

**Robbie Waisman<sup>1</sup>**

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**TESTIMONY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR**

*Robbie (Rachmil) Waisman was raised in a middle class, orthodox home in Skarszysko, Poland. Born in 1931, the youngest of six children, he survived the ghetto and labour camp in Skarszysko. His mother was murdered in Treblinka. In camp, Robbie witnessed the shooting of his closest brother, Abram, and the disappearance of his father. When he was liberated at fourteen in Buchenwald, Robbie told the Red Cross representatives that he wanted to go home.*

None of us realized the enormity of the Holocaust. We saw people dying around us. But these were individual people, not that great a number. It was very difficult to imagine six million in the overall larger picture that emerged later on. For a short period of the war I had part of my family with me—my father and brother Abram who was three years older than me, and we were very close. I tried very hard to survive and the reason for doing that is that I wanted to come home and show off to my family. ‘You see, you worried about me and I made it, and I made it on my own! So you didn’t have to worry.’ And I wanted to show off to my mom and to my older brother. I visualized them all being home before me. And I was going to be late coming. The irony of it all is that everybody worried about me and yet the only ones to survive were me and my sister Leah.

*Along with several hundred child survivors also liberated in Buchenwald, Robbie was moved to France under the auspices of the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE) and placed in a Children’s Home in Normandy. He describes how the orphans went on “rampages,” setting fire to their beds; how people said that ‘Les enfants terribles de Buchenwald’ were “not redeemable any more. These kids are completely lost. They*

*have seen too many horrors.”*

One day I just sat down and suddenly I realized that I lost everything, that there's no one left. That was the first time I cried. We all started questioning, is there a God, how could this happen to us? So we didn't believe in God. A lot of us sort of brushed it aside, and we didn't ask for kosher food and we no longer prayed, and started living an agnostic life. At first we were very eager to talk about the camp years.<sup>2</sup> But I was told by my teacher, Professor Manfred Reingwitz who really took a liking to me, 'if you keep on with this, the pain will be with you, you will not be able to concentrate on rebuilding your life if you talk about it and live it on a day to day basis. The best thing is, go to school, do all these things, put it aside. You don't want to forget it because it's your family and everything, but put it aside and build your life. Go in a different direction.' Well, most of us did that, and became a different person so to speak. And we did this very successfully and after a while the things just always came back, at the railroad crossing you know I would see the train which reminded me. In Saskatoon, in Calgary I kept it out quite successfully. Just did not talk about it at all. The memories were there with you. Sometimes a smell or a look or a feel brings back these memories, just like a song does bring back memories to normal people. With us it's a word, a smell, a situation that brings back memories.

*Robbie was already in France when he discovered his sister had survived the camps. She married another survivor and moved to Israel, eventually joining Robbie in Canada. Frustrated in his attempts to leave for Palestine, Robbie studied French and debated his future.*

I decided I didn't want to stay in Europe. I wanted to leave Europe as far as possible. France was too close to Poland, it was too close to a lot of the pain that we suffered, and I thought that by leaving it I would completely obliterate that kind of memory. I was wrong. You cannot run away from yourself. Those

memories do stay with you. The two places that we picked were Canada, we heard was a wonderful country to be in, but a lot of us thought Australia would be even better because it took three months to get there at that time, so that's far enough! I heard that the Jewish Congress, and that Canada opened its doors for a thousand children. I was one of the last ones that got out in December, 1949. I made applications and at first I was rejected because of my blood count and very low blood pressure, so the doctors at the time thought that there was something wrong with me. You had to be absolutely a very healthy specimen. Canada wasn't very liberal in its outlook towards refugees. I knew it was a young country and full of opportunity and I knew in Canada nobody ever went hungry. And that was a very important aspect of choice, because in the camps we used to wish sometimes of having enough bread and butter and the idea that food was freely available to anybody who wanted to do any amount of work was a very big thing.

I wanted to go to Montreal and I kicked up a fuss when they sent me out West, because I thought if I went to Montreal I wouldn't have to learn English, I already had French and it would have been that much easier. So I said, if I can't go to Montreal I want to go to Toronto. And they said no, you can't go to Toronto. Well, ok then I want to go to Vancouver. And they said, ok, we'll send you to Vancouver. While we were going to Vancouver the social worker that picked us up in Halifax [Mrs. Pearlman] said: 'I'll tell you what, we're stopping in Calgary for a few days because the place that we want to send you in Vancouver is not quite ready,' which was actually a trick, because they never intended for us to go to Vancouver. So we stopped in Calgary and I stayed.

