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## Memoir of a father's suicide

Dahlia Virtzberg-Rofe<sup>1</sup>

On August 4, 1968, on Sunday afternoon my father, Beni Virtzberg, shot a bullet into his brain, and he did it in our presence. I was ten, my brother Ilan seventeen, and my mother Rachel thirty-seven. (A visual description of my father's death is reported; readers' discretion is advised.) My experience is based in Israel in relation to my father's experience in World War II's holocaust.

This essay is based on an epilogue I wrote for the English edition of my father's book, *From Death to Battle*, published in August 2017 by Yad Vashem. The original name of the book was: *From the Valley of Slaughter to the Gate of the Valley* (I would like to thank Yad Vashem publications for allowing me to quote some portions of the epilogue. [Here](#) is the book in Yad Vashem's site.)

After my father's suicide I refused to receive psychotherapy and underwent a difficult adolescence, which included various types of anxiety and panic attacks, mainly concerned with the fear of the inevitable death. My first episode of mental illness occurred at the age of 17, and I was taken to a medical center for diagnosis. "What is your name?" The doctor asked. "Beni Virtzberg," I replied without hesitation. Then I added that in 1967 I published the book *From Death to Battle*.

My late father's book was first published in 1967. It was intended to release him finally from the heavy burden of his memories, and at the same time turn him into a distinguished writer. Both hopes were frustrated. First, the book threw him back again into that inferno in his past; and second, the book was eclipsed by the flood of other books published following Israel's victory in the Six Day War. The euphoria of the era left no room in people's hearts for the sorrows of the young Virtzberg.

We heard the shot and froze. We did not know that it would shatter our lives and leave them fragmented for many years. We ran as one to the service area balcony. My father was lying on the floor with his dead eyes wide open. The balcony's banister curved over the stone edge and my father's head lay on it as if it were a pillow. A large Webley Revolver was in his hand, and the right side of his head was smashed. A swelling pool of blood ringed his head like a burning halo and had also splattered the banister. But all of this indescribable horror was not the worst of it. The worst was that large parts of his head were rolling around in clumps.

Nothing in my short ten years of life had prepared me for coping with such a sight. My mother, my brother, and I screamed as a well-coordinated chorus, repeating a single word that sounded something like: “Nooooo . . . Nooooo . . . Nooooo . . .”

Within seconds, the house hummed with many people: neighbors and more neighbors, and then an ambulance team and policemen. I did not witness all of the pandemonium, because at a pretty early stage I was put behind the closed door of my parents’ bedroom, and told not to come out. My mother was in a state of total hysteria, and she was kept in the children’s room with my brother, who was completely numb. I was sitting on my parents’ bed and feeling odd, as if I was having a particularly strange dream, as if I was observing from afar things that were happening to other people. Suddenly, I got up and opened my parents’ closet door where there was a large mirror. I looked at my reflection and smiled daintily. In the years that followed my father’s suicide that smile had made my life miserable, a monster-child smiling while her father lay dead in the next room.

In the morning of that awful day, I could not restrain myself and asked him for some money to buy ice cream. With shaky hands, he opened his wallet and handed me the coins. He used this rare opportunity of our forced proximity to ask: “Tell me, Dahlia, does my situation disturb you and Mother?” Had I allowed my impulses to roam freely I would have burst into loud howling sobs and accused him of poisoning the atmosphere at home. But in a surprising display of maturity and tact, I responded in a restrained way: “I don’t mind it at all. As for Mother, I don’t know, you would have to ask her.” I deserved an Academy Award.

For years, I was furiously angry with him. At the same time, I also suffered from devastating bouts of guilt. I demonized his character, which for many years appeared in recurring nightmares as a vaporous black cloud that would all at once leap up like the genie from Aladdin’s magic lamp. It took me over completely, suffocating me, as if trying to steal my soul, or freeze my spirit.

In my mind I replayed this scene of his final question over and over again. Instead of formally and dryly answering, and escaping to find refuge in ice cream, in my replay, I would take his hand in mine and sit with him on the living room sofa. I would put my short arms round his neck and kiss his face again and again: his eyes, his cheeks, his forehead, and particularly his right temple, and I would rock and soothe him with warm sweet words. “I love you very much, Father. We all love you very much. We know that you are going through hell and that you believe that you have no right to exist; that you think you are disrupting our lives; that you are afraid that at work they will give up on you and fire you and that we would then become dependent on welfare benefits. But everything can still

be fixed and after darkness a light always comes, and there is a beautiful world out there waiting for you as well. If only you would let our love in, you would have an excellent chance of healing.”

But in the last days of his life, father was not surrounded by love. We behaved like drowning people who, wishing to survive, leaned with all their might on each other, wildly flapping our hands and kicking our legs in an attempt to raise our heads above the surface and breathe some fresh air. My father, who was already very ill, emerged at times from the bedroom, as pale as a ghost, his disturbed soul evaporating from moment to moment, and considered himself a dead man. A few days after his death my mother found a note he left in a drawer:

Dear Rachella, Ilan and Dahlia  
 I could not bear it any longer and cause you sorrow  
 Do not blame anyone  
 All of the property is to go to my wife to do with as she pleases.  
 Be happy  
 Yours with love, Beni Father

I tried to forgive my father for choosing to commit suicide in front of our very eyes, although I will never understand why he did so. His own father was shot in front of him during the death march, and that event was at the heart of his own personal tragedy. He suffered guilt for having survived while his parents did not, and for living in relatively better conditions in Auschwitz than did his father. It is surprising that he chose to “bequeath” the fundamental trauma of his life to us too, complete with the guilt for not being able to support and save him. Did he think that that way we would be able to understand him better? Was he at all capable of thinking about us in his condition?

In 1998, I visited my father’s grave for the first time. On the tombstone there is a verse from the Book of Jeremiah: “His word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones, I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.” Suicide is not just a kind of private euthanasia, but also an unavoidable need in view of the raging fire blazing in a person’s inner world. Is it possible to extinguish the fire in time? Those who love the sufferer need to be highly attuned to signals of distress that are indicative of a suicidal tendency and attempt to ease that person’s distress by any available means.

I will end with the personal dedication my father wrote for me in his book:

“When you grow up you will read in this book about the sad events in the life of your father, who made sure and will continue to ensure, together


with the rest of Israel's soldiers, that children like you will never have to experience what I went through. In this book you will also read about the courage of your mother whom I very much hope you will resemble when you grow up."

Yours with love, Father

February 20, 1968

## Biography

*Dahlia Vitzberg-Rofe'* is an ex-patient activist for the rights of people with psychosocial disability in Israel, a researcher, a linguistic and literary editor, and a publicist. She studied at the Tel-Aviv University and received a BA in comparative literature, a master's degree in cultural research and graduated both with honors. She is a doctorate candidate at Haifa University in Israel. She established together with her husband Tzviel Rofe' a free online dating site for people with psychosocial disability. She is a blogger since 2007, mainly on mental health issues. In June 2018 She was chosen by TheMarker to be one of the 20 women who changed Israeli medicine.

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