

# Asylum

the radical mental health magazine

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*and*

Climate Madness: Tipping Points



# The radical mental health magazine

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Asylum, formerly the magazine for democratic psychiatry, was established in 1986 as a forum for free debate, open to anyone with an interest in psychiatry and mental health politics, practice and policy. We were inspired by the democratic psychiatry movement in Italy and continue to be influenced by radical mental health movements around the world, including the psychiatric survivor and Mad liberation movements. We welcome contributions from service users, ex-users or survivors; activists, family members and frontline psychiatric or mental health workers (anonymously, if you wish). The magazine is not-for-profit and run by a collective of unpaid volunteers. We are open to anyone who wants to help produce, develop and distribute the magazine, working in a spirit of equality and democracy. Please contact us if you would like to help.

The views expressed in the magazine are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of the editorial group. Articles are accepted in good faith and every effort is made to ensure fairness and veracity.  
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# JUST ANOTHER HOLOCAUST STORY

Using personal, biographical and archival material, *ABRAHAM AAMIDOR* suggests many Holocaust survivors were misdiagnosed and received harsh treatment in the psychiatric system when they arrived in America.

The psychiatric literature on mental illness and Holocaust survivors is mixed – some studies suggest that mass trauma PTSD would be the likely diagnosis today for those who were pegged as schizophrenic after the war, while other research says diagnoses of schizophrenia were routinely *missed*. My brother, Yehoshua Chaim “Sidney” Rosenberg, who died by suicide at age 24, and my late father, Rabbi Joseph Rosenberg, both Holocaust survivors, were treated for mental illness in the years following World War II. I recently began a search to fill in my understanding of just what happened to them, yet privacy laws in America make it impossible to obtain a complete picture.

My search began with an inquiry, then an entreaty, to the high school at Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio, from which Yehoshua graduated in 1954. Being from an Orthodox family, re-establishing a strict Jewish lifestyle was paramount after the war. I wrote to the current Yeshiva administration twice for details of my brother’s life in Cleveland, but they were unresponsive. What I know is that Yehoshua joined the United States Air Force two years later, in 1956, when he was aged 19.

From my late mother’s files, I discovered a letter from the Jewish chaplain at Warren Air Force Base, where my brother was stationed. The following is an excerpt, written by Chaplain Philip Silverstein, 1st Lt., USAF, dated 7 May, 1956.

“Sidney had been coming regularly to the services here on base and we got to know each other very well.

“He is an intelligent boy but he has been suffering from a mental illness which began prior to his entering the Air Force. It was on these grounds that he was discharged and I’m afraid it cannot be reconsidered. I have spoken to the psychiatrist at length (*sic*) about him and I could only urge that he begin treatment in civilian life.

“I am very much concerned about him and I hope that he will adjust to civilian life. I can see by your letter that you have tried to help him but I’m afraid that it is not in our hands. He should see a doctor.”

Nothing in the letter is really a diagnosis, of course, and part of it counts as a legal disclaimer – *Sidney was ill before we ever saw him, Mrs. Rosenberg* – but I’ll go so far as to acknowledge that my brother was troubled prior to his enlistment. Yehoshua (he had been renamed “Sidney” by relatives on our father’s side who’d arrived in America before the war and who wanted to Americanize the name, but we never called him Sidney) had received a General Discharge and left the service after six months.

It’s not a dishonorable discharge – it just means things didn’t work out.

It was a psychiatrist in Chicago, where we moved after my mother and father divorced, who declared that Yehoshua was a paranoid schizophrenic. Yehoshua never agreed with the diagnosis. “Insane is the sane man in an insane world,” was his favorite quote, and “Mother, don’t take sides,” was a common injunction he would utter to her. I initially recalled Yehoshua’s Chicago psychiatrist only by his last name – Dr. Hilkevitch – but I now believe he was the locally well-known Aaron Hilkevitch, a Russian-born Jew, a University of Chicago graduate, and a past member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which was a group of Leftist and often Jewish volunteers that fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). This is somewhat speculative on my part, but my mother worked at the Park View Home for the Aged in Chicago for many years; she worked with a social worker named Milton Cohen who also was a well-known former member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. It’s not a stretch to think Cohen referred her to Hilkevitch.

As my mother worked at the Park View Home, a project of the Chicago Jewish Federation, she asked for a subsidy to the psychiatric ward at the city’s old Michael Reese Hospital, which was much closer to home and also connected to the Jewish Federation. Part of her reasoning was that Michael Reese served kosher food, which still mattered to Yehoshua, but there also was the issue that my mother trusted Jewish institutions in America.