*Orphans were placed in Jewish homes in Calgary. Bakery owners Harry and Rachel Goresht and their two children, Ida and Sam, gave Robbie a home. While Robbie went to night school to learn English, they were able to communicate with him in*

*Yiddish. The Calgary Jewish community found him employment. He stayed with the Goreshts for over a year. To this day Robbie maintains a very strong bond with his adoptive family.*

I arrived in Calgary on a Tuesday, and Wednesday morning I went to work. I just wanted to become, be a normal human being, pursue a career of sorts and make a life for myself. We enjoyed quite a nice reputation in Calgary. We became friends with the community. If there was a wedding in the community, we either got invited to the wedding or at least to the reception part. So we were always there for the dance. Ida would say, 'this is my brother,' or 'my European brother' when I objected.

Edward Bronfman was in Calgary at that time, I believe looking after the Royalite Gas Company. He had a convertible DeSoto car. None of us had any cars. We used to chum around. Sometimes he'd give us rides, he'd pick up the bill in the restaurant. It was great! Calgary was absolutely wonderful. There was a warmth that is very, very hard to describe. We were included in everything. We did everything. It was a fun time, and if we needed a healing process to forget, the Jewish community certainly put out. They were there for us in that sense. If anyone needed counselling, we looked after those problems ourselves and if we couldn't hack it we just landed up sick. If we did any crying, it was within, and we did it on our own time, by ourselves and I think to a great degree we still do this. I think as we know psychiatry today, we probably all of us needed counselling very badly. We did it the hard way. In Calgary I think the camaraderie and the closeness that survivors had between them played a large part in that kind of process.

There was one orphan, Jack, who was in Calgary with me and he couldn't cope. You see he wasn't able to adapt. And he landed up in the asylum. We used to go and visit him. He had his fingers shot off in one of the camps. He had these moods and I sort of felt a little bit of an attachment to him, trying to help him along. We thought we'd be able to get him out and we used to go every Sunday.<sup>3</sup> And we quit going because the last

few times we went there was an odour about him that we found out later is sort of symptomatic of a sick person. And he was no longer coherent. We'd go and talk to him and he's put his foot up right over his head and he would look funny and start talking to us funny and he would talk about camps and all that happened, but not in a normal way. And after a while they wouldn't let us in because he was mostly in a straight jacket and under sedation, and after a while he didn't know us. I don't know what happened to him. He just gave up.

*After Aron Eichler, one of the orphans, married Ida Zysblat in 1954, the rest of the group in Calgary would get together almost daily at the Eichler home. They established a kind of extended family, practising their English and discussing their problems. Robbie recalls that dating Canadian-born Jews, the orphans sometimes encountered suspicion and resistance. He married Gloria Lyons in 1959, when he was twenty-eight.*

On two occasions I took out a girl from two separate families and of course they didn't have an opportunity to get to know me, I just knew their daughters. On these two occasions where things were getting more involved and more interesting, they were there to split it up. I was a bit angry, but I had my pride and anybody that didn't want me, no big deal, I didn't want them either. And love hadn't gone to the degree that I was heartbroken. I married a girl who came from a very prominent family in Saskatoon. I found out later that they had me investigated when I was going around with Gloria. My wife was also told, you're marrying somebody that comes from a completely different background than you and went through the war and so on, you're bound to have problems. So there was discouragement. But there weren't very many of us that had integrated to a degree where they were taking out Canadian women. I was looking for the right person. I wasn't sure, I was a bit afraid. I was worried about marriage. I wasn't sure whether I would be able to just belong to any one person. I adjusted to it but there

are still certain things that I keep to myself. It's hard to just let it all hang out. I have never done that.

I sometimes think to have been a child survivor was much easier than being an adult survivor. First of all, maybe we didn't think as broadly as an adult. Now I put myself in my father's shoes and I understand why his hair turned white in a period of two weeks. His hair completely turned white. Because he must have known maybe of my one brother that was shot that I didn't know about. He probably knew that his wife went to Treblinka and I didn't. So, an adult maybe had a better understanding of the situation and he also had these loved ones that he lost. That must have been completely devastating and he probably gave up at this point in time, where I just thought of myself and the will to survive. I was angry with my father because I needed his strength and it was not there any more. I was already twelve years old and should have known better. Now that anger has come back to haunt me. Now I am angry with myself that I did not have more compassion towards my father.<sup>4</sup>

*Although Robbie's childhood ambition to become an engineer never wavered, the responsibilities of supporting himself, sponsoring his sister's family and his subsequent marriage led him into accounting. He moved to Saskatoon in 1959 where he opened a clothing store and devoted himself to Jewish community work, serving as president of the B'nai B'rith and then as president of the Saskatoon Jewish community. Few in Saskatoon had any idea he was a survivor. Yet he still dreamed survivors' dreams. Attending a wedding in Toronto in the 1970's, Robbie met a survivor from his home town who had witnessed his oldest brother's death.*

He knew my family. When he heard that there was somebody from Skarzysko, so he ran, he came up and he says I was a dear friend of your older brother and a friend of your family. I only remember you as a little child. He gave me some of the details. I was devastated. But, in a way, I wanted to know. I kept hop-

ing that my older brother was in Russia some place, because he served in the Polish army, and he was like a James Bond to me and I looked up to him. I thought nothing would ever, ever harm him. He was above it all. But I guess he wasn't.

