

# Patterns of Outmarriage and Inmarriage among the Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors

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In the Summer 1985 issue of the *Journal*, Rabbi Sanford Seltzer observed that there is a "relative dearth of material" about the psychological implications of mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles and that there is a particular absence of data on mixed marriages among Holocaust survivors and their adult offspring. Seltzer has indeed identified a critical gap in our knowledge, which my recent study, "Patterns of Outmarriage and Inmarriage among the Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors," is intended to begin to correct.

In the *Encyclopedia Judaica Decennial Book* (1982), there is a reproduction of an advertisement sponsored by the Bureau of Jewish Education of New York that reads: "IF YOU'RE JEWISH, CHANCES ARE YOUR GRANDCHILDREN WON'T BE."<sup>1</sup> To what extent are Holocaust survivors and their adult children implicated by or exempt from this prediction?

Under the auspices of the California Graduate School of Marital and Family Therapy, I identified a sample of 126 respondents and studied how the children of Jewish Holocaust survivors who marry other Jews differ from children of survivors who marry non-Jews. Is the religion of the marriage partners of the respondents in my sample just a matter of chance, or did my respondents make a conscious choice to marry inside or outside the Jewish fold?

For those Jews who considered marrying only other Jews, on what factors did their choices depend? The individual's strength of identity as a Jew, commitment to the Jewish people, and psychodynamics of family of origin were explored to determine their impact on the choice of a marriage partner.<sup>2</sup>

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## Research Design

A "snowball sample"<sup>3</sup> of 126 children of survivors was identified from my personal friendship networks, temple membership, and other Jewish group affiliations. Each respondent had at least one parent who had fled from Nazi tyranny between 1933 and 1941; had been liberated from concentration, extermination, or labor camps; fought in the underground; or hid in Nazi-occupied Europe. One hundred and eleven prospective subjects responded to my questionnaire (88 percent), of which 15 did not qualify for the statistical study. One had married both in and out; three were born before 1945 and, therefore, did not belong to the postwar generation; two returned their questionnaires after the results had been analyzed. Nine respondents were the offspring of mixed marriages where one partner was Jewish and the other partner was Gentile. Each of these offspring was married to a non-Jew but could not be considered as "outmarried" for this study. As the mother of one of these subjects stated, "My friends tell me that our son married a woman just like me" (this respondent's mother and wife are both Irish Catholic).

Statistical analysis was performed on data from 96 children of Holocaust survivors living in the San Francisco Bay Area. The 96 participants were divided into two groups—an outmarried group, consisting of 46 subjects, and an inmarried group, consisting of 50 subjects.

The groups' scores were compared on the instruments used in this study: *Biographical Data Schedule*,<sup>4</sup> constructed by the researcher, requesting basic demographic information, secular and religious Jewish experiences, and background on family of origin; the Jewish Dimension of Zak's *Jewish-American Identity Scale*<sup>5</sup> and Maller's *Self-Definition Item*;<sup>6</sup> and the Cohesion Dimension of Olson, Bell, and Portner's *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales II*.<sup>7</sup> Every fourth subject to return the questionnaires was asked for an interview by the researcher; and the spouses of three participants also were interviewed. A total of 20 interviews were conducted.

## Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

All of the 96 subjects of this study were the children of two Jewish-born parents, at least one of whom was a Holocaust survivor, with the exception of the two offspring of an intermarried couple whose mother was a convert to Judaism. Sixty-five subjects had two parents who were survivors of the Holocaust. The mothers of 17 subjects had survived concentration camps; the

fathers of 18 of the subjects had survived concentration camps. The Holocaust was reportedly never or rarely discussed in 33 of the families, sometimes discussed in 42 of the families, and frequently or always discussed in 21 of the 96 families. Eighty-six respondents lost members of their families in the Holocaust, including siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

Ninety-three of the 96 respondents were married for the first time; three respondents were divorced. Twenty-one were married to other children of survivors. Six children of survivor spousal pairs and 15 sibling sets were part of the sample. Fifty-eight subjects were female and 38 were male; 80 were born in the United States, 11 in Europe (including three in displaced persons' camps), four in Israel, and one in Shanghai. Fifty of the subjects were married to born Jews; 46 were married to Gentile-born spouses. Seven of the Gentile spouses had converted to Judaism; these are referred to as *intermarriages*. Thirty-nine of the spouses did *not* convert to Judaism; these are referred to as *mixed marriages*.

