

Extensive collections of Holocaust literature occupy the shelves of almost every public library, classroom, and bookstore. This genre of literature typically details the lives of Jews, or other groups such as non-Jewish Lithuanians and Poles, who were targeted by the Holocaust. In most cases, the book describes the characters' experiences in Nazi-occupied areas, ghettos, and/or concentration camps. One thing that is very rarely described is the lives of victims *after* World War II. This is the topic that the late Mira Ryczke Kimmelman tackled in her book *Life Beyond the Holocaust: Memories and Realities*. The memoir is divided into three parts. The first part is composed of letters from Kimmelman to her children and grandchildren. The second section recounts Kimmelman's attempts to reconnect with her remaining family members and friends. Finally, the third segment describes Kimmelman's trips back to Europe to visit the locations of her childhood. Kimmelman tells her story in her own words, and the book offers a perspective on the Holocaust not often found in related literature.

Kimmelman's letters to her relatives that make up the first section of her book are called Jewish ethical wills, or just ethicals. As stated in the introduction of *Life Beyond the Holocaust*, "Judaism has an honored tradition, that of bequeathing an ethical will to one's children and grandchildren, so that they can integrate the values of their parents, grandparents, and other relatives they might not have known personally into their own value system...[ethical]s often take the form of letters to loved ones, of stories that share a writer's personal values and experiences..." (pgs. XXVIII-XXIX). In the course of these ethicals, Kimmelman informs her children and grandchildren of the origin of their names, which is especially important in Jewish culture. In Chapter Two of the book, entitled "What's in a Name," Kimmelman states, "In the Jewish Ashkenazi (Middle-European) tradition, we give our children names after departed family members. In this way we honor our beloved departed relatives so that their memory lives on" (pg.

7). Kimmelman also describes the lives and genealogy of the previous bearers of the children's names, as well as the Holocaust experiences of herself; her father, Mortiz Ryczke; and her husband Max Kimmelman, among others. These traditions of ethicals and name-giving are especially important to post-Holocaust Jewish families, as multiple generations of Jews were wiped out and deprived of the opportunity to teach future generations of their history, culture, and values.

After Kimmelman had regained some semblance of normalcy following the Holocaust, she began searching for any living family members. As she states in Chapter 14, entitled, "In Search of Remnants," "Once World War II ended, those who survived began the agonizing search for family members. Everyone hoped to find parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunt, and cousins. Unless we had witnessed the death of our dear ones, we continued our searches, which sometimes lasted for years" (pg. 167). In Part 2 of the book, Kimmelman reaches to the farthest edges of her family tree in order to reconnect with relatives and friends. She details her long strings of communications with people like Harry Szmant and his daughter, as well as chance encounters with relatives, such as Halinka Frydlender Gelles and Theo Richmond. This entire process of rebuilding culminated in a large family reunion in London, England where the remaining members of the Ryczke family gathered to discuss their experiences and personal lives which are documented in Kimmelman's book; Kimmelman also presented her relatives with a detailed family tree and proofs of relation. Efforts such as Kimmelman's work to reunite her living relatives are imperative for Jewish people, as they help to maintain a sense of unity and hope for a group of people who have suffered so much, and continue to suffer in a still anti-Semitic society.

The third section of Kimmelman's book is dedicated entirely to her travels to Europe in order to visit locations significant to the Holocaust, as well as those important to her own childhood. She takes her first trip with a group called Facing History and Ourselves. Kimmelman

states in Chapter 22, called, “Searching for Closure,” that, “By making this pilgrimage, I was seeking closure and saying good-bye to my dear departed relatives who perished during the Holocaust” (pg. 234). She took subsequent trips with her relatives, the second with her younger son Gene and his wife Caroline, and the third with her older son Benno. Kimmelman’s second and third trips required difficult emotional labor, especially during her visits to Stutthof and Treblinka, which were former concentration and extermination camps. After the visit to Treblinka, Kimmelman writes, “We left this place of sorrow with heavy hearts and drove home. Very little was said on the way home, each of us had to deal with Treblinka and what it represents for our family” (pg. 301). In 1999, Kimmelman took one final trip to Poland, this time joined by Alina Szmant and Michael Bloch, two of her cousins. This trip was arranged for the purpose of viewing the unveiling of a tablet that Kimmelman had commissioned to be attached to the house where the Roonstrasse Synagogue had once stood, a project that Kimmelman pursued after seeing the lack of Jewish life and culture in Poland during her previous trips. All four of these trips reconnected Kimmelman and her assorted relatives to the locales that had offered them both comfort and pain. It also ensured that they would never forget their past as they moved into their future.

Though vastly different from most Holocaust compositions, *Life Beyond the Holocaust: Memories and Realities* offers an insightful view on how survivors of the Holocaust recover, rebuild, and live normal lives after experiencing unimaginable trauma. Through letters, reunions, and travels back to Europe, Mira Kimmelman tells her story, as well as the stories of those no longer able to speak for themselves. She also highlights the importance of remembering the atrocities of the Holocaust, as well as the restoration that must follow. As Kimmelman states in the epilogue on page 325, “We have to learn from the past, but we also have to strive for a better future.”