She was denied. My mother claimed she was told that since she had a job she could afford to pay for her son’s treatment, but private pay psychiatric treatment was expensive and, anyway, Yehoshua already was 21 by this time and he did not have a job. He was simply a Holocaust survivor, a United States Air Force veteran (albeit truncated service), and a very troubled young man. He was referred to the Galesburg Research Hospital in Illinois by Dr. Hilkevitch, who should not have been indifferent to his patient’s history. Yehoshua had bounced around the country from Memphis, where the family had originally settled after the war and where I was born, to New York to Chicago to Cleveland repeatedly by the time he was 16, and he had *been bounced* from Poland to Lithuania to Shanghai to port in San Francisco by the time he was 10. My parents and Yehoshua were refugees during the war and were never interned in a concentration camp, but my mother’s parents and her 10 siblings all perished.

Was my brother schizophrenic? Was he suffering from mass trauma PTSD? I don't know, but I want to float a certain hypothesis as to my brother's treatment, that sending him to a state-run psychiatric hospital may have been an expression of his doctor's deliberate contempt for Orthodox Judaism and Holocaust survivors and, as such, an example of the notorious *countertransference*. I can only think of Bruno Bettelheim, the discredited Jewish psychiatrist who claimed to have personally known Sigmund Freud and was reported to have physically abused children into submission at his famous Orthogenic School on the campus of the University of Chicago – it was Bettelheim who had argued most forcefully that Jews didn't resist the Nazis, i.e., were cowards and complicit in their own genocide. Hilkevitch, too, according to his obituary, was a Freudian psychoanalyst and surely would have known the once-famous Bettelheim during his own University of Chicago days and later, life-long residence in the university's Hyde Park neighborhood.

### Privileged Communications

I wanted to obtain some records from the now-demolished Galesburg hospital – precise dates of admission, treatment protocol, maybe even prognosis. After a few false starts, I was referred to Anthony W. Vaupel, the associate judge who handles petitions for psychiatric matters in the relevant jurisdiction. Here is what he personally wrote to me after reviewing my request.

“Disclosure of records through the Illinois Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Act is intended to be prohibited except for a few people or entities. While I understand why the statute is written the way it is, it seems to lack common sense exceptions, such as your situation. ... I understand this letter must surely be disappointing, especially when I can think of no societal interest in precluding family members from records nearly 60 years after death. I am required to follow the law, even in those situations where I disagree and it is for that reason I must deny your request for an order.”

Judge Vaupel's letter was respectful, clear and final. I have no quarrel with him. But, I do note the irony of the relevant statute that says, for example, had I been suing my late brother's estate for any monies he might have left, oh, well, in that case I *would* have had access to his records! I think it was Karl Marx who wrote that all law is really about property rights; you don't have to be a Marxist to see he had a point.

I do have one original document from Galesburg, though. It's a letter that Yehoshua wrote to our mother while he was committed there; she kept it all the years of her life.

“Dear Mother, I want to come home,” he wrote. “I promise to be good.” That's it. The note is written on

a half-sheet of paper and his handwriting is slow and scraggly, much like a schoolboy's. He was a Holocaust survivor, a world traveler and an Air Force veteran, yet he was reduced to promising to be good like some 7-year-old in sit-out.

### **Manhattan State Hospital, Ward's Island, New York City**

Now, my father: I cannot say I knew him well because I only met him twice after my parents divorced, but he, too, was committed to a mental hospital, in this instance the Manhattan State Hospital, Ward's Island, New York City, in 1950. He was living with his older sister in New York at the time, yet my parents were still married and officials in New York wrote my mother for permission to begin a certain treatment. I quote from a letter written by John HL Travis, MD, Senior Director, addressed to Mrs. J. Rosenberg and dated Nov. 19, 1952.

“Dear Madam:

“Your husband, the above-named patient [Joseph Rosenberg, #124308], was admitted on Nov. 17, 1950. He is suffering from a chronic form of mental illness and has had extensive treatment in the past. I regret to say that so far he has failed to show any appreciable improvement in his mental condition.

“In our opinion he might be benefited by modern brain surgery known as Topectomy and Lobotomy. This form of treatment is widely used on patients suffering from the same illness as your husband and the results have been very encouraging.

“Before performing this operation we need your consent. Will you please sign the enclosed ‘permission blank,’ have it witnessed and return it to me at your earliest convenience.”

I copied the full letter (with my father's patient number) and mailed it to the Manhattan Psychiatric Center, as it's now known. The reply was Orwellian in some of the language it used, which I quote now:

“We are in receipt of your request seeking information from the records of Joseph Rosenberg, who, *you believe* (emphasis added), was a patient in our facility and is now deceased. ... The New York State Office of Mental Health does not allow either (*sic*) confirm or deny that the individual received treatment in our facility for the purpose of genealogy or *interest* (emphasis added).”

Well, my mother signed, the operation was performed, and I was told by older family members who knew my father better than I did that he was never the same person again. Joseph managed to evade the Nazis only to receive the cure, as it were, here in America. He even got his own number. ■

Abraham Aamidor is a former long-term reporter at *The Indianapolis Star*.