No significant statistical differences were found in age, gender, secular education, occupational status, parents' Holocaust experiences, or loss of family members in the Holocaust between the outmarried and inmarried groups. Also, no significant difference was found between the families of origin of the outmarried and inmarried groups concerning frequency of synagogue membership.

An interesting finding (though statistically insignificant) was that a higher percentage of the outmarried group belonged to Orthodox and Reform synagogues, and a higher percentage of the inmarried group belonged to Conservative synagogues while the respondents were growing up. One can conjecture that the Conservative movement may represent Judaism's "golden mean," providing an acceptable balance of tradition and modern thought to young people. Perhaps the rigidity of Orthodoxy invites rebellion, while Reform practices may not provide enough structure and religiosity for some Jews to establish a firm commitment to Jewish life.

The inmarried and outmarried groups differed significantly, however, along three secular variables: membership in Jewish youth groups, attendance at Jewish summer camps, and visiting Israel. Significantly more inmarried than outmarried subjects had participated in Jewish youth groups, attended Jewish summer camps, and visited Israel. (Unfortunately, the *Biographical Data Schedule* did not clearly ask whether visiting Israel had occurred before or after marriage.)

## Testing of Hypotheses

The research tested nine hypotheses. The first six explored Jewish experience and the final three explored family issues. The results are reported below, along with my interpretations and selected comments from my subjects.

1. *Jewish identification (Zak<sup>8</sup> and Maller<sup>9</sup> scales) was significantly higher in the children of Holocaust survivors who inmarried than in the children of Holocaust survivors who outmarried.* This finding confirmed common-sense assumptions as well as traditional Jewish thinking cited in the literature about the relationship of religious identity to the choice of a marriage partner.<sup>10</sup>

The interviews yielded some interesting contrasts in Jewish identity between the inmarried and outmarried groups. All but one of the outmarried interviewees defined themselves as Jews in relation to the Holocaust. An American-born 35-year-old son of a refugee father stated this relationship most succinctly: "My being Jewish is my relationship to the Holocaust. I am a Jew because I am a child of a survivor." For a sister and brother, the Holocaust was their Jewish identification. In separate interviews, both vividly described their parents' harrowing experiences in a concentration camp. These respondents do not remember any family religious observance or participation in Jewish organizational or institutional life. They define themselves as Jews solely because their parents survived the Holocaust. Although they describe their parents as "larger than life," both offspring married non-Jews. The plaintive explanation of the younger sister, who recalled escaping from Communist Czechoslovakia in a HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) plane when she was 14 years old in 1966, was: "What is it that made me a Jew? I knew I was Jewish, knew I was Jewish because my parents were on (*sic*) a concentration camp, and they were on (*sic*) a concentration camp because they were Jewish." Her older brother had grown up with the belief that Judaism was dangerous outside the home. Therefore, he is "not into continuing the Jewish religion/race. It would be a better society if everyone were integrated [assimilated], including blacks."

On the other hand, the inmarried interviewees defined their Jewishness in a more positive way. This group's attitude can be summarized in the words of a San Francisco-born, 36-year-old male: "I was proud of being a Jew as a kid; I never experienced anti-Semitism as a kid, and when older, only mildly. There is a Jewish link which is hard to describe, and special. It made sense for me to marry a Jew."

2. *Mixed results were found in the relationship of religious education to marriage pattern. Religious education in this study included Sunday School and Confirmation, Hebrew School, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah. There was no significant difference between the outmarried and inmarried groups on Hebrew School attendance and Bar/Bat Mitzvah. However, there was a trend toward inmarriage for those who attended Sunday School; and the incidence of Confirmation was significantly higher in the inmarried group.*

The interviews suggest that many respondents experienced no choice about whether to attend Hebrew school or to become Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Their parents made the decision for them. This was especially true for males. For those who had wanted it, religious training was remembered as a positive experience. For those who had opposed it, religious study was a negative memory. The combination of these factors may have led to the nonsignificant results. The confirmand in Reform and Conservative Judaism at age 15 may be in a stronger position to make a choice than a child of 10 or 11 preparing to be Bar/Bat Mitzvah. A young person who does not want to affirm a commitment to Jewish belief is more likely to rebel and to refuse to take part in the Confirmation ritual. The decision to be confirmed may be, on the part of a young person, an early commitment to lead a Jewish life, which eventually will be shared with a Jewish partner.

