

Central Queensland University

Bambi Ward

Identity issues of a second generation Holocaust survivor: the role of art therapy in facilitating the writing of family secrets.

Abstract:

This paper discusses the challenges involved in writing a memoir about identity issues that were hidden from me by my family. It focuses on a discussion of how art therapy enabled me to start writing a memoir of my spiritual journey that includes the revelation of identity related family secrets.

Biographical note:

Bambi Ward is a current PhD student in creative writing with Central Queensland University. Her creative work is a memoir of her spiritual journey.

Bambi is based in Melbourne. She has a background in general practice, medical education and oral history.

Keywords:

Art therapy – family secrets – memoir – spiritual journey – identity

Judaism has a rich tradition of stories – both oral and written – that has been in existence for thousands of years. Several years ago I listened to a Torah study class with a mystical perspective, given by a Rabbi whom I study with. According to him, the heroes and heroines in the Torah allowed their stories to be told...warts and all. Why? So we can learn from them and the choices they made.

Perhaps this partly explains why I've always been so interested in stories: in books, in the stories of the Torah, in oral history, in people's stories and patients' stories. The talk made me feel confident about my decision to tell my own story in an authentic and honest way. The main aim would be to inspire and empower people with secrets to come out of hiding and live authentically.

However before I could start writing my story in the form of a memoir, I needed to address a huge obstacle. I needed to overcome the feelings of guilt and betrayal I felt at revealing a long kept family secret, even though all the secret keepers were now dead.

I stumbled across art therapy at a perfect time. This paper is a personal account of my background, the secrets in my family and the reasons for them. It also shows how powerful the process of art therapy was in enabling me to tap into my inner courage and gain freedom to express myself in the form of a memoir.

My story of secrets starts with Papa, my Hungarian paternal grandfather who migrated to Australia with my grandma in 1956, two years before I was born. All I really knew about him was that he adored me, his only grandchild. I have fond memories of visiting him and Grandma at their weatherboard home in Elsternwick. He wore glasses, was shorter than Grandma, and always wore a suit. He often gave me Hungarian stamps stuck on thin blue envelopes for my stamp collection. I soaked them in Grandma and Papa's white bath. The blue envelopes always left a blue rim around the edge of the bath, but no-one ever complained about it.

Papa was a very sick man. He had heart trouble, as well as insulin dependent diabetes. He died at home in bed from a heart attack one night. He was sixty-nine, and I was only six. I wasn't allowed to go to his funeral. My parents thought I was too young.

He left a letter for me about how he envisaged my wedding day. I read it out at the reception on the day of my wedding. It was pretty accurate. I was indeed married by a minister, and I felt like the Queen of Love on that day.

It was only years later when in my forties that I found out more about Papa. By that time, Dad was dead. Mum told me that Papa, Grandma and my dad converted to Christianity in 1937 as a result of the increasing anti-Semitism that Jews were experiencing in Hungary. Despite the conversion, Papa was still transported by the Nazis from his home in Budapest to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria during the Holocaust. This was because the Nazis still considered a person to be Jewish even if they only had one Jewish grandparent. He would have been in his early forties at the time.

Very few people survived the gruelling conditions of the Mauthausen concentration camp. Apparently Papa never spoke about his concentration camp experiences to anyone. But the experience scarred him for life. He was adamant that future

generations of his family be protected from anti-Semitism. He wanted his only child to marry in a church, and to raise future family members as Christians. The family's Jewish background was to remain a secret, even in Australia. Papa's wish was honoured by my parents.

But the truth eventually came out. In 1965, at the age of eight, my parents told me that I had a Jewish background, but that I should never tell anyone, even if asked directly, because 'it wasn't safe'. Because of these instructions I grew up with invisible sticky tape over my mouth. It wasn't until I reached the age of forty that I started questioning this loyalty to keeping our family secret. My Jewish soul was crying out to be heard, and I could ignore it no longer. I started exploring Judaism, and found it gave me the meaning and purpose I'd been yearning and searching for since my adolescence.

