



War Survivors and Dementia

“One more battle to fight”

Holocaust survivors and war veterans, when placed in the nursing home setting, bring with them a traumatic past of extreme pain and unfathomable loss. Combined with cognitive impairment, these residents present a unique challenge to caregivers.

By Paula David

In 1946, the Allied Forces liberated Europe and discovered that less than half a million Jews were left. The survivors had been incarcerated in concentration camps, confined and isolated in ghettos, hidden in the woods and, under the protection of righteous Gentiles, disguised with false papers, or on the run - many for four or five years.

Death and trauma

Within the next year, the world began learning of the unbelievable atrocities they had endured and that six million Jews had been exterminated by Nazi perpetrators. The Holocaust (“Shoah” in Hebrew) became synonymous with visions of multiple deaths, loss and trauma.

“Something in them shudders and makes you turn your eyes away. These people have been amputated; they haven’t lost their legs or eyes, but their will and their taste for life. The thing that they have seen will come to the surface again sooner or later.” (Wiesel, 1970)

With few exceptions, most who managed to survive were young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Thus, if they are still alive, they range in age from their mid-seventies to their mid-nineties.

Each survivor represents a unique and miraculous story of unexpected survival that pushed the definition of trauma to inconceivable limits.



Photos: (Top) Hong Kong prisoners of war, December, 1945. Reproduced with the permission of Veterans Affairs Canada. (Above) The Children of Auschwitz, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the Belarussian State Archive of Documentary Film and Photography.