ceremony is a creative ritual that helps residents cope with death, mourning, and remembering on personal and collective levels. In her working definition of ritual, Barbara Myerhoff suggests, "Ritual is an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion" (1992: 129). Myerhoff also points out that ritual is separated from ordinary life through framing. Outside of the Terraces,

Yom Hashoah commemorations are rituals in their own right. Inside the Terraces however, this gathering incorporates conservative elements of Yom Hashoah ceremonies (prayers, songs, candle lighting), while reframing other elements (shiva ribbons, survivor participation, the poetry of the Survivors' Group) so that the ceremony reflects the creativity and the personal context of the residents. Anthropologist David Kertzer suggests that the power of ritual is grounded in "a particular social group and in shared psychological associations and memories," (quoted in Zeitlin and Harlow: 108). Furthermore, he points out that people create new rituals out of pre-existing symbols. Yom Hashoah reconciles collective Jewish history with personal experiences, and relies on individual and collective memory to bring meaning and energy into the present lives of Terraces residents.

Furthermore, Terraces residents re-create elements of family and community through their shared Jewish history and culture, as well as through their collective experiences of growing old; nevertheless, much remains that separates them, including religious beliefs, health, and where they came from. By giving residents an opportunity to bring to the foreground their individual experiences, as well as to mourn collectively, the Yom Hashoah service is a confirmation of each person's self-worth and sense of identity. The Ceremony also flips the notion of victimhood in its head. In many circumstances in North America, victims seek help in private, or attempt to find solace among others who have suffered the same pains. Here, resident survivors (victims of the Holocaust) invite community members into their collective home, in order to witness—and celebrate—their survival. In this way, the Terraces Yom Hashoah observance presents a unique angle on Holocaust Remembrance Ceremonies, most importantly, because it takes place in a home for the aged, but also because while the service honours and memorializes victims of the Holocaust, by integrating the resident survivor population into the ceremony, the message is not one of despair, but rather a message of empowerment, hope and courage.

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