It took years of exploration and lots of angst to finally come out as being Jewish. In fact I had a coming of age ceremony (or Batmitzvah) at the age of forty-eight. That was a huge step that changed my life forever. It brought me great joy and peace of mind to have the freedom to express my authentic self. But there was still a problem. It was one thing to declare my Jewish identity publicly in a synagogue to an invited group of people whom I knew. It was quite another thing to contemplate writing a memoir of my spiritual journey. How would I deal with my feelings of guilt at betraying my beloved Papa? Loyalty to my family had always been a strong value of mine. Did I really have the courage to set aside these feelings and tell my story? I desperately wanted to do this, but I remained ambivalent, even after obtaining a place as a postgraduate PhD student in creative writing.

I needed something to help me break through this barrier. The answer came unexpectedly when I was a few months into my PhD. I visited an art exhibition called 'Out of the dark: the emotional legacy of the Holocaust'. It consisted of paintings, sculptures, prose, home movies and displays created by three distinct groups of people: adult holocaust survivors, child holocaust survivors and second-generation holocaust survivors. While I waited to buy a booklet at the entrance of the travelling exhibition, I studied the faces of people leaving the exhibition. Some were wiping tears from their faces; others were blowing their noses; and even more just looked very sad.

The exhibition moved me greatly, and achieved its primary aim to explore the ongoing traumatic effects of the Holocaust on survivors and the next generation. An article in the booklet about the exhibition caught my eye. It was called 'Assembling the art of the Holocaust – perspective of an arts therapist', by Gail Rockman. It described Gail's involvement in gathering the artworks together. It also mentioned that she worked as both art therapist and artist with two second generation holocaust survivors in her studio.

As I read her words, I remembered a powerful experience I'd had with intuitive art, as well as the process I underwent when I commissioned Victor Majzner, a well known Jewish artist, to paint the story of my spiritual journey. I wondered whether Gail would be able to help me overcome my feelings of betraying my family by revealing family secrets in my memoir, so I decided to track her down. I really needed help to

break free from my strong feelings of family loyalty if I was going to move forward with writing the memoir.

It took a while to find Gail. When we finally connected, she expressed reluctance to take me on as a client. She was currently receiving chemotherapy for cancer and felt uncomfortable at the possibility of having to postpone a session. I told her it wasn't an issue for me, so she agreed to take me on. I felt very relieved. My intuition told me she was the right person for me to be doing this work with because of how I'd found out about her.

Art Therapy Session 1. October 2, 2013.

