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Stories to expedite healing

Allowing victims' experiences to touch our souls will drive home our message of abhorrence of senseless killings

A general view of the former Nazi-German concentration camp KL Auschwitz-Birkenau in Oswiecim, Poland .

PICTURE: EPA

Holocaust survivor Veronica Phillips is to give testimony during the Holocaust Commemoration.

PICTURE: BHEKIKHAYA MABASO

Wendy Kahn

EARLIER this year, I was privileged to spend Human Rights Day in Sharpeville. On the square where the horrific massacre took place 56 years ago, I stood next to a woman by the name of Maria Morake, who was a witness to the atrocity.

Maria recounted her personal story of what happened on that day – March 21, 1960. She described what the square looked like, and the loud bangs that she heard – being only a child, she did not immediately recognise it as gunfire.

She recalled pills lying around on the ground, dropped by patients who were shot leaving the clinic, and blood soaking the ground, mixing with water from a sudden downpour of rain. She remembered the spears that the police used to make sure that people who had been shot were really dead.

Nothing makes us understand the horror and pain of such tragedies than first-hand witness testimony.

We can only start to understand the suffering when we put a face to it and when we hear a personal account.

Over the past years, I have engaged with many survivors of the Holocaust, who have shared the horror of their experiences at the hands of the Nazis during World War II.

One of these is Mascha Schainberg.

She was 12 when she and her family were confronted at their home by soldiers thrusting rifles in their faces and herded into a cramped boxcar train with hundreds of fellow Jews.

After two days without food or water, they arrived at what she described as "the living hell" of Auschwitz, the largest and most infamous of the Nazi death camps.

They were immediately put into lines for selection. Mascha and her sisters were sent to the right, their mother to the left.

In that moment, Mascha's mother knew what lay ahead, and she clung desperately to her four girls before an SS guard hit her over the head with his rifle.

Mascha's last memory of her mother was seeing her being carried away bleeding into the back of a cattle truck.

Later that day, she and her sisters saw a large black cloud of smoke coming out of two chimneys.

There was an awful stench of burning human flesh in the air. Without understanding why, they knew that their mother was up those chimneys – gassed and cremated together with all the other prisoners designated for immediate death.

With no time to comprehend or even mourn their loss, the girls were stripped and shaven to the skin. They were tattooed with a number on their left arm. Mascha's number was 34746. Through a series of small miracles, she managed to survive four horrendous years of captivity.

South Africans started this year with the shattering realisation that their country's apparently seamless transition to democracy masked a deep-rooted pain that had never truly been addressed. The upsurge of vicious racism, initiated by Penny Sparrow, made us all realise that there was still so much to be done in addressing the pain of the past and achieving true reconciliation.

At a forum I attended in February, hosted by Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa to address issues around social cohesion, nation-building and anti-racism, the representative of the SA Council of Churches described our country as being a "wounded nation", which I thought was an excellent analogy.

We are indeed a country with a festering wound. To put a plaster over it as we have in South Africa for the past 22 years may cover up the ugliness, but it doesn't allow the wound to heal properly. For the healing to be complete we sometimes have to clean it with antiseptic.

It is painful, but it assists the process – the sting rids us of the bacteria and the obstacles to closure. And we must also remember that even after the wound heals, a scar remains – a permanent reminder of the pain and suffering experienced.

This, of course, is what South Africans are going through today. Twenty two years after transition to democracy, we are pulling off the plaster, cleansing out the wound and beginning the process of healing. It is painful and hard, but it is something we all need to be involved in.

Earlier this year, someone from my own community posted a comment on our Facebook page asserting that it was time for South Africans to "move on", to "get over it" just as Jews had after the Holocaust.

That comment shocked me. How could anyone, especially a member of the Jewish community, think that one can "move on" after decades of systematic deprivation of rights, abuse and hate?

We of all people know that the process of healing for victims of oppression is lengthy and difficult. Our own survivors have struggled for decades to come to terms with the horrors that they endured. Seventy years later, some are still unable to talk about those experiences.

While some healed to some extent, they will never "get over it". Even second and third generations of survivors live with the pain.

To expect South Africans who suffered under apartheid to heal after a mere 22 years is naïve, not to mention insensitive.

Speaking at last year's Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony, Mascha Shainberg's daughter said: "Remembering them is the key to preventing the same atrocities from occurring again. And so we must always remember the very real people, the families and the lives that were lost. Not just today, but every day we must ensure that it never happens again! Not to our children, not to theirs, not to anyone… ever again."

Only when we hear the stories, the stories of the Holocaust, the stories of Rwanda, the stories of apartheid, only when we let them touch our souls can we truly integrate the message of "never again".

● The Holocaust Commemoration Ceremony will be tomorrow May 5. Survivor, Veronica Phillips, will give testimony of her experiences in Concentration Camps.

● The Pretoria day of remembrance, Yom Hashoa, is at 5pm tomorrow at the Pretoria Hebrew Congregation Synagogue Complex in Schroder Street, Groenkloof.

● *Kahn is the national director of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies.*