3. *It was postulated that a negative identification with Judaism, transmitted by survivors' frequent discussion of the Holocaust, would be associated with greater outmarriage by their children. However, the present findings do not support this hypothesis. There was no significant difference between the inmarried and outmarried groups in the amount of Holocaust discussion reported to have taken place in families of origin.*

Despite the finding of nonsignificance, some observations about possible links between discussion of the Holocaust and marriage decisions may be made. In twice as many families of respondents who inmarried, the Holocaust was "never mentioned"; and in twice as many of the families of respondents who outmarried, the Holocaust was "always talked about." Unfortunately, the number of subjects is too small to draw any reliable conclusions from these two extremes of the distribution. This finding, however, may reflect that "too much" discussion of the Holocaust in the family of origin was experienced negatively by many children of survivors who married out.

This research suggests that it is less important to know *how often* survivor-parents actually talked about their Holocaust experiences with their children than to know *what was communicated* by silence or in conversation. The impact of the Holocaust on the

second generation is so strong that what matters most may be what was said, how it was expressed, and, most importantly, how the children of survivors interpreted and internalized their parents' experiences.

*4. Outmarried respondents' gender was not found to be significantly related to spouses' rate of conversion of Judaism.*

Although the Jewish partner's gender made no significant difference in the rate of conversion of the non-Jewish spouse, there is an historical trend, with which my findings are consistent, in the direction of more conversions when the Jewish partner is male. However, there may be a shift toward equalization.

The overall rate of conversion to Judaism by the non-Jewish partners in this study was half (15 percent) of the rate (30 percent) reported by Maller a decade ago.<sup>11</sup> This rate may change, however, as illustrated by one respondent who indicated on his questionnaire that his spouse was currently "in the study phase of a conversion to Judaism."

*5. Outmarried respondents' strength of Jewish identification was not found to be significantly related to spousal conversion to Judaism.*

Massarik suggested that if the Jewish spouse in a mixed marriage has a strong Jewish identify, the non-Jewish partner is more likely to convert to Judaism.<sup>12</sup> However, the test of Hypothesis 5 demonstrated that the conversion of a Gentile spouse was not significantly related to the Jewish partner's strength of Jewish identification. As one interviewee explained, his Catholic wife has values that are identical to his, as opposed to the "Jewish Princesses" he has met: "Why would there be any reason for her to convert? Our son is being raised with good values, and he will be in the enviable position of being able to choose his own religion when the time comes!"

Another consideration is the Gentile partner's strength of religious identification. As Massarik stated, "Just as there are different degrees of Jewish commitment among people who were born Jews, so, too, are there different degrees of commitment to their non-Jewish religion by non-Jewish marriage partners."<sup>13</sup> Although formal conversion in the halachic sense may not occur, a non-Jewish partner may "drift" into Jewishness, thus creating a quasi-Jewish family for all practical purposes. Or, the reverse may occur, i.e., a "drift" away from Judaism for some Jews who marry out.

*6. It was impossible to test the hypothesis that the frequency of children raised as Jews in mixed marriages will be significantly higher when a rabbi officiated at the marriage ceremony than when a rabbi refused to officiate at the marriage ceremony.*

Data from 14 respondents who married non-Jews and asked a rabbi to officiate at their wedding were used to test this hypothesis. Eight of these subjects were married by a rabbi, and six were not. However, these responses could not be coded because the sample is too small and the relevant data are too complicated. For example, one subject was married by a rabbi and a priest. Eight of the 14 subjects responded ambiguously to the question of raising their children as Jews. Several added a third column, "?", between the "yes" and "no" columns on the questionnaire; others qualified a response of "yes" or "no" or responded both yes *and* no. To quote several subjects: "Yes—Jewish education, tradition"; "Culturally, yes; religiously, probably not"; "Yes, we actually participate in Christian holidays as well as [in] Jewish ones"; "No, children will be exposed to both Judaism and Catholicism," etc. As the subjects' responses were not clearly "yes" or "no," it was not appropriate to analyze statistically the yes/no variable.