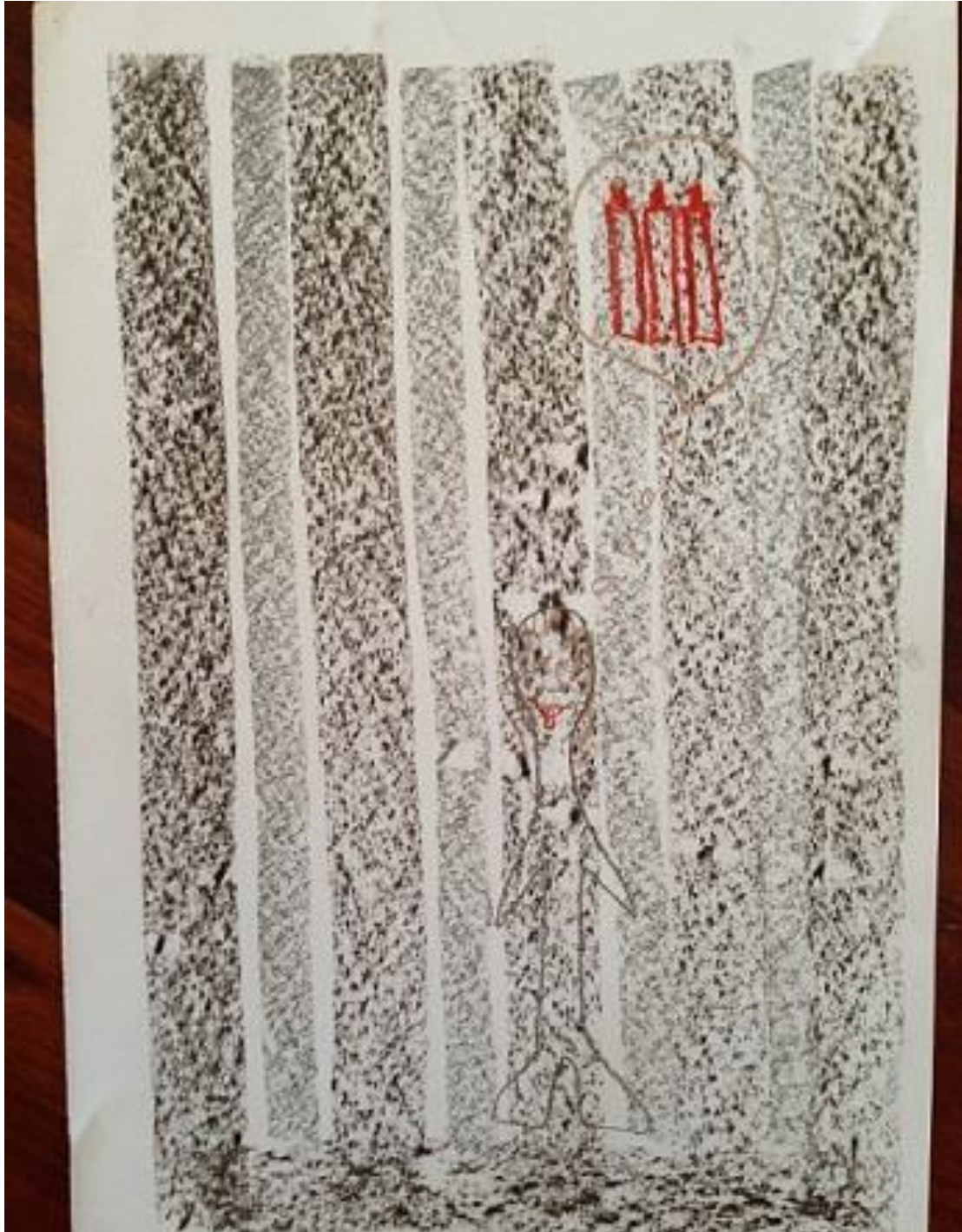
I drove to Gail's home studio in a well-known Jewish suburb of Melbourne. As I rang the doorbell, a medium-sized black dog with short curly fur approached the front door and barked. A friendly woman a few years older than myself came to the door. She was wearing a coloured scarf. She directed me to her studio, whose entrance was in front of her door to the side. We sat down at a huge table. She told me she is not a Holocaust survivor, which left me surprised and a bit disappointed. But I liked her, and felt very comfortable with her. It was actually more than that. I felt safe with her. It felt okay to reveal my true self to her.

We talked for a while and then got down to work. She gave me some charcoal and invited me to draw my secret. I drew myself as a child – an insignificant small white dot imprisoned in a huge black structure. You really couldn't see me at all. She told me I could smudge the charcoal if I wanted to. I hadn't done that since I was a child. I smiled as I got my fingers really dirty. I felt like a naughty, mischievous, rebellious child. My mother didn't like me getting my hands dirty, but I always loved using charcoal in drawings at school.



Gail was very encouraging. She observed that there was a very strong structure with a purposeful pattern underneath the smudges. She suggested I might like to create a series of drawings which showed how I could break out of the stifling structure.

This time I chose a stick of grey charcoal, as well as a black one. I was still in a prison, but gaps had appeared between the bars. I drew myself as a much taller, older girl. My red tongue was poking out. A speech bubble contained three red sticks of dynamite. I told Gail I was going to use them to blow up the prison. It made me feel really good. I started feeling happy and more empowered.



Gail suggested I draw something to express my sense of happiness, using any of the coloured crayons she put in front of me. We sat in silence for a while. I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply. An important memory surfaced. I started remembering what it was like to stay with an Orthodox Jewish family when I was an eighteen year old medical student. My parents had escaped to Surfers Paradise for their annual winter holiday, leaving me at home. It was the first time I'd stayed with family friends, rather than having someone stay with me. For the first time in my life I felt safe to be Jewish. I loved the Friday night Shabbat (Sabbath) dinners, and the way my mother's friend said the blessings in Hebrew after lighting the Shabbat candles.