*Robbie began to speak to his children about his experiences when they were teenagers. And, in 1983, spurred by the James Keegstra affair in Alberta, he found the courage to speak in public.*

I put everything aside. I raised a family and my family knew very little. My wife knew a little bit about my background. People in Saskatoon were shocked when I first started talking. I was having flashbacks from the camps. There were philosophers and writers among the Jewish prisoners there, and I heard these philosophical discussions and I remembered listening to them. I remember one once turning to me and saying, anybody who survives this war is going to live in paradise and there will no racism, there will be no antisemitism, and finally people will have learned to live with one another. And then one of them, I remember, turned to me and he says, 'hey you punk, come over here.' So they got me over there and they said, 'if you survive, if you happen to survive, you must tell the people what you've seen and what you've heard and how bad it was and what the Nazis did. Remember that!' Well it sort of went in one ear and out the other. That conversation flashed back and I felt, particularly after Keegstra, that I have a responsibility and a duty to talk. And survivors are dying out. We're getting to that age now, I am the baby of the survivors and I'm sixty-two. Time is running out, and so we have to do everything we can to leave some sort of a legacy of the Holocaust so that it doesn't repeat itself. So I have a strong feeling of this urgency of doing as much as I possibly can. I feel that maybe there was a purpose for it all. And I want to be sure that their dying had some purpose, and I speak to kids about it.

When I read *None is Too Many*,<sup>5</sup> I had to put it down

many times because I was so angry about what happened. I like to think that out of the despicable conduct of people like Mackenzie King and Blair, who was the Director of Immigration, that somehow the present government became more humane and when the Boat People were facing this doom and gloom that Canada opened its doors and heart. And I like to think, I believe strongly in my heart, that it's as a result of the disgusting way they behaved towards a few Jewish children from Europe, that none was too many.

I talked to my father-in-law, because he comes from a generation of Jews that used to put up their hands and seek protection. And it all came out one day at the supper table when my kids told their mother, they had to eat in a hurry because there's a demonstration at City Hall for the Jews of Russia, to get them out. My father-in-law said to me, 'are you letting your children to go to that demonstration, because none of it is any good, the way you're doing it! It's got to be done in a proper manner.' I said, 'what is a proper manner, to go with your tail between your legs and bend down and beg? What did you do when we were all dying in Europe, is that what you were doing? You should have gone to City Hall and demonstrated and screamed. You didn't do that. Now you're telling me my kids shouldn't protest?' Of course I let them go.

*In Vancouver since 1978, Robbie Waisman has been an active member of both the Jewish and general community. Since 1983 he has been a moving force behind the Vancouver Holocaust Centre Society, acting as Treasurer, Vice-President and President. After decades of suppressing his past, he energetically promotes Holocaust awareness and education.*



I have led a normal adult life. And normalcy and surviving the Holocaust are two different things, at least in my mind. When you think what survivors went through, how can we be normal? Some of the thoughts and some of the way we think cannot be normal. The one thing that I never wanted from anybody, I didn't want sympathy. Don't feel sorry for me, I'm just as good as you are. Don't say, oh poor Robbie what you must have gone through, I don't want this! We have proven to ourselves that we're normal human beings. We have raised a family and become responsible in the community. We have made contributions in various ways and so that now we can step back and say, the Holocaust occurred, these are the things that happened. These are the things that we must do so that it doesn't happen again.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Excerpts from an interview with Robbie Waisman, conducted by Paula Draper. Vancouver, British Columbia: 25 October 1993. Excerpts have been edited with permission and input from Mr. Waisman. The italicized material has been added by Paula Draper.

<sup>2</sup>Mr. Waisman adds: "But no one was willing to listen, no one seemed to care what our problems were. We were told by professional experts to forget the past. We now know that this was a mistake. Back then psychiatry did not know about severe trauma of the Holocaust. We all had to find our own ways in dealing with our pain and the loss of loved ones...Looking back I can tell you that you cannot escape the past. Memories, particularly the bad ones are always ready to spring up at you....Still, for more that thirty years I did not talk about my experiences in the camps."

<sup>3</sup>Mr. Waisman is referring to two other survivors, Aron Eichler and Oscar Kirshner.

<sup>4</sup>Mr. Waisman adds: " My father was a leader in our town, very well respected in the community. His counsel and advice was sought by friends

and neighbours. His positive views and attitude were always welcomed. He was deeply in love with his wife Rifkale and this love carried over to all of his children. My father kept everyone's outlook bright during the start of the war. He used to laud the accomplishments of Germany's writers, scientists, musicians, etc. His strong belief in that society must have devastated him when it all fell apart during the Holocaust. I found out later about his pain."

<sup>5</sup>Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto, 1983) outlines Canada's role in the Holocaust.