

# Life After Trauma

Local author's book focuses on the hopeful, healing stories of Israeli terrorism survivors.

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Contributing Writer

**H**er interest in terror survivors in Israel began years ago when Zieva Konvisser of Orchard Lake heard the extraordinary stories of the few members of her family from Vilna, Lithuania, who had survived the Holocaust. "I was impressed by their motivation to achieve extraordinary accomplishments following their traumatic experiences," said Konvisser, author of the recently published book, *Living Beyond Terrorism: Israeli Stories of Hope and Healing* (Gefen House Publishing).

"For example, my mother's cousin, a math professor, brought the Russian method of teaching mathematics to the United States," she said. "Izaak Wirszup, who lived through the Vilna Ghetto and the camps, survived believing he was spared to make a difference in the world. Out of his struggle, he observed 'how love, friendship and help can transform the most fragile souls into individuals stronger than steel.'"

A pivotal moment for Konvisser came when she attended the Turning Point '95 International Leadership Intensive held at Auschwitz-Birkenau on the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the extermination and labor camps. She noted how survivors shared their stories to establish meaning from their experiences and make a positive difference in the world.

"As a second-generation witness, I deeply sensed and identified with the horror and pain," she said. "At the same time, I felt the hopes of those who not only suffered such horrendous events but who thrived in spite of these events. I came away with an important question: How can we learn from our experiences to prevent genocide?"

## Terror Survivors

After traveling to Israel with husband, Marc, in October 2002 during the height of the Second Intifada, Konvisser began researching the experiences of terror survivors in Israel.

"That trip helped me connect what I learned about Holocaust survivors to what was now happening in Israel and the Middle-East conflict," she said. "Once again, I observed the strength of the human spirit to cope with tragedy and uncertainty and asked myself how we can move beyond the trauma of terrorism. I knew then I needed to listen more, record and compile the stories, and make them available for others."

Konvisser felt that if she were to share the survivors' stories she possibly might give more meaning to their experiences and make a positive difference in the world.

Between 2004 and 2010, she traveled to Israel eight times for extended stays to collect stories for her dissertation and book. Participants were obtained from personal recommendations and from newspaper ads. Sixty-three people were interviewed, resulting in 36 stories recounted by 48 people. Three had Detroit connections: Sharon Stav, Joshua Faudem and Peggy Kern (pseudonym).

In 2006, she completed her dissertation, "Finding Meaning and Growth in the Aftermath of Suffering: Israeli Civilian Survivors of Suicide Bombings and Other Attacks." The findings were recently published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Traumatology*, documenting the academic foundation for her research. Her book, *Living Beyond Terrorism*, presents the voices of those who live with and beyond terrorism.

"I chose to do this difficult work in Israel because my heart and passions are in Israel," she said. "This is where I am committed to making a difference. My love for the people in Israel lets me live like they do — in the present and not worrying about what might happen in the future."

Konvisser and her brother Eddie were raised in a Jewish and Zionist home in New Jersey, surrounded by their parents' love of Israel, Jewish education, charity, family and friends.

"Growing up, Israel was always *home* in our hearts," she says. "We took trips back and forth to visit family in Israel, and they visited us."

Those who know Konvisser are not surprised by the turns of her professional journey. Her undergraduate degree in chemistry and her master's degree in pharmaceutical chemistry prepared her for non-traditional roles as a woman. During her 25 years with Chrysler Mopar Parts Division, she held numerous supervisory,

management and executive positions in planning, operations and marketing — often the first woman to do so.

## Victim Or Survivor?

In an excerpt from her book, Konvisser tells one woman's story:

Shoshana "Shoshi" Gottlieb, 54, is a happily married woman, mother of four and grandmother of five. A poised, beautiful woman with sparkling eyes and infectious laughter, she had her life change forever by a senseless and horrific terrorism attack. Seemingly effortlessly, she manages her family, household and job from a wheelchair in her spacious handicap-accessible apartment in Har Nof, a newer community on the western-most tip of Jerusalem.

Her daughter Rinat best describes Shoshi: "Mom, when you are sitting by a table when we talk to you, it's just like you are everyone else. No one can see there is something wrong with you."

To which Shoshi quickly adds: "I told you that there is nothing wrong with me, even though I understood in the van the minute I saw my legs what was going on. The minute I went to rehabilitation, I started rehabilitating. I won't let anything take over

my life. I haven't given up anything. Even walking I haven't given up ..."

The long months of recovery and the years since the attack have allowed Shoshi time to reflect on the events in her life and to discover who she really is ... Shoshi makes sense of her life in the aftermath of the terrorist attack and moves forward with her life. She is healing. In the face of overwhelming disaster, this otherwise ordinary woman calls forth, from the depths of the human spirit, courage she never knew she possessed; she finds meaning from her deeds, experiences and attitudes, and turns tragedy into triumph. She has become a survivor.

## Therapeutic Research

While collecting the narratives for her book, Konvisser said, "My role was as a

researcher. Even so, there was a therapeutic aspect to the interview process. Telling their stories to an empathic listener helped the participants increase their self-awareness and understanding of their experiences, and seemed to give them a more complete perspective on their lives."

All the people in her book struggled with indiscriminate acts of terror.

"While some survived with impairment, many were able to live next to their feelings of grief and pain, overcoming suffering and moving forward to hope and healing," she said.

"There is no one recipe — no right or wrong response — about how humans respond after struggling with horrific experiences," she said. "Yet there are common themes that evolved from these stories that can be cultivated to master any crisis."

A few of the major themes:

- Adjusting future expectations to fit a new reality and focusing on the important things in life;
- Moving forward with strength gained from past experiences and prior adversity;
- Grappling with fundamental existential questions through religion and spirituality; and
- Finding the silver lining and creatively giving back turns tragedy into action or activism.

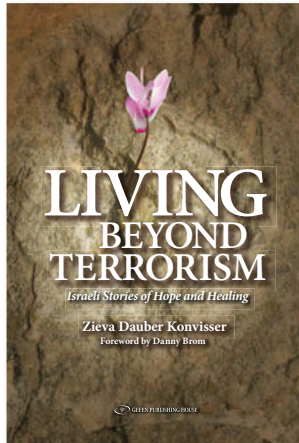
"By focusing on terrorism's human rather than political dimension, the book fills out the historical narrative in a critical way," said Don Cohen of West Bloomfield, a former Jewish professional and journalist who worked with Konvisser to refine the ideas, stories and style.

"The book's depth and humanity help us penetrate the life-changing impact on those who survived, and provide a necessary context for grappling with the personal and political possibilities and challenges ahead," Cohen said.

The Konvisser family are active members of Congregation Beth Shalom in Oak Park. They have two grown sons.

Today, as a Fellow of Fielding's Institute for Social Innovation, Konvisser is interviewing women who have been wrongfully convicted, often incarcerated, and later exonerated to better understand how they respond to this horrendous experience. □

*Living Beyond Terrorism: Israeli Stories of Hope and Healing* is available at Amazon.com or on Konvisser's website: [www.zievakonvisser.com](http://www.zievakonvisser.com).



Zieva Konvisser