When my parents returned one month later, I didn't want to go home. I protested by wearing my male friend's blue jeans. They had huge holes in them, and my mother was mortified. But I had no choice: I had to return home. However, I continued to attend Shabbat dinners for some time.

I drew the blue jeans with holes in them, then left a gap, and drew a red heart with red light beaming out of it above the jeans. I also drew a red smiling mouth above the heart. There were no other body parts that represented me, except for brown shoes under the jeans. To the left of the drawing I used red crayon to write the words 'happy heart'. I also drew a large round red smiling face below the words.

'How do you feel?' she asked.

'Great.'



Our time was up. Gail set me some homework. She asked me to think about the kinds of behaviours my father and grandfather displayed that indicated they were Holocaust survivors.

She also mentioned how ironic it was that my grandfather went to all the trouble of converting to Christianity, yet he was still sent to a concentration camp. In Hitler's eyes, he had Jewish parents and grandparents, so he was still Jewish.

I made a time to see Gail in two weeks, and wished her a full recovery using the Hebrew phrase 'refuah shlemah'. Her eyes filled with tears, and she thanked me.

Art Therapy Session 2. October 16, 2013.

As I walked down the path to ring the doorbell, the black dog saw me and barked happily. I patted him before venturing into the safe place – the studio – where Gail awaited me with a glass of cold water.

I told her the list of things I'd written down for my homework. Then I told her about the struggle I was having. I still felt that I'd be betraying my grandparents and parents by writing my family secrets in a memoir. I also felt like I was being disloyal to them even though they were all dead. Did I have the right to do this? This whole issue was causing me great angst. I wondered about taking on a nom de plume, or writing fiction instead. It just felt so overwhelming. I felt like a four-wheel drive stuck in desert sand. The wheels were spinning, but they weren't going anywhere.

Gail seemed puzzled by my words.

'You've already come out as a Jew. You're living as a Jew. I don't understand'.

'At the moment, I choose who I reveal myself to. It's different if I were to get a book published or a film made'.

We talked for most of the session. Then it was time to create something. I chose to use oil pastels this time. I drew a scene that actually happened. It showed my mother and I walking towards a house with a mezuzah by the front door. It was the home of the Jewish family I stayed with when I was eighteen. But I was only eight in this picture.

Before we rang the bell, my mother pointed to the mezuzah with reverence. Then she told me its name in a hushed voice. I had no idea what a mezuzah was. I'd never seen one before, and I didn't know it signified a Jewish home. I just knew it was something special, it was something Jewish, and I mustn't talk about it to anyone. Ever.

I drew myself in profile and then added a box so I could enlarge the features on my face and chest. I drew a long beaked nose and laughed out loud as I drew it. 'That's no good,' I exclaimed.

'It's fine,' said Gail.

'I'm talking about my nose. Not my artwork,' I explained. 'My mother tore up any photos of me in profile because of my Jewish looking nose.'

Gail looked at me, horrified.

‘It’s not really funny at all, is it?’ I said. ‘She even tore up proofs of my wedding day where I appear in profile.’

That scarred me for life. To this day, I can’t look at a photo of myself in profile without cringing inside.

To complete the picture, I drew a red gun aimed at my head and wrote the words ‘Shh! Don’t tell’ in big black capitals.



Gail asked me whether I’d expressed my anger about having to keep quiet about my Jewish background. I said I thought I had, but there was clearly more to be worked through.

Art Therapy Session 3. October 22, 2013.

By the time the third session came around I was feeling much better about things. I told Gail that the angst I’d had about writing the book had gone.

For some reason, I started telling Gail about my heart, the place where I feel my soul resides. I described the structural defect in my heart that I was born with, and told her how Mum, Dad, and our dog Prince all had the same structural problem. Mum had died from a serious heart rhythm related to the defect four years ago. My grief had been overwhelming at the time. The loneliness of being an only child was excruciating, and I longed for a sibling with whom I could share my intense feelings of loss.