Tension was apparent among respondents who maintained Jewish tradition and those who broke from it, suggesting the painful conflicts with which those who outmarry and their families have to wrestle. For example, the couple that was married both by a priest and by a rabbi had two wedding ceremonies. Although the parents of the Catholic bride attended the Jewish ceremony under the *chupa*, the groom's parents would not witness their son's marriage in a Catholic church. Interestingly, however, the groom's Jewish grandmother attended the Catholic ceremony. Another respondent who married out explained that "all rabbis refused [to officiate at the wedding]. Too bad. An ex-Jewish female Unitarian minister did [officiate]. And it was great!"

In this study, mixed marriage, regardless of who officiated at the ceremony, led to conflict and confusion regarding the religious upbringing of the offspring. Some respondents who married out distinguish between ethnic identity and religious faith; they plan to expose or already are exposing their children to Jewish "education, tradition, culture and customs," but not "religion." Other respondents who married out stated that their children may "possibly, probably, or hopefully" be raised as Jews. Still others want their children to choose their own religion after being exposed both to Christian and to Jewish beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

7. *Only the oldest children in the families of Holocaust survivors were significantly more likely to marry out than other children in the birth order.* Friedman's finding "that Jews who married non-Jews overwhelmingly occupied the sibling position of oldest or only" was confirmed in this study.<sup>15</sup>

As family enmeshment was not positively correlated with outmarriage (see Hypothesis 8 below), why is this child more prone to marry out, and what is the significance of this finding?

What is the effect of preferential treatment of the oldest male child in the Jewish family on sons and daughters and on the ethnic choice of a marriage partner? Does this pattern hold for other ethnic and religious groups that favor sons over daughters?

8. Hypotheses 8 and 9 explore family cohesion, "the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another."<sup>16</sup>

There are four levels of family cohesion in Olson, Bell, and Portner's *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale* (FACES II), ranging from extreme low cohesion (disengaged) to extreme high cohesion (enmeshed).<sup>17</sup> *Cohesion/enmeshment was not significantly greater in the families of origin of respondents who outmarried than in the families of origin of respondents who inmarried. Conversely, although not significant, there was a trend toward more inmarriage in enmeshed families.*

This finding contrasts with Friedman's<sup>18</sup> and Fishbein's<sup>19</sup> reports on Jews who marry out. Fishbein hypothesized that many Jews who outmarry "are re-acting to the emotional intensity of a family system which did not permit them freedom to develop their own identity."<sup>20</sup> My statistical results do not support Fishbein's view. Moreover, I found that interviewees' comments about cohesion in their families of origin were indistinguishable between the outmarried and inmarried groups.

*9. Family cohesion/enmeshment was not a more significant predictor of outmarriage than Jewish identity in my sample of children of Holocaust survivors. My findings suggest that strength of Jewish identity was a more significant correlate of inmarriage/outmarriage than cohesion/enmeshment in the family of origin.*

My findings support Rosenblatt's claim that children who feel strong Jewish identity and loyalty to the Jewish people choose to marry a partner who wants to establish a Jewish home and perpetuate Judaism.<sup>21</sup> In choosing a marriage partner, Jewish identity was a more significant criterion for my respondents than the family of origin's cohesion dynamic that Friedman<sup>22</sup> and Fishbein<sup>23</sup> have postulated. Friedman's conclusion that "Jews who marry Gentiles tend to put a circuit breaker into an intense emotional family system"<sup>24</sup> was not borne out by this study. Nor was Fishbein's observation that many Jews established their independence and attained an autonomous sense of self by marrying out.<sup>25</sup>

Many rabbis and therapists have encountered Jewish women and men, raised in intensely enmeshed families, who have deliberately chosen a non-Jewish mate as an "escape route." But, in the present study, outmarried respondents as well as many inmarried respondents were raised in extremely close and clinging families.



## Conclusion

Marital patterns are linked to the survival of the Jews as a people and a culture. This study, although focused on the generation of children of Holocaust survivors, has implications for three generations of Jews: survivors themselves, their children ("second generation"), and their grandchildren ("third generation").

The outmarriage rate of the survivor generation was 10.5 percent (94 children of survivors had two Jewish-born parents; two had intermarried parents; and nine had mixed-married parents). Not one offspring of the nine mixed-married survivors married a Jew; none of their spouses converted to Judaism; and all of their children are being or will be raised as Gentiles.

