



OPINION

My grandparents survived the Holocaust. I'm not going anywhere

SHAWNA COHEN

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Shawna Cohen is a freelance writer and editor based in Toronto.

“Take your husband’s name,” my mother – who had me reading Gloria Steinem at age 12 – told me when I got engaged in 2002. “It’s safer.” Cohen clearly identifies me as Jewish. My husband’s last name, Shields, reads more British than anything else.

I kept my surname, along with my mother’s awareness that Jews are never quite safe, not even in the Western world. My mother is the daughter of Holocaust survivors. My late grandparents immigrated from Europe to Canada after the war and formed a business, a family and a tight-knit community. They travelled a lot. Celebrated *simchas*. Doted on their grandchildren.

But even for me, the third generation of survivors, there were constant reminders of the horrors they endured. The numbered tattoo, for instance, on my Bubbie’s forearm that she received when entering Auschwitz. As a child, I couldn’t help but notice it: by the pool as she applied suntan lotion to her arms; at the cottage, where she chopped onions for her famous egg salad; even at the kitchen table where she sat, listless, during her years battling dementia.

I grew up feeling safe and secure in Canada’s cultural mosaic – a far cry from my grandparents’ lives in pre-war Europe. I’ve never felt afraid to have a mezuzah on my door or to wear the Star of David necklace I bought in Israel at age 17. Toronto has a rich Jewish history and to this day, it’s always a thrill to point out to my children the Kiever Synagogue as we stroll Kensington Market, where Jews once made up more than 80 per cent of the population. And yet, the Holocaust lingers in my subconscious mind.

When a friend moved into a new house with a crawl space, I (somewhat jokingly) called dibs. At six years old, my younger son would playfully disappear into the storage compartment of our Ikea sofa bed. *Perfect hiding*

spot, I thought. These thoughts are never debilitating – they’re just a part of me, like my dark sense of humour or the dark circles around my eyes.

Researchers have explored the ways in which trauma tied to major events – such as slavery or the Holocaust – can be passed down from one generation to the next. The study of epigenetics looks at how one’s environment changes the way a person’s genes operate or how their body, or those of their children, reads a DNA sequence. Such findings could help explain my need for a “hiding spot” or even my insistence on an aisle seat at the movies or on an airplane (easiest escape route). It’s as if I’ve spent my entire life preparing for the next Holocaust, but in a low-key, high-functioning way.

Friends who once called me over-anxious are now having deep conversations about our new reality. The world is a terrifying place for Jews, eerily reminiscent of the years and months leading up to the Holocaust. After Hamas’s Oct. 7 attack on Israel, I expected the whole world to be outraged. Instead, as Toronto police chief Myron Demkiw recently said, there’s been a “very significant rise” in antisemitic hate crimes in the weeks following (in the U.S. alone, reported incidents of harassment, vandalism and assault increased by nearly 400 per cent over the same period last year, according to the Anti-Defamation League).

Terrifying antisemitic events have been happening here and around the globe. Around 1,000 pro-Palestinian supporters appeared at the Sydney Opera House on Oct. 9, many chanting, “Gas the Jews.” In Russia’s Dagestan region, a mob stormed the main airport on Oct. 29, hunting for Jewish passengers arriving on a flight from Tel Aviv. Just last week, Molotov cocktails were ignited at both a synagogue and a Jewish non-profit’s headquarters in Montreal.

Like every Jewish person I’ve connected with over the past few weeks, I have felt utter shock, fear, anger and disbelief. We are *not* okay. The world is masking hatred under the guise of anti-Zionism. That haunting question

that's plagued me my entire life – *Where will I hide?* – has never been more relevant. There's even a new social media campaign where Jews post an image asking, "Would you hide me?"

While its creator likely had good intentions, the campaign offends me. Jews don't need anyone to hide them – just people who are open to engaging in conversation and learning about the origins of the war. What we need are allies who are ready to stand up to antisemitism and fight with us. I've had a growing fear of this moment for decades; now that it's here, I will not be hiding. No amount of resistance or hatred will stop me from standing tall, from teaching the next generation that's it never shameful to be Jewish.

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