To make matters worse, our dog Prince was diagnosed with heart failure ten days after Mum's death. He died seven months later. I was devastated. He'd been like a third child to me. My grief over these deaths literally broke my heart, and I ended up having an intervention to try and stop the worsening palpitations I was getting. The procedure didn't work as expected and I wound up with significant unexpected complications. Fortunately these are now been fixed, but it took a couple of years to get sorted out, plus lots of angst that impacted hugely on the quality of my life.

Gail reviewed one of the pictures I'd drawn in the previous session and commented on the black cross I'd drawn through my heart. She encouraged me to work on my heart issues and laid out bits of coloured tissue paper, crayons, pastels and markers.

I picked up a red piece of tissue paper and tore it into the shape of a heart. Then I folded it and made a hole in the heart, glued it onto a piece of paper, drew a body around it – but left out the head – and then crossed out the part of my heart that had given me all the trouble with lots of black crayon marks.



For my second picture, I picked up another piece of red tissue paper and created a very long tongue.

I put glue on the back of it, and stuck it on a bank sheet of white paper, hitting it angrily and forcefully as I glued it onto the paper. Then I drew a mouth around the tongue, followed by scribbles around the tongue in three different colours. Gail asked me to name the emotion.

‘I don’t have words for it.’

But after pausing a few seconds, it all came to me. I picked up a black crayon and wrote: ‘It’s not fair!’



Gail encouraged me to express the emotion physically. So I tore up the picture and flung the pieces in the air with as much force as I could. Some pieces landed on the table, some on the floor, some almost hit Gail.

She encouraged me to continue expressing my anger and the feelings of unfairness. So I drew another picture on a new sheet of paper. It was an image of fire and flames.



‘Who are you angry with?’ asked Gail.

‘I don’t know...God. Myself. The fact that I inherited all this crap.’

‘It’s not your fault. You weren’t responsible for any of it. You’re allowed to be angry.’

I then tore up the first picture of my heart and threw all the markers onto the floor. I felt like a naughty little child having a temper tantrum.

Then the adult part of me looked over at Gail, shocked at what I’d done.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘I’ve seen worse.’

Phew. No judgment. I wasn’t in trouble for showing my true feelings. What a new experience this was. And how liberating!

‘Were you allowed to be angry or show anger as a child?’

‘No. I remember one time when I did.’

‘And, what happened?’

‘I was threatened with a strap one time. Another time Mum chased me around the house with a frying pan. But she never hit me.’

We talked a bit more about my anger.

Then Gail told me I didn’t have to protect anyone any more. That it was safe to tell my story. That I have a right to tell it. I have a right to open my mouth, I have a right to express myself. And writing my memoir is part of the healing.

Our time was up. I thanked Gail for creating a safe place in which I could be me. She

asked me if I'd like to take the pieces of my torn picture home with me. This seemed like an odd question at first, but then I thought more about it.

'Yes please'.

So she gathered the pieces and put them in a shopping bag. Gail was happy that I'd had a break through, and that I'd got in touch with my volcanic anger.

If I'd had the guts I would have thrown a lot more stuff around. Maybe next time.

The Flow On From Art Therapy Session 3.

The next day I decided to put the picture of my heart back together, to mend my broken heart and repair the large hole.

As I set about doing this, I felt much compassion for the little girl inside, my inner child. The eight year old girl with the broken heart, the little girl who couldn't pass for an Aryan because of her looks, the little girl who had to hide who she was.

As I stuck the broken pieces back together with sticky tape, I experienced a deep feeling of compassion for myself. I'd never felt this before.

I also had a sense of the effect of my dysfunctional life on my heart. It was no wonder that it was broken – physically and metaphorically.

I wrote the following words in my journal:

I desperately want to heal my heart. One way is to be authentic to my Jewish self, and absorb the energy of the Hebrew letters when I sing and pray. And I don't need to protect others any more. I think that's why I chose to become a doctor. To protect others from pain; to heal their pain. I projected this out. But now it's time to heal my heart. And my soul. And to let the fear go. And let the love in.