Among the children of survivors, there was a 52.4 percent outmarriage rate (50 had married in and 55 had married out.) Of the 96 respondents included in the statistical analysis, 50 had married in and 46 had married out. Only seven spouses of outmarried respondents had converted to Judaism. Thirty-nine had not converted (although one was in the "study phase" of conversion). Will the offspring of the mixed-marrieds, also, be lost to Judaism, as in the previous generation? The prediction, "If you're Jewish, chances are your grandchildren won't be"<sup>26</sup> may be even more applicable to the families of Holocaust survivors than to the American Jewish community in general. Further empirical investigation, including longitudinal study of the families of the "second" and "third" generations, will help us understand marriage patterns among the families of Holocaust survivors.

The Jewish community has both an opportunity and a responsibility to respond to the mixed marrieds' ambivalence regarding the religious identity of their children. The CCAR has begun this process by its decision on patrilineal descent, and the UAHC by its Outreach Program. We need to build on these progressive policies and programs at the "grass-roots" level. Each congregation must take the initiative by affirming the Jewishness of interfaith couples and "reaching out" through a professional, an appointed, qualified volunteer, or an Outreach committee to welcome them into the temple family.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Encyclopedia Judaica, *Decennial Book, 1973-1982* (Jerusalem: 1982), p. 593.

<sup>2</sup>For recent and comprehensive literature reviews on intermarriage and mixed marriage, see Sanford Seltzer, "The Psychological Implications of Mixed Marriage," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, volume 32, no. 3 (1985), pp.

21-37, and Mark L. Winer, "Sociological Research on Jewish Inter-marriage," *ibid.*, pp. 38-57.

<sup>3</sup>Respondents in a "snowball sample" are obtained through the investigator's network, by solicitation, and by recommendation of other respondents. This sampling strategy is frequently employed in exploratory research. Unlike random samples, the drawback of snowball samples is that their principal findings cannot be generalized to entire populations.

<sup>4</sup>Vera R. Obermeyer, "Patterns of Outmarriage and Inmarriage among the Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors," Doctoral dissertation, California Graduate School of Marital and Family Therapy, San Rafael, CA (1985), pp. 118-119.

<sup>5</sup>Itai Zak, "Dimensions of Jewish American Identity," *Psychological Reports*, volume 33 (1973), pp. 891-900.

<sup>6</sup>Allen S. Maller, "American Jews and Exogamy: Two Sets of Influences," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal*, volume 21, no. 4 (1974), pp. 63-67.

<sup>7</sup>David H. Olson, Richard Bell, and Joyce Portner, "Family Adaptability and Cohension Evaluation Scales," *Family Social Science* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup>Zak, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup>Maller, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup>Gary Rosenblatt, "Coping with Inter-marriage," *Jewish Digest*, volume 23, no. 1 (1977), pp. 9-12.

<sup>11</sup>Allen S. Maller, "Inter-marriage and Jewish Continuity," *Congress Monthly*, volume 43, no. 8 (1976), pp. 14-15.

<sup>12</sup>Fred Massarik, "Rethinking the Inter-marriage Crisis," *Moment*, volume 3, no. 7 (1978), pp. 29-33.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>14</sup>Two studies in the literature report statistical data correlating rabbinical officiation at marriage ceremonies and religious identification of offspring. Rabbi Cohen found that 88 percent of the Jewish-Gentile couples at whose marriages he had officiated were raising their children as Jews, as compared to Maller's reports of 25 percent. See Henry Cohen, "Mixed Marriages and Jewish Continuity," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal*, volume 19, no. 22 (1972), pp. 48-54, and Maller, "Inter-marriage and Jewish Continuity," p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Edwin H. Friedman, "The Myth of the Shiksa," in Monica McGoldrick, John K. Pearce, and Joseph Giordano (eds.), *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1982), pp. 499-526.

<sup>16</sup>Olson, Bell, and Portner, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Edwin H. Friedman, "Myths of Mixed Marriage," *Jewish Spectator*, volume 37, no. 9 (1972), pp. 25-26, and "The Myth of the Shiksa."

<sup>19</sup>Irwin H. Fishbein, "Marrying 'In' not 'Out,'" *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal*, volume 20, no. 2 (1973), pp. 31-34.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup>Rosenblatt, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup>Friedman, "The Myth of the Shiksa" and "Myths of Mixed Marriage."

<sup>23</sup>Fishbein, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup>Friedman, "Myths of Mixed Marriage," p. 25.

<sup>25</sup>Fishbein, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup>See note 1.