It's time to stop protecting my family... my father, my mother, my grandparents, my children, my husband, my self. I don't need to hide behind a nom-de-plume. This feels very freeing.

And loyalty. What is loyalty? What determines our attitudes towards it? Where did I get my attitudes from?

My family. It's time to let it go. It's not valid anymore.

It feels good to let it go. Very freeing. I am a child of holocaust survivors whether they acknowledged themselves as being so, or not.

The process of art therapy had given me unconditional acceptance of my self. What an amazing gift.

It also felt really good to mend my broken heart. It felt much stronger now...much stronger.

It's so big! I guess it means I have a big heart. One that can give. It's not an enlarged heart and it doesn't need protection.

I can send it healing if I want. Every day. It can be healed.

Thank you Gail. Thank you God.

Art Therapy Session 4. December 4, 2013.

My fourth art therapy session occurred several weeks later. It started off with me describing how I'd gone about mending the picture of my broken heart. I added that I now felt confident to tell my story in the form of a memoir without feeling guilty, and gave Gail a heartfelt thank you for facilitating the sessions so skilfully.

Her eyes lit up with joy as I spoke. She smiled as she congratulated me on reaching this significant milestone. We agreed this would be our last session, and spent the rest of the time talking.

However the celebratory atmosphere dampened towards the end of our discussion. Gail told me she was about to embark on further treatment for her cancer, which was causing some complications. My heart sank when I heard the news, but I tried not to show the intense sadness I felt. Gail had been feeling positive about her treatment and how it was working up until recently when her specialist gave her bad news. Now there was a feeling of despair and lost hope in the room.

We talked a bit more, and soon after, our time was up.

I gave Gail words of encouragement, expressed once more my gratitude for her help and wished her all the very best in her healing journey. We hugged and smiled. Gail's eyes had tears in them. I took a deep breathe, turned around and walked out of the art therapy room with my head held high. I didn't look back. The heavy load of secrecy I'd been carrying on my shoulders was gone.

Maybe I would have been able to get through my feelings of guilt and betrayal without doing the art therapy, but I don't know for sure. My experience showed me how art therapy can tap into the subconscious mind and make important attitudinal changes. It helped me tackle a difficult and emotive issue. It also enabled me to pursue my PhD with confidence, and present my project to people in a way that didn't leave me crippled with fear, regret and guilt.

Although this paper presents one case study, I posit that art therapy has the potential to guide other creative writers of memoir, particularly if they are struggling with ethical questions related to family loyalty and individual freedom, or suppressed anger and confusion resulting from identity related family secrets.

Research statement

Research background

Finding one's voice and having the courage to write an authentic and honest memoir can be challenging, particularly when there are family secrets relating to identity. If the tension between family loyalty and individual freedom is not constructively resolved, a writer is likely to be stuck in a quagmire of ambivalence as to whether or

not to proceed with writing their memoir. The literature has significant gaps in describing methods that can assist in overcoming this obstacle.

Research contribution

Children of Holocaust survivors have been described as inheriting their parents' trauma as a result of 'vicarious memory' (Climo 1995: 175 – 184). The term refers to a process whereby second generation Holocaust survivors subconsciously remember aspects of Holocaust trauma, despite not having directly experienced it. This can occur even when there has been a conspiracy of silence in which survivors chose not to discuss the Holocaust with their children (Wajnryb 2001).

Art therapy has the potential to benefit clients who may not be expressing subconscious thoughts and feelings (Ward 2008).

'Identity issues of a second generation Holocaust survivor: the role of art therapy in facilitating the writing of family secrets' is a case study that illustrates how the process of art therapy can facilitate a memoirist overcome barriers involved in writing about family secrets.

Research significance

This research demonstrates how art therapy enabled a second generation Holocaust survivor to have the courage to write about family secrets. It also shows how art therapy can be a useful tool in enabling memoirists with hidden identity issues to overcome the challenge of 'coming out'.

The research and its accompanying drawings will make up a chapter of the exegesis of a PhD project entitled 'Breaking the silence: issues of family secrets and identity in a second generation Holocaust survivor raised as a gentile'.

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